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# CHALLENGING “LEFTIST BIG TECH” THROUGH RIGHT-WING ALTERNATIVE SOCIAL MEDIA: PARLER AND ALBICLA IN POLISH CONSERVATIVE MEDIA DISCOURSE<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

Numerous “free speech” platforms have been launched in recent years as a form of protest against content moderation practices on mainstream social media. This paper asks the question of how the issue of these emerging right-wing alternative social media is discursively constructed, taking as an example the Polish conservative media debate over the American service Parler and its Polish equivalent Albicla. Taking a critically discursive approach, the article provides an analysis of the discursive strategies applied, and critically embeds the findings in the broader socio-political context, as well as in the alternative media theory. The results show that, drawing on the wartime rhetoric and numerous references to Poland’s non-democratic past, the discourse creates a populist narrative of identity conflict between two opposing groups: “them” – hostile “leftists” seeking to impose a radical, progressive social order and “us” – oppressed protectors of freedom and common-sense values. The study additionally indicates that the issue is also utilised for the purposes of rivalry between domestic right-wing factions. Furthermore, the data contains frequent reference to issues of political economy and thus, intriguingly, overlaps to some extent with left-wing media critique, in that both agree on the necessity of contesting a monopolised media market and developing alternative means of communication.

**Keywords:** Albicla, alternative social media, critical discourse analysis, Parler

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## Introduction

There is an ongoing debate on the evolving rules and practices that shape today's digital media landscape. Until recently, corporate social media (CSM), such as Facebook or Twitter, have been portrayed as key tools of democratisation and the empowerment of citizens (Gehl, 2015). However, in response to numerous controversies, negative attitudes towards their impact on society have escalated. One of the central points of the growing critique is that CSM contribute significantly to the dissemination of disinformation, hate speech, and other harmful content (*The Facebook Files*, 2021). Despite various ways of tackling these problems (including mandatory legal arrangements), the implemented solutions most often take the form of *ad hoc* in-house CSM initiatives (including removing, flagging or limiting the visibility of content and profiles arbitrarily considered as problematic). In turn, such a "self-regulatory" approach results in a backlash from those who contest the applied countermeasures as being non-transparent, inconsistent, and beyond democratic scrutiny (Binns, Gorwa, Katzenbach, 2020).

As a form of protest against the evermore stringent CSM content moderation policies, a number of right-wing alternative social media (ASM) were launched. They gained increased public attention due to the deplatforming of Donald Trump from Facebook and Twitter at the beginning of 2021 (Hern, 2021). Platforms such as the American service Parler and its Polish equivalent Albicla, closely associated with conservatives, criticise CSM for political bias and promise less rigorous standards, including ensuring their users that they will not be banned or muted in any way for publishing posts.

This paper focuses on the question of how the issue of right-wing ASM is discursively constructed in Polish conservative media. Based on a qualitative analysis of texts, I discuss the general character of the discourse by unpacking its key discursive strategies and critically embedding it in the broader socio-political context and alternative media theory.

Poland constitutes a relevant research space due to its complex history and intriguing current political situation. The most distinctive and relevant features of the Polish context include a steep decline in media freedom in recent years (*Poland*, 2021), and social media regulation plans announced by the right-wing government (Easton, 2021), combined with a non-democratic past, including historical experiences with state censorship (Pokorna-Ignatowicz, 2013). In addition, the Polish media discourse is highly polarised and focused on advocacy journalism (Olechowska, 2022), with two main opposing political camps: one that is more liberal and pro-European, and the other, which is more conservative and Eurosceptic (Bartoszewicz, Gołębiowski, 2021). By focusing on this national space, I aim to illustrate how the issue of ASM can be politically weaponised in a particular context.

Given the recent character of the problem, there have not been many attempts to capture the phenomenon of right-wing ASM so far. Some initial observations

can be derived from research on American alt-/far-right groups’ interaction with media. Zeng and Schäfer (2021) provide an initial theoretical conceptualisation of right-wing ASM (see below) and show how these platforms are used to spread conspiracy theories, whilst Hawley (2021), along with Hermansson, Lawrence, Mulhall, and Murdoch (2020) reflect on the general character of the US alt-/far-right movement and discuss the historical development of their media. Although these papers are not discourse-oriented, they nonetheless provide valuable background to this study. Furthermore, the problem should be also considered along with related research focused on critical and discursive aspects of such issues as disinformation (Farkas, Schou, 2019), privacy (Brodzińska-Mirowska, Seklecka, Wojtkowski, 2020), and filter bubbles (Dahlgren, 2021), all of which reflect on the politicisation of discourses on emerging online phenomena and their role in on-going media transformations.

The article is organised as follows: I start by summarising key points of alternative media theory and asking how the concept of “alternative media” corresponds to developing initiatives such as Albicla and Parler. I then explain my methodological approach, by reflecting on the application of Critical Discourse Analysis as an analytical framework in the study, and following this, the logic of data collection. Subsequently, I present the empirical results of the inquiry, describing the discursive strategies inductively identified in the texts. The paper ends with a wider discussion which establishes links between the findings and alternative media theory and left-wing media critique.

## 1. The framework of alternative media theory

My analysis of ASM is embedded in alternative media theory. In this framework, “alternative media” are generally defined in opposition to symbolically powerful, concentrated and commodified “corporate media” (Gehl, 2015), whose ideological content constantly reproduces the capitalist status quo (Fuchs, Sandoval, 2015). Conversely, the concept of alternative media is related to the ideas of decentralisation, democratic participation and the empowerment of marginalised voices.

Thus, alternative media theory is somewhat ambivalent in its assessment of social media platforms because they “provide new ways to think about who can make and distribute media, but they also intensify media centralization, control, and commercialization” (Gehl, 2015, p. 4). As a result, both Gehl (2015) and Fuchs and Sandoval (2015) propose a distinction between “corporate/capitalist social media” (CSM) – understood as owned and controlled by transnational technology/media companies and “alternative social media” (ASM) – understood as a “critical response to CSM that not only allows for users to share content and connect with one another but also denies the commercialisation of speech, allows users more

access to shape the underlying technical infrastructure, and radically experiments with surveillance regimes” (Gehl, 2015, p. 2).

The question arises then of how to embed the emerging right-wing social media (such as Parler or Albicla) in this framework. Until recently, theorists tended to link the concept of ASM with dispersed, non-profit, “do it yourself” platforms used to integrate and mobilise citizens critical of capitalist society or authoritarian regimes. However, the new conservative platforms have significantly different qualities and motives. Referring to them as “dark platforms”, Zeng and Schäfer (2021) characterise them by: 1) content liberation – they have less rigorous moderation standards than CSM; 2) infrastructure ostracisation – they develop their own technological infrastructure to protect against being excluded from mainstream solutions (e.g. hosting, online payment); 3) exile congregation – they unite users banned from CSM and can thus be channels for spreading conspiracy theories, disinformation, and hate speech. Given the above, I will provisionally refer to Parler, Albicla, and similar as “right-wing ASM”. I recognise, however, the need for rebuilding alternative media theory to better implement such emerging initiatives into this framework and my own critical studies on right-wing ASM discourse aims to contribute to such efforts.

## 2. Methodology

The paper seeks to provide an insight into the Polish conservative media discourse on the right-wing ASM. I draw on the theoretical and methodological framework of multidisciplinary Critical Discourse Studies (CDS) to conduct an “analysis of a topic-related body of linguistic data positioned and explained in relation to a socio-political context with a critical angle” (KhosraviNik, Unger, Wodak, 2016, p. 278). Despite the variety of research approaches and procedures applied, CDS practitioners focus on studying social issues through their linguistic manifestations (Flowerdew, Richardson, 2017). The use of language is thus seen not only as a communicative utterance, but also as a social practice of formulating and transmitting social meaning. As such, discourses have a “constructed as well as constructive character” (Reisigl, 2017, p. 49). This means that they can shape social reality beyond the micro-linguistic level, whilst at the same time, they are simultaneously shaped by various broader conditions. Following this perspective, I understand discourses<sup>2</sup> as “thematically connected and problem-related semiotic (for example oral or written) occurrences that relate to specific semiotic types, which serve particular political functions” (Reisigl, 2008, p. 99).

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<sup>2</sup> I use “discourse” as a countable noun, in the sense we can analyse “discourses” about specific issues developed by various social groups, media outlets, individuals, etc. (Flowerdew, Richardson, 2017).

The main research problem is the question of how the issue of the right-wing ASM is discursively constructed in the Polish conservative media (both news and opinion). To provide an overview of the most relevant aspects of the discourse, I conduct a qualitative analysis focusing on selected discursive strategies proposed in the Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA) to CDS (Reisigl, 2017; Wodak, 2001a). First, I consider “nomination/referential strategies”, understood as diverse linguistic ways of naming and categorising social actors, processes, events, etc., used, for example, to construct in-groups and out-groups. Second, I trace the characteristics and stereotypical traits that are attributed to them, known as “predicational strategies” in DHA. According to van Dijk’s (1998) concept of the “ideological square”, people perceive themselves (and others) as members of groups, which tends to result in in-group favouritism and out-group derogation. I therefore pay particular attention to these positive/negative descriptions of “us” and “them”. Third, I investigate key “argumentation strategies” as a form of rhetorical persuasion used to justify the abovementioned group divisions and the validity of the general reasoning in the texts. I refer here to the concept of “topoi” (Wodak, 2001a, 2015), which I understand as “a more or less conventionalised way of representing the relation between what is stated in the argument and what is stated in the standpoint” (Grootendorst, van Eemeren, 1992, p. 96), and look for some previously identified patterns typical of political communication, for example, topoi of threat, topoi of history, topoi of people.

Additionally, to critically interpret the results, I provide a “socio-diagnostic critique” (Wodak, 2001a) of the analysed discourse. Drawing on alternative media theory and the broader social and historical context, I reflect on the political instrumentalisation of the debate on ASM, seeing it as an example of a debate on power relations in media. I focus on media discourse due to the crucial role of media in influencing the political climate towards the development of digital communication technologies. Within a framework of critical theory, media are perceived as a symbolically powerful social force that significantly contributes to constructing shared social imaginaries of reality (Jessop, 2004; van Dijk, 1997). Hence, I perceive media debates as spaces for “discursive struggle”, in which various voices constantly compete to impose and counter certain meanings and to enforce or sustain a preferred social order, including (re)shaping the principles of the contemporary online space, such as who can speak, where, and on what terms. The rules of the contemporary Internet are constantly changing so it is necessary to analyse – including through a discursive lens – the interests and ideologies of these ongoing transformations.

The research sample consists of texts about two right-wing ASM platforms: 1) Parler (American), and 2) Albicla (Polish), published on the five most popular online conservative media in Poland (tw, 2019): *nczas.com*, *niezalezna.pl*, *dorzeczy.pl*, *wpolityce.pl*, *telewizjarepublika.pl*. *Nczas.com* is the website of “Najwyższy Czas!” [High Time!], a magazine linked with political circles related to the political party *Konfederacja* [Confederation] (a far-right party that remained outside the

ruling coalition in Poland during the period under study). The remaining titles, by contrast, all directly or indirectly declare an affinity with the Prawo i Sprawiedliwość party [PiS; Law and Justice], Jarosław Kaczyński's conservative party that ruled Poland when the analysed articles were published. These outlets are highly interconnected, i.a., by shared authors (who also frequently appear on TVP – state-controlled “public” television in Poland). On the other hand, they also compete for the audiences, and financial support from the government and state-owned companies (Olechowska, 2022). Additionally, it should be emphasised that *niezalezna.pl* and *telewizjarepublika.pl* are part of a media group associated with the influential media figure, Tomasz Sakiewicz, who is also one of the founders of *Albicla*.

I analysed articles published in the period from November 2020, when Parler experienced a significant growth of users in reaction to the US presidential elections results, to June 2021. To collect specific texts from the abovementioned media outlets for analysis, I conducted a keyword-search of phrases “parler” and “albicla” via Google Advanced Search. Given that my research considers an evolving, largely unexplored discursive space, and thus demands time-absorbing in-depth analyses, I decided to concentrate on a relatively small sample volume. Hence, the results should be regarded mainly as a preliminary overview of the emerging problem and a starting point for further explorations. 40 texts were analysed in total: 25 found by keyword “parler” (5 from each portal) and 15 found by keyword “albicla” (5 from *niezalezna.pl* and *telewizjarepublika.pl*, 3 from *nczas.com*, 2 from *dorzeczy.pl* and 0 from *wpolityce.pl*).<sup>3</sup>

### 3. Results

In this section, I present the results of a critical discourse analysis of the texts concerning right-wing ASM that were published in the Polish conservative online media. The results discuss a number of recurring discursive strategies that were inductively extracted from the analysed articles. The strategies are illustrated by short excerpts from the research sample.

#### 3.1. The war on free speech. Defining the situation

The sequence of events that resulted in the initial development of the right-wing ASM (including the proliferation of CSM content moderation policies and the deplatforming of Trump and Parler) was presented as “the war on free speech” (*wpolityce*).

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<sup>3</sup> If there were fewer than 5 texts from a particular portal, this was due to lack of sufficient number of articles in search results.

pl, 11 January 2021).<sup>4</sup> The discourse of conflict, using a war metaphor, served to define the situation as an extraordinary time of struggle between good and evil, and thus allowed for the construction of typical roles in the discourse, that is, “us” as victims and heroes, and “them” as villains (cf. Królikowska, 2015; Johnson, Lakoff, 2003; van Dijk, 2005). Such framing entailed numerous militaristic references:

- 1) Big internet companies affiliated with the Democrats, such as Amazon, wanted to **destroy** it [Parler] for not censoring its users’ comments (nczas.com, 17<sup>th</sup> February 2021).
- 2) Tech giants [Amazon, Apple, and Google] **were merciless** [to Parler] (niezalezna.pl, 17<sup>th</sup> January 2021).

Following the wartime rhetoric, the analysed texts implied that the media landscape was facing an imminent danger, and that the situation would continue to deteriorate so that there was a need to stay cautious:

- 3) **Further attacks** on Parler, as well as all conservative and right-wing media and platforms, **are to be expected** (nczas.com, 17<sup>th</sup> February 2021).
- 4) If they can block the President of the United States, **they can block anyone. No one can feel safe anymore** (wpolityce.pl, 11<sup>th</sup> January 2021).

Part of this metaphorical scenario of war was the use of the topos of threat, which relies on the conditional that “if there are specific dangers or threats, one should do something to counter them” (Wodak, 2001a, p. 75). In particular, the need to organise resistance was emphasised. The launch of right-wing ASM was presented as a defensive response to attacks on freedom:

- 5) “We realise the importance of launching social media that are not controlled by extreme leftist movements. [Social media] are currently the largest forum for the exchange of information and ideas and **therefore we will not give in to attacks. Freedom is worth the sacrifice**” (...) (tvrepublika.pl, 22<sup>th</sup> January 2021).
- 6) They [Big Tech companies] need us more than we need them. We have created them. Thanks to us, they have reached the top. And so, **we can throw them back to the ground too**. We have made them seem essential to our existence. **We can easily turn against them and get rid of them** (dorzeczy.pl, 6<sup>th</sup> February 2021).

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<sup>4</sup> All excerpts from the research sample are marked with the place of publication and date. All quotes were translated from Polish to English by the author. Bolding was added to highlight the most relevant fragments. Essential clarifications were added in square brackets to explain the context of the sentence.

### 3.2. Hostile leftist alliance. Constructing the out-group

The use of the war metaphor was complemented by the building of a discursive division of actors into competing identity groups – “them” as “leftist” enemies threatening the conservative world and “us” as protectors of the “good”, traditional social order. This sub-section is focused on how the image of the out-group (‘them’) was shaped and what traits and aims were attributed to its members.

Generally, the out-group was understood as a wide-ranging political coalition, consisting of mainstream media, technology companies, and global political elites. It was suggested that they co-created a broad alliance aimed at maintaining control over public opinion:

- 7) (...) Parler announced that it recognises freedom of speech guaranteed by the First Amendment to the US Constitution and would not censor. Nevertheless, **Facebook, Google, Twitter, Apple, and Amazon commonly use it** [censorship] **to help Democrats gain power and keep it**. This is because they [Democrats] guarantee that they [the companies] will maintain their monopolistic and privileged position on the internet, which ensures impunity (nczas.com, 20 April 2021).
- 8) Google had transferred 128 billion euros to Bermuda through a Dutch subsidiary (...) the giant [Google] thus avoided almost 38 billion euros in taxes, which it would have otherwise had to pay in the US. Trump would not have allowed this. (...) In my opinion, **this was** [the Democrats’ permission to tax evasion by tech companies] **a reward for total opposition” from the media to Trump**, demonstrated throughout his term (dorzczy.pl, 21 April 2021).

This supposed alliance was explicitly identified with “leftist” ideology. Linking actors that do not clearly support a reactionary agenda with the radical left is particularly characteristic of the discourse of Polish right (cf. Bennett, Kwiatkowski, 2019; Żuk, Żuk, 2020). In this process, as Bennett and Kwiatkowski (2019) have noted, “disparate opposition groups are ‘lumped together’ or collectivized (van Leeuwen, 1996) and a single (fictional) opponent is thus discursively constructed that can best be described as a folk devil representing a moral panic that needs addressing” (p. 244). The use of this synecdochic and hyperbolic “leftist” label serves to delegitimise opponents through ascribing them with negative traits, for example, nihilism, anti-patriotism, moral corruption, etc. In this context, the largest technology companies were presented as active political actors supporting a radical, progressive agenda:

- 9) Apple has never responded to calls for violence from the left on **left-wing Twitter or Facebook** (nczas.com, 20<sup>th</sup> April 2021).

- 10) We realise the importance of launching **social media that are not controlled by extreme leftist movements** (tvrepublika.pl, 22<sup>th</sup> January 2021).
- 11) (...) Big Tech shoves **its toxic woke ideology** down everyone’s throats. Examples abound (dorzeczy.pl, 6<sup>th</sup> February 2021).

This “leftist alliance” was discursively constructed as hostile to conservative “politicians, content, and values” (dorzeczy.pl, 21<sup>th</sup> April 2021). Its ultimate goal was supposedly to “restrict civil liberties, silence public debate, limit one’s freedom” (wpolityce.pl, 11<sup>th</sup> January 2021). In particular, in the texts from nczas.com, it was suggested that this coordinated political effort has a conspiratorial nature, referring more or less directly to the “New World Order” conspiracy theory (*New World Order...*, 2021):

- 12) Democrats, their media, and big internet companies that are involved in **building the “new order”** will obviously never stop in their efforts to destroy free speech and impose censorship (nczas.com, 17<sup>th</sup> February 2021).
- 13) According to popular belief, the coordinated action by Apple, Google, and Amazon [the deplatforming of Parler] was **collusion** (nczas.com, 20<sup>th</sup> April 2021).

In the analysed discourse the notion of censorship served as a synonym for “modus operandi”, by which political rivals of conservatives are imposing their dominance over the society. The pervasive, arbitrary, and vague character of this phenomenon was focused on. It was portrayed as “mass” (dorzeczy.pl, 10<sup>th</sup> January 2021), “growing” (tvrepublika.pl, 22<sup>th</sup> January 2021), and “global” (wpolityce.pl, 11<sup>th</sup> January 2021). The authors argued that “there are no boundaries for global censors fighting free speech” (wpolityce.pl, 11<sup>th</sup> January 2021), and “the censorship in social media can affect anyone” (nczas.com, 13<sup>th</sup> January 2021), however specific examples, other than the deplatforming of Trump and Parler, were rarely invoked.

Possibly as a result of this focus on free speech, the term “content moderation” was almost absent in the discourse. Any kind of oversight performed by technology companies was classified as “censorship”. The authors expressed doubts about the legitimacy and honesty of the implemented moderation practices. These actions are presented by CSM as aimed at improving the quality of public debate and protecting citizens from harmful content (e.g. hate speech or disinformation). In the analysed discourse such a narrative was undermined, and evaluated only as an official excuse to impose a progressive agenda on users. The authors often used hedges and quotation marks to emphasise the arbitrariness of the implemented policies:

- 14) (...) [the deplatformings of Trump and Parler were implemented] under the pretext of [fighting] “hateful” language, “hate speech”, “conspiracy theories”, and any other bogeymen (nczas.com, 14<sup>th</sup> June 2021).

- 15) The tech giant [Amazon] (...) removed the service [Parler] from its online platform claiming it was due to the “policy violation” (tvrepublika.pl, 16<sup>th</sup> January 2021).

### 3.3. Oppressed protectors of free speech. Constructing the in-group

In the previous sub-section I presented how the out-group was portrayed in the analysed texts (and thus how the group was attributed with political bias and how the concept of censorship works in the discourse). In this subsection, I attempt to characterise the discursive construction of the in-group.

Following the narrative about the ubiquitous “leftist” censorship, members of the in-group were presented as conservative protectors of free speech. The analysed texts operated on simple dichotomies in which CSM equalled censorship, whereas right-wing ASM equalled freedom of speech:

- 16) It [Albicla] is a discussion forum **free from censorship** practiced by the world’s social networking giants (tvrepublika.pl, 12<sup>th</sup> March 2021).  
 17) Parler is back. The platform, **where there is no censorship**, as opposed to rival Twitter, **and there is freedom of speech**, is running again (nczas.com, 17<sup>th</sup> February 2021).

Echoing populist narratives and the topos of people,<sup>5</sup> conservatives were described as “average media users” (dorzeczy.pl, 6<sup>th</sup> February 2021), who just want to speak freely and cultivate their common-sense values. Members of the in-group were, thus, positively described as protectors of the “free world” and an antithesis of the “leftist” radicals. This fits into a wider Polish right-wing discourse on topics such as immigration, LGBT+ rights or environmental protection (cf. Bennett, Kwiatkowski, 2019; Cap, 2018; Żuk, Żuk, 2020), where conservatives are depicted as “the last line of defence” against “dangerous” and “totalitarian” outside influences:

- 18) On 20<sup>th</sup> January 2021, Albicla.com officially launched, where **any internet user who values freedom of speech** can create an account (niezalezna.pl, 31<sup>st</sup> January 2021).  
 19) Twitter’s shares plummeted [after the deplatforming of Trump] so **the world (the free one)** at least had some fun because the boys [Twitter] were taught a lesson as billions were at stake (dorzeczy.pl, 21<sup>st</sup> April 2021).

A victimisation strategy was likewise observed in the analysed discourse. This can be interpreted in line with the Wodak’s (2015) concept of “the right-wing

<sup>5</sup> The topos relies on the conditional that “if the people favour/refuse a specific action, the action should be performed/not performed” (Wodak, 2015, p. 53).

perpetuum mobile”. The process involves right-wing actors creating scandals by making false or offensive claims (in our case, spreading hate speech, etc.) and then, after a condemnatory media response (in our case, bans on CSM), re-defining the original scandal by assigning right-wingers the role of martyrs, complaining about the lack of freedom of speech, and accusing the media/establishment of plotting against the right-wing agenda. According to the authors of the analysed texts, the emerging moderation practices on CSM are based on double standards, which means that their aim is only to suppress conservatives:

- 20) (...) Facebook has been censoring Christians and conservatives for months, for example, by removing content that defends the lives of unborn children or recalls victims of Islamic terrorism (wpolityce.pl, 11<sup>th</sup> January 2021).
- 21) (...) [Google and Amazon] accused the service [Parler] of distributing posts inciting violence after the US Capitol riots on January 6th. The same companies have never reacted in case of incitements to riots expressed on the left-wing Twitter by Democrats, the Marxist organisation BLM or fascists from Antifa (nczas.com, 20<sup>th</sup> April 2021).

In this context, it is worth mentioning that the notion of neutrality was inconsistently constructed in the discourse. On the one hand, as discussed above, right-wing ASM were equated with freedom and impartiality, particularly in opposition to CSM. On the other hand, some authors noticed the “right-leaning” orientation of the two analysed portals. In the case of Parler, the authors acknowledged that it is linked with the American right-wing political community:

- 22) The **conservative social networking site** Parler stopped working on Monday (...) (niezalezna.pl, 11<sup>th</sup> January 2021).
- 23) Amazon, Apple, and Google hit the **right-wing service** Parler (dorzczy.pl, 11<sup>th</sup> January 2021).

Despite recognising the conservative roots of the service, the question of their impact on the design and day-to-day operation of the portal seemed to be negligible, unlike in the case of CSM, where, as previously discussed, their “political bias” was considered as crucial for their functioning. Furthermore, discussions about the neutrality of the Polish service Albicla revealed internal political struggles between domestic right-wing factions. Niezalezna.pl and tvrepublika.pl, closely related to the founders of Albicla, presented the platform as fully democratic and unbiased:

- 24) Albicla is a social networking site for absolutely everyone. People with conservative views can find their place here, as well as liberals, and left-wingers (niezalezna.pl, 5<sup>th</sup> March 2021).

- 25) Albicla not only brings together conservatives, people with similar views. This is evidenced by the fast creation of accounts on the portal by Onet.pl [one of the most popular Polish mainstream news websites] and its editor-in-chief – Bartosz Węglarczyk – or Krytyka Polityczna [a left-leaning opinion portal]. “I do not agree with these people on almost any issue. However, I want everyone to have the right to discuss. We are all children of one God” – wrote the editor-in-chief [Tomasz Sakiewicz] of *GP* [“Gazeta Polska”] and *GPC* [“Gazeta Polska Codziennie”].

On the contrary, *nczas.com* and *dorzeczy.pl* criticised Albicla for being closely connected (and thus politicised) to a specific right-wing faction associated with Tomasz Sakiewicz’s media group:

- 26) Albicla, **the “Polish Facebook” for PiS created by Sakiewicz**, is a total failure (*nczas.com*, 21<sup>st</sup> June 2021).
- 27) Such persecution [“biased” content moderation on CSM] has become quite widespread. The Polish government has therefore taken several steps. Firstly, it has unfortunately decided to subsidise Albicla, **a private internet project**, which, according to my sources, proved to be a disappointment (*dorzeczy.pl*, 6<sup>th</sup> February 2021).

### 3.4. Parallels to the non-democratic past

The discourse was also framed in terms of parallels to Poland’s non-democratic past. Under the Soviet influence, the Polish People’s Republic (1947–1989) was one of the states of the Eastern Bloc. The country experienced extensive governmental apparatus of censorship and propaganda as well as limited civil and political rights (Stępińska, 2017). These experiences are significant for post-1989 socio-political climate in Poland that ‘can be best described as socially conservative and wary of the left, with left-wing political actors usually being associated with the previous Communist regime’ (Bennett, Kwiatkowski, 2019, p. 239).

In the analysed texts the topos of history was present, which assumes that “because history teaches that specific actions have specific consequences, one should perform or omit a specific action in a specific situation (allegedly) comparable with the historical example referred to” (Wodak, 2001a, p. 76). Thus, numerous references to Poland’s “communist” history were used to discredit the out-group by building the following sequence of associations: the out-group → leftists → totalitarianism → censorship, lack of freedom, surveillance, anti-Catholicism, etc. → a necessity of contestation/resistance:

- 28) What should be the Polish response to the “**new Bolshevism**” on social media? (*wpolityce.pl*, 12<sup>th</sup> January 2021).

- 29) There is no doubt – the left all over the world – whether in the UK, the US, the EU or in Poland – is always **authoritarian and totalitarian**. It wants to destroy freedom of speech. That is the only way it can impose its views – through **indoctrination, censorship**. It will not tolerate any competition of thought and debate (nczas.com, 19<sup>th</sup> January 2021).

The historical parallels were also observed in *ad hominem* attacks on decision-makers and employees of CSM who were described as servants of an overpowering, hostile regime, invoking associations with members of political apparatus of the Polish People’s Republic and other oppressive states:

- 30) Thus, **censors and political guards** from Apple want to decide in the name of users what content is harmful and dangerous to them (nczas.com, 20<sup>th</sup> April 2021).
- 31) Let’s remember that Big Tech notoriously hires lefties for the job, because they are particularly inclined towards arbitrary, totalitarian games. There is no need to feel sorry for them (dorzeczy.pl, 6<sup>th</sup> February 2021).

### 3.5. The political economy of social media

Furthermore, the discourse was saturated with comments on the political economy (Fuchs, Sandoval, 2015; Jessop, 2004), with the authors of the analysed articles discussing the relationships between the shape of digital media and political and economic power structures.

As indicated above, most of the texts framed the discourse in terms of a global conflict between “leftists” and conservatives. However, some authors of the analysed articles added another layer to the construction of this conflict, considering it through the lens of American imperialism and the nationality of capital. It is important to stress that the texts were published at the specific moment of the transfer of power in the US from Republicans to Democrats. In this context, the American dominance over the media landscape and the resulting alleged persecution of conservative Central and Eastern European states were highlighted:

- 32) (...) the products of Facebook, Twitter, Instagram or YouTube are global brands and services so the world’s media began to be ruled by a few American companies (dorzeczy.pl, 21<sup>st</sup> April 2021).
- 33) Poles are well aware that Big Tech is even more bossy outside the US [than in the US] (...) Until recently, Facegootwittdom [a neologism, a collective term for the most popular technology companies] has <sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> This is a reference to the project of “Międzymorze” [Between-Seas] – a geopolitical concept promoting a potential political coalition between Central and Eastern European countries. The

Hence, a necessity of strengthening national media, that would limit the impact of non-domestic actors, was expressed. Following this line of argument, even Parler was seen as an insufficient alternative, because it is controlled by foreigners. As for indicating specific solutions to this problem, once more an internal power struggle between domestic right-wing factions was visible. The media connected with Albicla promoted their service as a solution, whilst the other titles inclined towards different initiatives, including state-driven legal CSM regulations:

- 34) **Albicla is the Polish answer to the activities of global social networking giants**, which have been infected by the virus of censorship and manual scrutiny of content (niezalezna.pl, 5<sup>th</sup> March 2021).
- 35) **Polish Parler or a new law?** What should be the Polish response to the ‘new Bolshevism’ in social media? (wpolityce.pl, 12<sup>th</sup> January 2021).

Secondly, the issue of the economic dominance of the biggest technology companies was raised. A struggle for market position was presented as one of the dimensions of the conflict between CSM and their conservative equivalents:

- 36) Google and Apple cut Facebook’s competitor Parler out of their shops. But that is nothing, because it is only a question of software. But we have now moved on to hardware, which means physical elimination. Amazon, which rented servers to Parler, has terminated its contract and Parler is gone (...). This is how things are done now (dorzeczy.pl, 21<sup>st</sup> April 2021).
- 37) Apart from the popular platforms, internet users have other social networks to choose from: Facebook’s competitor Parler, YouTube’s competitor Rumble, and the Twitter-like service Gab (tvrepublika.pl, 16<sup>th</sup> January 2020).

The authors argued that the real rivalry between biggest technology companies and their alternatives is impossible due to the unlevel playing field. To highlight the political and economic power of CSM, their size and impact were foregrounded, being described as: “digital giants” (nczas.com, 12<sup>th</sup> February 2021), “internet molochs” (wpolityce.pl, 11<sup>th</sup> January 2021) or “new Tyrants” (dorzeczy.pl, 10<sup>th</sup> January 2021). The companies were thus portrayed as powerful corporations that can suppress any market competition:

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vision has never been fully implemented and serves in the Polish conservative discourse as an idea for creating a counterweight to the European Union and strengthening the international position of Poland (Kott, 2017).

- 38) The problem is that the internet giants such as Google, Amazon, Facebook or Twitter have **created an oligopoly** that threatens free speech on a planetary scale (wpolityce.pl, 11<sup>th</sup> January 2021).
- 39) Bus, tram or metro – these are places where we can keep in touch with the world and, of course, use Albicla. As yet there is no app to facilitate this (and unfortunately **it could be blocked by monopolies**), but it is not necessary (niezalezna.pl, 31<sup>st</sup> January 2021).

However, Albicla and Parler were presented as ways to challenge the established power structures within the media system, providing users with the possibility of choice. They were assigned a subversive potential to create a communicative sphere free from “leftist” (Albicla and Parler) and foreign (Albicla) control:

- 40) (...) we need freedom-loving social media like Parler, Gab, GoDuckDuck, and such like. They should be used in the Interarium – alongside some local initiatives – as **a healthy alternative to Facegootwitterdom** (...) (dorzeczy.pl, 6<sup>th</sup> February 2021).
- 41) Parler was designed as an **unbiased and free speech alternative to major social networks** such as Twitter and Facebook (niezalezna.pl, 9<sup>th</sup> January 2021).

## 4. Discussion

It should be noted that the identified discursive strategies are rooted in a broader media critique, which is a significant element of the right-wing discourse in general (not just in Poland). In the “right-wing media ecosystem” (Benkler, Faris, Roberts, 2018, p. 13) a narrative that portrays media outside of this system as strongly left-leaning and hostile towards conservatives (Bhat, 2022; Meagher, 2012) has been promoted for decades. In recent years, this narrative has been extended to include emerging digital media. Available analyses of this right-wing critique of CSM in the US (and the often accompanying promotion of ASM) indicate that the discursive strategies reconstructed in this article largely overlap with those used in the American context, including the wartime rhetoric, the dichotomies of “us” vs. “them” based on the victimisation of conservatives, assigning the role of a “folk devil” to the left, and other anti-left tropes (e.g. references to communist totalitarianism), and the re-contextualisation of the anti-capitalist critique of corporate power (cf. Bhat, 2022; Cows, Ma, 2022). These observations suggest that the identified discursive strategies fit into the general character of right-wing populism as a style of political expression (Aalberg et al., 2018), which employs strategies such as: 1) Manichean divisions into friends and enemies combined with scapegoating and

insulting “the others”; 2) belief in the unanimity and virtuousness of “the people”; 3) victim–perpetrator reversal, 4) blaming the media and elites, 5) extreme simplification of reality; 6) dramatisation and emotionalisation (Reisigl, 2008; Müller, Schulz, Wirth, 2020; Froio et al., 2020; Wodak, 2003).

Expanding the discussion beyond the issue of right-wing populism, the results can be interpreted in the broader context of the on-going debates on overlapping questions regarding internet governance, agency and power structures within the contemporary digital media landscape. These debates constitute a space for “discursive struggles” between different, often entirely contradictory, symbolic imaginaries of various political communities. Particularly noteworthy is how the right-wing discourse recontextualises the left-wing standpoint in some aspects.

Firstly, despite their inherent differences, the two approaches admit that CSM are biased to some extent. The left-wing perspective argues that mainstream media apply some form of economic censorship that results in promoting “a particular vision of the world that is amenable to corporate capitalism, consumerism over citizenship, and political conservatism” (Gehl, 2015, p. 2). Drawing on the legacy of neo-Marxism, the left-wing argument undermines the concept of a “neutral” media. In this approach, media reflect the views and values of actors who have the power to shape them (Wodak, 2001b). Hence, van der Velden (2013, as cited in Gehl, 2015, p. 7) has noted that “social networks could be analyzed in terms of their push of different (political) agendas”. The Polish conservative media discourse has absorbed this critical perspective to contest the ideological involvement of CSM. Hawley comes to a similar conclusion, albeit in the context of the American alt-right movement:

inspired by the twentieth-century Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci, many voices on the far right argue that ideological hegemony in the culture must precede permanent political victories. In their view, the left has achieved such astonishing success in recent decades, despite conservative victories at the ballot box, precisely because it controls the culture via popular entertainment – though left-wing dominance in education and the news media is also important. The alt-right’s engagement with popular media predominantly takes the form of critique (Hawley, 2021, p. 157).

Thus, starting from similar assumptions, both perspectives vary significantly in their evaluations. The Polish conservative media discourse recontextualises arguments from the left-wing critique to delegitimise media that do not explicitly support right-wing ideologies and politicians. The left-wing critique classifies mainstream media as neoliberal, and thus focuses on their role in sustaining *status quo* of the capitalist society. Conversely, the analysed discourse describes the same media as left-leaning and accuses them of destroying a traditional social order and imposing a revolutionary agenda (i.e. anti-Christian, multiculturalist, “woke”).

Secondly, both approaches express anti-corporate sentiments. Such a position has traditionally been associated with the left-wing stance, which is inherently “critical of the power exercised by media in the hands of the state or large global

corporations” (McQuail, 2010, p. 11). Nonetheless, as the analysis showed, conservative actors have also begun to acknowledge that “the capitalist domination of the internet constitutes a form of cultural imperialism” (Fuchs, Sandoval, 2015, p. 169), having in mind the abovementioned recontextualisation of arguments concerning the political nature of this “imperialism.” This is an intriguing observation given that right-wing neoliberalism has for years successfully fostered a belief that free speech is guaranteed by privatised and deregulated media market. In line with this laissez-faire logic, CSM, as private companies, which have achieved a strong market position thanks to the quality of their platforms, should be free to operate under internally established rules. Such an attitude, however, was all but absent in the analysed texts. Instead, CSM were portrayed as harmful for public debate and political rights and yet omnipotent and uncontrolled, with regard to their dominant market position. As such, requests for limiting not only their symbolic but also economic dominance were forwarded.

Embedding the results in alternative media theory, I would argue that there is a need to rebuild this framework so that it sufficiently takes into account platforms such as Parler and Albicla. From the viewpoint of critical theory, Fuchs and Sandoval observe that:

alternative media diffuse content and worldviews that question dominant realities, provide critical information and give voice to critical viewpoints that tend to be marginalised in the mainstream media – especially the views of progressive social movements and activists – and have a vision of an alternative society without domination (Fuchs, Sandoval, 2015, p. 166).

The authors here perceive alternative media as non-profit, free from surveillance, decentralised, and collectively owned and shaped. The conservative media discourse promotes a different character of ASM. Its focus is rather on a need for transferring the political control over social media to actors outside the “left alliance” than on removing the issues of centralisation, top-down design structure, and commodification. In this context, it is worth emphasising that both Albicla and Parler are private, for-profit media outlets that can “capitalise on the free speech narrative” (Hermansson et al., 2020, p. 142).

## Conclusion

The article presents the results of the critical analysis of the Polish conservative media discourse on the two right-wing ASM, the Polish portal Albicla and the American portal Parler. The authors of the analysed texts, drawing mostly on the war metaphor, created a narrative of identity conflict between two opposing political communities (frequently using highly emotional language and confrontational style). The out-group, consisting of powerful technology companies and their

supporters, was portrayed as hostile to conservatives. The corporations, along with mainstream media and global political elites, were accused of being part of coordinated “leftist alliance” which is striving to implement a radical, progressive social order. This fits in with the general anti-left tropes in right-wing populist discourse, in which “the left” is presented as “folk devil” seeking to destroy “good people” and “Christian civilisation”. Platform moderation practices were described as invasive, omnipresent and politically biased “censorship”, whose role is to sustain the “leftist” hegemony around the world. In this narrative, conservatives (the in-group) were presented as victims of an on-going “war” and oppressed protectors of “free world” and traditional values. Right-wing ASM were depicted as synonymous with free speech. However, despite the overall positive portrayal of right-wing ASM, ambivalent attitudes regarding their neutrality were expressed. In particular, in the case of the Polish platform Albicla there were concerns that the service can be utilised by certain right-wing factions for the purposes of domestic political rivalry. Moreover, although the discourse focused mostly on the American context, there were numerous parallels to Poland’s “communist” past in order to make sense of the current situation (hostile, oppressive regime vs political dissidents fighting for freedom). Finally, the discourse often turned to issues of political economy. In this sense, at least, paradoxically, the discourse has several common points with the left-wing critique of social media. The two opposing approaches agree on the necessity of contesting highly monopolised character of the contemporary media and developing alternative means of communication.

Concluding, the analysed results prove that media discourse on ASM constitutes a ground for semantic battles, by which various groups try to pursue their political interests and impose different visions of media and democracy. For this reason, further critical studies regarding the ongoing media transformations are recommended. It is also necessary to provide systematic knowledge about the political economy and ideological foundations that underlie the development of the contemporary digital media systems.

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