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# MEDIA PROTEST ACTION AS A CRISIS MANAGEMENT TOOL USING THE EXAMPLE OF THE “MEDIA WITHOUT CHOICE” PROTEST

## Abstract

The aim of this paper is to study is to explore the utilization of protest as a crisis management strategy, using the “Media without choice” protest action of February 10, 2021, as a case study. As part of the protest, media and advertising organizations in Poland suspended their activities for one day in response to the announcement of a draft law imposing a new fee on entities broadcasting advertisements. The research aimed to provide a detailed analysis of the actions of media organizations during the protest. Open-ended interviews and analysis of existing data (including press information and the draft law) were used to collect data. The research results indicate that the chosen form of protest proved to be an effective crisis management tool due to the utilization of the characteristics of the media market and the unprecedented nature of the event. The case study also allowed for the observation that achieving the intended goal was possible thanks to the cooperation and solidarity of media organizations that compete with each other on a daily basis.

**Keywords:** crisis, crisis management, media without choice, protest

**JEL:** D72, H12, L82, M38

## Introduction

Uncertainty and risk are inherent in the operations of any organisation. However, in today’s highly dynamic and volatile reality, traditional methods of dealing with risks may not be sufficient. Effectively navigating a crisis situation now demands managers to embrace ingenuity and innovation in their approach. At the beginning of February 2021, a draft law “Act on additional revenues for the National Health Fund, the National Fund for the Protection of Monuments and the establishment of a Fund for the Support of Culture and National Heritage in the Media Area” was

presented by the Polish government. It proposed the introduction of a new contribution for entities broadcasting conventional and online advertisements in the territory of the Republic of Poland. Some media organisations saw this as a significant threat to their activity, to which a response was needed. A “Media without choice” (pol. “Media bez wyboru”) protest was organised, which consisted of refraining from publishing news and advertising, as well as switching off broadcasting for 24 hours, on February 10, 2022. The protest proved to be an effective way out of the crisis situation and is a unique example of dealing with a threat in the media industry. With this in mind, the aim of this paper is to explore and understand the reasons for using protest as a crisis management tool. It sought to answer the question “How was the ‘Media without choice’ protest used as a crisis management tool?” and the specific research questions: “Why did media organisations decide to refrain from activity as part of the ‘Media without choice’ protest?” and “Why was the use of media blackout an effective crisis management tool?”. The study adopted a case study methodology, honing in on the “Media without choice” protest. It employed a multifaceted approach, combining in-depth interviews with employees from the protesting organizations and a thorough analysis of diverse data sources, encompassing press releases, legislative documents, and social media content.

## Crisis management

The concept of crisis is discussed within scientific disciplines such as medicine, psychology, political science, administration, sociology, economics, and management. The word crisis comes from the Greek *krisis*, meaning “separating,” “distinguishing,” or “decision,” “judgement” (Liddell, Scott, Jones, 2023). In the dictionary definition, crisis is translated as “a time of great disagreement, confusion, or suffering; a turning point that may result in a decisive change” (Cambridge Dictionary, 2023). In the field of management, a crisis is an abrupt and unforeseen incident that endangers an organization’s ability to conduct its operations and creates potential risks to its financial stability and reputation (Coombs, 2007, p. 164). It is a pathological state in an organisation that must be addressed with suitable measures as it can lead to adverse outcomes such as decreased production, service quality, employment, financial stability, and reputational damage (Barton, 1993, p. 12). Not all problems, difficult situations or conflicts can be called a crisis situation. In order to be considered as such, there must be a real threat to the organisation that can eventually develop into a crisis. A crisis situation is therefore subjective in nature and its occurrence depends on the level of threat acceptable to a given organization – what is a threat to one organisation is not necessarily a threat to another.

Crucial to crises are the consequences, which can take on both positive and negative dimensions. The positive dimension stems from the fact that critical reflection on the organisation’s past actions can lead to the implementation of beneficial

changes that contribute to further development. This happens when the procedures developed and implemented in the past are reviewed, and their usefulness is assessed (Tworzydło, 2017, p. 78). If an organisation manages to survive, a crisis can actually make an organization stronger by equipping employees with new skills, like problem-solving and early detection. More often than not, it takes on a negative dimension, as it causes significant constraints for the organisation in carrying out its tasks (Tworzydło, 2017a, p. 172). The negative impact stems from the destructive and costly nature of a crisis situation. There may be a rupture in the relationship with the organization's audience due to the emergence of doubts, discouragement, or fears, as well as a decline in sales, increased turnover among the staff, and the appearance of negative comments and publications in the media (Tworzydło, 2017, p. 78). While an organization may financially recover to its pre-crisis state, reputational damage is often irreparable. The organization's environment may permanently lose trust and retain negative associations with the crisis in their minds.

Crisis management is the response to usually sudden and unpredictable events. A number of schemes for dealing with crisis situations can be found in academic and industry literature. The actions taken during a broadly defined crisis management depend on the situation in which the organisation finds itself – the causes, the scale of the problem, the potential consequences. Seemingly, some crisis situations may appear similar, but they should be approached individually (Kaczmarek-Słowińska, 2020, p. 85).

## The crisis challenges of the media market

Media organizations are similar to other types of organizations in many ways, but they also have their own unique traits. This explains the emergence of a separate area of study within the discipline of management, a sub-discipline – media management. According to Picard, all media, regardless of their nature and medium, fulfil two functions: 1. social mission, 2. commercial (Picard, 1989, p. 17). Because of this duality, they are a specific market good and cannot be treated as enterprises whose sole purpose is to bring profits to their owners (Nierenberg, 2014, p. 52). Media management, due to its social mission, should be close to the humanistic aspects of the management process (Nierenberg, 2011, p. 78). Media organizations are characterized by a high crisis potential, stemming from the intensity and dynamism of cultural and technological changes. They operate in conditions of constant, dynamic transformations. Media also play an important role in providing information about crisis situations and shaping public opinion about them. By providing space for commentary and opinion exchange, media become a platform for public debate. Journalists, whistleblowers, or ordinary internet users can spotlight discrepancies and misconduct within various organizations. By attracting attention,

they empower others to become aware of organizational issues, igniting vigilance and oversight.

The dominant motives in the economy (capitalistic pursuit of maximizing profits through added labor value), in organization (efficiency), and in consumption (desire for immediate gratification of needs), coupled with the rapid advancement of technical parameters of equipment, lead to the emergence of a “culture of speed” (Millar, Schwarz, 1988; Virilio, 1988 as cited in van Dijk, 2006, p. 193). One of the most significant changes in the operations of media organizations is the process of digitization, which leads to a significant increase in the production, distribution, and consumption of information and communication. The perception that our culture is enriched by an increase in information and communication in the media in terms of quantity and quality is, however, apparent. The noticeable speed is not without effect on our quality of perception, as this deteriorates due to information and data overload. Digital culture is a culture of excess, which makes us notice the limitations of the individual in the way we perceive. While the possibilities for accessing information via the internet are expanding, they do not guarantee an increase in our ability to process and comprehend that information (Szpunar, 2012, p. 125). Often, audiences receive similar or even identical information, so that finding relevant and necessary data is hindered and blocked by its excess. The abundance of forms and channels of content delivery is not the same as the increase in the number of information sources. Echo chambers are frequently created, which refers to a circumstance where an individual is deprived of exposure to diverse information or has limited access to it (Popiołek, Sroka, 2019, p. 159).

The speed culture in the media also affects the quality of content, as one can see a progressive tabloidisation and trivialization of messages. High production costs and low reproduction costs make media companies more inclined to adopt a strategy of cheap product differentiation (Hollifield, 1996 as cited in Kreft, 2012, p. 241). Simultaneously, the importance of images in our culture is increasing, as information in this form can be presented and consumed much faster than others (speech, text, and numbers) (van Dijk, 2006, pp. 193–194). Visual representation dominates all types of media. Oculocentrism, i.e. the dominance of the sense of sight, can be seen in for example, the press and news websites, where increasingly large spaces are used for photographs, charts and infographics. Rather than solely focusing on informing or educating the audience, these elements are primarily utilized to capture the reader’s attention and generate an emotional response. This shift is often driven by the desire to increase readership and advertising revenue rather than maintaining journalistic values such as accuracy and objectivity. Additionally, the pervasiveness of screens can result in adverse effects, including physical and mental strain (van Dijk, 2006, p. 195).

The changing media landscape is evident in the transformation of the journalistic profession, which increasingly requires versatility and adaptability, particularly in response to new technologies (Skuzza, Modzelewska, Szeluga-Romańska,

2019, p. 93). Journalists, along with editors, news directors, publishers, media owners, advertisers, lobbyists, politicians or personal information sources, are some of the most important gatekeepers in the media. By creating media messages, they decide on the relevance of certain information and the way it is presented. However, the dominant view regarding the future of professional journalism is a catastrophic vision, as new technologies and computer programmes displace traditional journalists and replace them with automated aggregators and algorithms (Skuza, Modzelewska, Szeluga-Romańska, 2019, p. 93). Relative to classic media gatekeepers, new iterations of gatekeeping are emerging – audience gatekeeping and technology gatekeeping (Szpunar, 2013, p. 55). Search engine algorithms not only map our preferences, but also suggest new or forgotten cultural elements, manage social networks, facilitate access to individuals while impeding access to others – they are able to assess what is important, what is of greatest interest and what is most heavily discussed and what is of little relevance (Kreft, 2018, p. 12). Overconfidence in their effectiveness, may result in a weakening of their own capacity. Users of different filtering systems should also be aware of the concept of *filter bubbles*. These bubbles form when algorithms customize content based on our preferences, showing us only material that aligns with our past searches or location. This can result in a decrease in the variety of information available to us (Iwasinski, 2017 as cited in Popiołek, Sroka, 2019, p. 159).

The problem of information overproduction is also an important market challenge, as it hinders value creation for advertisers – due to the saturation of the market with information, audiences are less and less willing to pay for access to it (Kreft, 2012a, p. 39). As a result, programs and systems that improve ad blocking, as well as Video on Demand (VoD) services, are gaining in popularity.

The observed negative changes are not due to the ineffectiveness of information technology, but rather to the exponential increase in the complexity of societies, organisations, and individual lives, which we can only cope with through technology (van Dijk, 2006, pp. 199–200). Information creation has become a largely autonomous and self-supporting process (van Dijk, 2006, p. 200). The overabundance of information and data manifests itself in many spheres of media activity – it is inevitable, overwhelming and addictive.

## Research methodology

A protest is an expression of individual or group opposition to a particular situation. The media play a significant role in all protests, as they are able to report on a mass scale about the issue, actions taken, and demands, helping protesters gather supporters and allies. In the context of protests organized by media organizations themselves, they appear to have a distinct advantage, as they possess the means

to broadcast their message to a wide audience. However, in an age of information overload, over-communication can become an ineffective form of protest.

In early February 2021, legislators announced a draft law proposing a new fee on entities broadcasting advertisements. The proposed changes were recognized by the media community as a threat to the operations of private media and advertising organizations in Poland. In response to this looming crisis, media organizations mobilized a protest that culminated in a one-day media blackout, during which all media activities were suspended, and the publication of media content and advertising ceased.

A blackout refers to the deliberate suppression of a particular news item related to specific topics or individuals. It can occur due to editorial decisions made by media outlets or be imposed by governing bodies. Governments often utilize blackouts to regulate the dissemination of information and bolster their authority, particularly during times of conflict when strategic information is selectively released or concealed (“Blackouts: a brief history”). While restrictions on freedom of expression are typically frowned upon, there are instances where they serve as a safeguard, such as preventing widespread panic and societal unrest. However, the use of media blackout is a contentious issue in the media industry, as it is difficult to assess whether hiding information brings more benefits or harm (Tolan, 2006, p. 358).

The aim of this thesis is to explore the use of protest as a crisis management tool. In the course of the research conducted, the main research question answered was: “How has the ‘Media without choice’ protest been used as a crisis management tool?”. Exploring this topic also requires specific research questions: “Why did media organisations decide to refrain from activity in the ‘Media without choice’ protest?”, “Why was the use of media blackout an effective crisis management tool?”. The answers to these questions were developed on the basis of empirical material collected during a study conducted using the case study research method.

The selection of this case is deliberate. This study focuses on a specific event: a one-day protest titled “Media without choice”. However, it is crucial to analyze this event within a broader cultural, social, political, and economic context, as these factors influenced the causes, progression, and outcomes of the protest. While a case study does not allow for broad generalizations, analyzing this protest offers insights into the operations of media organizations in Poland and crisis management strategies. Since direct observation is not possible, studying the event retrospectively allows for reflective analysis, but also carries the risk of overlooking important factors and distorting the narrative.

The first research technique employed was open-ended interviews. Invitations to participate in the study were distributed via email to all organizations involved in the protest. However, the majority of participants declined involvement, citing reasons such as the “confidential nature of the project”. Three interviews were subsequently conducted with representatives from media organizations engaged in the protest. The first interview involved a brand manager and journalist from a political

and social news service, the second featured a journalist from a national private radio station, and the third included an editor and political journalist from a national weekly newspaper. Each interview lasted between 40 minutes and 1.5 hours and took place during July and August 2022. The second technique chosen for collecting material was an analysis of the data – press releases, data made available for this research by the radio station RMF (a press release and a research report commissioned from Kantar Polska for the Radio Research Committee), legal documents and social media content from media and advertising organisations and journalists.

The gathered material aimed to identify recurring themes in crisis management strategies. Additionally, emphasis was placed on understanding the reasons behind implementing a blackout protest and its subsequent implications.

The analysis was embedded in the interpretative paradigm, according to which the researcher's role is to comprehend, depict, and interpret the phenomena being studied as they exist (Burrell, Morgan, 1979, p. 28).

## Analysis of media protest action as an anti-crisis measure

### 1. Genesis and context of the protest

On February 1, 2021, a draft act titled “Act on additional revenues for the National Health Fund, the National Fund for the Protection of Historical Monuments and the creation of a Fund for Support of Culture and National Heritage in the Media Area” was added to the list of legislative and programmatic works of the Polish Council of Ministers. This act aimed to introduce a special tax on companies broadcasting both conventional and online advertisements in Poland. The revenue from this fee was planned to be divided as follows: 50% to the National Health Fund, 35% to the newly created Fund for Support of Culture and National Heritage in the Media Area, and 15% to the National Fund for the Protection of Historical Monuments.<sup>1</sup> The Ministry of Finance, which developed this draft law, justified the introduction of the new levy by the long-term effects of the pandemic on health, the economy, and society. According to the ministry, the revenues were intended to support the healthcare system, which suffered as a result of the pandemic, and to address the changes occurring in the digital space and culture:

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<sup>1</sup> Projekt z dnia 1 lutego 2021 r. Ustawa z dnia ... 2021 r. o dodatkowych przychodach Narodowego Funduszu Zdrowia, Narodowego Funduszu Ochrony Zabytków oraz utworzeniu Funduszu Wsparcia Kultury i Dziedzictwa Narodowego w Obszarze Mediów, online: <https://www.gov.pl/web/koronawirus/media-pomoga-w-zwalczaniu-skutkow-covid-19-przepisy-o-skladce-reklamowej-w-prekonsultacjach> (access: 1.08.2022).

An important result of the struggle of Polish society with the consequences of the pandemic is the increasingly faster transfer of many social activities to the online space. It has brought about a huge change in health, economic and social life and generated new challenges, i.e. stratification of the level of digital competence, increasing difficulty in assessing the reliability of information appearing in the media, as well as loss of a sense of community and ties to tradition and limited access to cultural goods and monuments of common heritage. It is also the direct consequences of the SARS CoV-2 virus pandemic that require special attention, significantly affecting the quality of life and economic and social development in Poland.<sup>2</sup>

Further, the legislator referred to “European examples,” i.e., the contributions and taxes in force in other European countries, including France, Austria, Greece, and Hungary:

By introducing the advertising levy, Poland is following the example of several OECD and European Union countries that have implemented similar measures into their legislation. These measures are in place, among others, in France, Austria, Greece, and Hungary, where for many years the legislative intent has been to engage in meeting specific, often extraordinary public needs, with the largest beneficiaries accelerating the process of digital transformation of the economy. The levy rate in Poland will not differ from the level applied in other countries in our region (such as the Czech Republic and Hungary) and will depend on the advertised goods, the type of media, and the broadcaster’s size. Higher rates will apply to revenues from advertising goods harmful to health, particularly sweetened beverages, as well as dietary supplements.<sup>3</sup>

The Ministry also claimed that the proposed solution would benefit the media industry, as a portion of the funds from the “Fund for Support of Culture and National Heritage in the Media Area” would be allocated to addressing digital exclusion, educating about cyber threats, promoting national heritage, cultural and sports achievements, and supporting media research.<sup>4</sup>

The estimated revenue from the proposed levy for 2022 was expected to reach PLN 800 million. A public consultation took place from February 3, 2021, to February 16, 2021. The proposed changes met with criticism from a significant portion of private media organizations, which opposed its implementation.

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<sup>2</sup> Projekt ustawy o dodatkowych przychodach Narodowego Funduszu Zdrowia, Narodowego Funduszu Ochrony Zabytków oraz utworzeniu Funduszu Wsparcia Kultury i Dziedzictwa Narodowego w Obszarze Mediów, online: <https://www.gov.pl/web/premier/projekt-ustawy-o-dodatkowych-przychodach-narodowego-funduszu-zdrowia-narodowego-funduszu-ochrony-zabytkow-oraz-utworzeniu-funduszu-wsparcia-kultury-i-dziedzictwa-narodowego-w-obszarze-mediow2> (access: 1.08.2022).

<sup>3</sup> “Media pomogą w zwalczaniu skutków COVID-19. Przepisy o składce reklamowej w prekonsultacjach”. Gov.pl, 2.02.2021, <https://www.gov.pl/web/koronawirus/media-pomoga-w-zwalczaniu-skutkow-covid-19-przepisy-o-skladce-reklamowej-w-prekonsultacjach> (access: 1.08.2022).

<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem*.



During the interviews, participants were questioned about the potential effects of the proposed levy. One interviewee highlighted that the extra financial strain would adversely impact media entities already greatly weakened by the pandemic and economic downturn. Moreover, he emphasized that drawing comparisons between media funding in other countries and that in Poland is not suitable, given the differing media systems in these nations:

[I2]: Due to the pandemic and uncertain circumstances, with a decrease in revenue and lockdown measures, companies naturally cut back on all “non-essential” expenses. Marketing and advertising were often considered non-essential expenditures. (...) It was even stated on the government website that this law is a response to regulations applied, among others, in France, Greece, and Austria. (...) These countries have different tax systems, different methods of financing, for example, healthcare. They were also in a different situation during the pandemic compared to Poland. They also have different media systems. If anything, we could look at what’s happening in post-communist countries, in countries with similar social, cultural, and political conditions – where there is a similar level of readership, cultural consumption, and media usage. However, observing does not mean blindly imitating. Taxes should be adjusted to the realities. If we start choosing regulations from any country and blindly implementing them here, a financial disaster awaits us.

It also anticipates that the introduction of a levy would involve redundancies and a reduction in the quality of content:

[I2]: The first thing that comes to mind, unfortunately, is what is always applied when a company is in crisis, namely layoffs, but also a decline in quality, of course. In the media, you constantly need to invest in development because the media landscape changes so rapidly that you can fall behind if you’re not vigilant, in my opinion.

The interviewee, who works as a political journalist, pointed out that the draft act should be analysed in a broader, political context:

[I3]: In a nutshell: it all began when PiS [Prawo i Sprawiedliwość party] came into power. It was sufficient, before 2015, to listen to the leaders of this party, including the president himself, to understand that free, independent media were viewed as an obstacle to their political agenda by this group, so upon assuming power, the party would seek to address them. This was also evidenced by the previous experiences with PiS governments, from 2005 to 2007. Jarosław Kaczyński never concealed his dissatisfaction with independent media and journalists – he attributed his defeat in 2007 to them. Therefore, this attempt to limit freedom of speech did not catch me by surprise – it was expected that sooner or later here would be an attack on independent editorial offices.

In her view, this is yet another attempt by the authorities to fight the independent media:

[I3]: In fact, such an attempt was made earlier, before 2021. Let’s go back to the end of 2016 – it was then that the first protest of the journalistic community took place in connection with the attempt to expel political journalists, parliamentary reporters from the main building of the Sejm [Lower house of the Polish parliament] and to move us to another

building, where we would be cut off from parliamentarians and de facto condemned to listen to the “messages of the day”, with which only party-appointed politicians would come there. I think that, apart from the takeover and immediate politicisation of the public media, this was the first such event heralding that freedom of speech would be curtailed. We, as a community, joined the protest at the time – some TV stations refused to invite politicians to the studio. Instead, parliamentary reporters appeared, explained what the job was and why access to the parliamentary corridors was so important to us. We were supported by opposition politicians. We protested, just as we had previously demonstrated in defence of the Constitutional Court or later in defence of TVN. Because freedom of speech, alongside an independent judiciary or minority rights, is one of the pillars of liberal democracy.

The introduction of an additional levy especially in times of pandemic would primarily entail the creation of a disruptive crisis – the need for media organisations to reduce their activities or even for some of them to close down. Media organizations interpreted the draft act as a crisis situation requiring immediate response, as failure to react could spell the end of their activity.

## 2. Characteristics of the protest action

Faced with the proposed act, more than fifty newspaper titles, online portals, radio and television stations and other organisations from the media and advertising industry on February 10, 2021 joined a protest action entitled “Media without choice”. It consisted of a refrain from activity, shutting down broadcasting, news publishing and advertising. Applied by media and advertising organisations, the media blackout lasted for 24 hours – from February 10, 2021, at 4 a.m. to February 11, 2021, at 4 a.m. The only message visible to viewers, listeners, and readers was the slogan “Media without choice” or “Here was supposed to be your favorite program,” both displayed on a black background, spelled with capitalized white letters. On radio stations, a voiceover informed listeners that broadcasting had been halted due to the protest. Some broadcasters directed their audiences to an open letter addressed to the authorities of Poland and political leaders or provided a brief explanation of the protest. Street demonstrations were also organized in major cities across Poland on that day and for several days afterward.

The opening words of the open letter highlight the incorrect usage of the term “contribution” in the draft law, as media organizations characterize the proposed levy as a “tax”. Listing the consequences of introducing an additional financial burden, the signatories argue that a levy entails:

1. weakening or even liquidation of a part of the media operating in Poland, which will significantly limit the possibility for the public to choose the content it is interested in;
2. limiting the possibility to finance quality and local content. Their production currently provides a living for hundreds of thousands of employees and their families, and provides the majority of Poles with access to information, entertainment and sports events largely free of charge;

3. deepening of the unequal treatment of entities operating on the Polish media market, in a situation where the state media receive PLN 2 billion from the pockets of every Pole every year, while private media are burdened with an additional tribute of PLN 1 billion; 4. *de facto* favouring of companies that do not invest in the creation of Polish, local content at the expense of entities that invest the most in Poland. According to estimates, companies described by the government as “global digital giants” will pay only about PLN 50–100 million in the aforementioned levy, compared to PLN 800 million paid by other locally active media.<sup>5</sup>

They pointed out that the act would *de facto* introduce changes to the conditions of the concession during its term. The signatories also stressed that their activities are already highly taxed and, in addition, most of them also carry out charitable activities: “Every year we pay an increasing number of taxes, tributes and fees to the state budget: CIT (corporate tax), VAT (value added tax), broadcasting fees, fees to copyright management organizations, concessions, frequency fees, VOD fee, etc. We also support the most vulnerable groups in our society through our own charitable activities.”<sup>6</sup>

Organisations that signed the letter include: Agencja Wydawnicza AGARD Ryszard Pajura, Agora S.A., AMS S.A., ASTA-NET S.A., Bonnier Business, Burda Media Polska, CANAL+, Dziennik Trybuna, Dziennik Wschodni, Edipresse Polska, Eleven Sports Network Sp. z o.o., Euractiv.pl, Fundacja Reporterów, Gazeta Radomszczańska, Gazeta Żoliborza, Green Content Sp. z o.o., Gremi Media S.A., Grupa Eurozet, Grupa Interia.pl Sp. z o.o., Grupa Medialna WTK, Grupa Radiowa Agory Sp. z o.o., Grupa RMF, Grupa ZPR, Helios S.A., IBERION Sp. z o.o., Infor Biznes, Inpress Sp. z o.o., Kino Polska TV S.A., Krajowa Izba Gospodarcza Elektroniki i Telekomunikacji, Lemon Records Sp. z o.o., Marshal Academy, Music TV Sp. z o.o., Muzo.fm Sp. z o.o., naTemat.pl, NOWa, Gazeta Trzebnicka, OKO.press, Polityka Polska Press Grupa, Prasa Beskidzka, Ringier Axel Springer Polska, STAVKA Sp. z o.o., Superstacja Sp. z o.o., Telewizja Polsat Sp. z o.o., Telewizja Puls Sp. z o.o., Telewizja Regionalna TVT, TIME S.A., TV ASTA, TV Spektrum Sp. z o.o., TVN S.A., Tygodnik Powiatu Wołowskiego Kurier Gmin, Tygodnik Powszechny, Tygodnik Regionalny 7 dni Częstochowa, Wirtualna Polska, Wydawnictwo Bauer, Wydawnictwo Dominika Księskiego Wulkan, Wydawnictwo Magraf, Wydawnictwo Nowiny, Zakopiańskie Towarzystwo Gospodarcze – Tygodnik Podhalański.<sup>7</sup>

In response to the blackout, the legislature released its statement on February 10, reiterating its argument for the validity of the proposed draft act:

A free and independent media is the salt of democracy. This remains beyond any discussion. Their freedom is guaranteed by existing laws. No laws in this area are modified. The

<sup>5</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>7</sup> “Media bez wyboru. Protest mediów przeciwko nowej opłacie. List otwarty”. i.pl, 10.02.2021, <https://i.pl/media-bez-wyboru-protest-mediow-przeciwko-nowej-oplacie-list-otwarty/ar/c1-15434869> (access: 5.09.2022).

advertising area, however, is not exempted from the fair payment of public tributes. For this reason, solutions are being introduced throughout the world and in Europe, adapted to the changes brought about by technological economic developments. In many European countries, e.g. Great Britain, France, Spain, Italy, Belgium or Greece, solutions similar to those proposed in Poland have been adopted.<sup>8</sup>

The legislator encouraged media and advertising organisations to enter into dialogue claiming that their reaction is “inadequate to the situation.”<sup>9</sup>

Although the dialogue began with a pause, media organisations, from February 11, 2021 returned to their regular activity, informing their audiences of the details of the protest action.

Journalists associated with Ringier Axel Springer Polska sent a letter to their audience:

We are taking a step today that none of us wants to take, because it goes against all the values we hold as journalists. All Ringier Axel Springer Polska websites are being closed down for 24 hours. We are taking part in this protest together with journalists from many other titles and services owned by Polish and foreign owners, because we believe we have no other choice. (...) Today we will all see what Poland looks like without free media. However, we believe that such a drastic action is necessary, because without free media there is no free choice, and without free choice there is no freedom. We are no longer counting on the authorities to help those media, especially the smaller ones, which are on the brink of bankruptcy because of the epidemic. However, we are counting on the authorities to understand the importance today of the words of Thomas Jefferson, one of the founding fathers of our closest ally, who already knew 234 years ago how important a free media is for democracy: “If I had to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers or newspapers without a government, I would not hesitate a moment and choose the latter”. Freedom of speech dies in silence. So today we are making a very loud appeal to politicians to move away from the idea of a new media tax.<sup>10</sup>

In its press release, radio station RMF informed its audience of the event:

On Wednesday February 10, dozens of web portals, radio and TV stations and newspapers protested in solidarity against plans to introduce a new ad tax. Broadcasters suspended, curtailed, or changed their news coverage – broadcasting only protest messages or black boards with the words “Media without choice.” Newspapers that day published a full-page open letter on their covers. The media are protesting against plans to impose a new tax

<sup>8</sup> Stanowisko do projektu ustawy o dodatkowych przychodach Narodowego Funduszu Zdrowia, Narodowego Funduszu Ochrony Zabytków oraz utworzeniu Funduszu Wsparcia Kultury i Dziedzictwa Narodowego w Obszarze Mediów. Gov.pl, <https://www.gov.pl/web/finanse/stanowisko-do-projektu-ustawy-o-dodatkowych-przychodach-narodowego-funduszu-zdrowia-narodowego-funduszu-ochrony-zabytkow-oraz-utworzeniu-funduszu-wsparcia-kultury-i-dziedzictwa-narodowego-w-obszarze-mediow> (access: 1.08.2022).

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>10</sup> “Media bez wyboru”. List pracowników grupy Ringier Axel Springer Polska”. Onet.pl Wiadomości, 11.02.2021, <https://wiadomosci.onet.pl/tylko-w-onecie/media-bez-wyboru-list-pracownikow-grupy-ringier-axel-springer-polska/37y7fm5> (access: 1.08.2022).

on them (charged on revenue, not profit), which will hit free and independent editors the hardest by restricting viewers' access to reliable information.<sup>11</sup>

Communication after the one-day halt in publication consisted not only of battering the need for protest, but also of refuting allegations directed at media organisations:

For 24 hours, Polish internet portals, television, and radio stations disappeared, while newspaper covers turned black. Why did the vast majority of competing media outlets in Poland decide on a step that had never before taken place? You will hear voices from the government claiming that we want to avoid paying taxes, that we have no intention of financing the healthcare system burdened by the coronavirus, and moreover, that we do not care about the restoration of Polish monuments. That is a lie. The government is not concerned about money. It is about weakening us so that we cannot hold the government accountable on your behalf.<sup>12</sup>

Although the largest media organisations in Poland such as Business Insider, Fakt, Interia.pl, Newonce.radio, Newsweek Polska, OKO.press, Onet.pl, Przegląd Sportowy, Radio Zet, RMF FM, Rzeczpospolita, Telewizja Polsat, Polsat News, Tok FM, TVN, TVN24, TVN24 BiS, and Wirtualna Polska decided to completely abstain from regular activity on the day of the protest, some organisations resumed before noon. Some organisations only supported the protest but took no further action.

During the interviews, respondents were asked about the nature of the actions taken on the day of the protest by their organisations. All confirmed that they had joined the protest. One interviewee indicated that the participation of the organisation he represents in the protest was symbolic. This organization does not sustain itself from advertising revenues, so the proposed fee would not alter its situation. They supported competing editorial offices out of solidarity.

The interviewee, who works at the weekly newspaper, described that her editorial team devoted the front page of the issue to reporting on the protest. She also explained where the idea for this form of protest came from:

[I3]: The idea was to make audiences aware that if this tax came into force, the effect would be to reduce media plurality – there would be less access to channels and titles other than government and pro-government ones. Some editors, overwhelmed by the costs, also resulting from the then ongoing coronavirus pandemic, would not be able to cope with another financial burden. Viewers saw that day what television, for example, would look like if the only channels available were those conducted by the authorities. It was a kind of one-day return to the past. An attempt to draw attention to the fact that it is not at all said that access to free media is something certain: something that was, is and will be. Because political power can finish off these media and the viewer will have no choice but to watch, for example, the propaganda tube that public television has become – and the name is not appropriate, we do not have public television, only government television.

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<sup>11</sup> Komunikat prasowy, 2021.

<sup>12</sup> Stankiewicz, Kozanecki, 2021.

Other interviewee explained it similarly:

[I2]: If this tax was introduced, a lot of media would probably cease to exist anyway. We showed Poles what it is like when there are no independent media, when there are only public media. It was such a “sample” of reality.

The absence of media activity for a day illustrated the reality of a world deprived of diverse media content choices, hence the protest’s title – “Media without choice.” Normally, media and internet users are inundated with an abundance of content and messages daily. However, on this particular day, the situation was starkly different. The form of protest also caught media employees off guard, with most only learning about the action the day before. It was this element of surprise that made the impact particularly noticeable:

[I3]: Everything was shrouded in secrecy because it was about a certain element of surprise, to prevent the authorities from preparing for it or resisting it in any way. I don’t remember any specific alternative form of protest being considered, because the idea with the black panels and blackout was simply very good: clear and powerful, grabbing attention. Such a form of protest made the biggest impression because we had never experienced anything like it before. This was also evident from our readers and their lively reaction to what was happening – they were moved by this attempt to create economic threats to independent media, and we received a lot of words of support at that time.

However, the unity of the environment is a contentious issue because, as mentioned, not everyone protested in the same way. The ability to protest in this form was often due to organisational culture and relationships with customers and business partners:

[I1]: It is a very radical step to suspend broadcasting. They [the organisations that did not blackout] may have simply feared criticism from their audience. There are many such tragic, difficult situations where one could protest in this way, and yet it is not a common phenomenon. In our editorial office, there was no discussion about whether this would cause us problems, because we have a very good and close contact with our readers. It is easy for us to estimate that this is something we want to do, and we have the support of our readers. If we were some other commercial stations, then maybe, if we had to work with advertisers, this issue would be more complicated for us. But this is also a question of the independence of the media – they are largely dependent on many external entities and then it is much more difficult to make such a decision. Here, this decision is linked to such trust on the part of the readers. This trust is key here – if we have it, we can make such decisions.

Another interviewee similarly argues the reasons why not all independent media protested in the form of a blackout. He also points out that the public media would also have been affected by the introduced levy, but they could not protest because of their strong dependence on the government:

[I2]: I think that maybe some people wanted to, but they were afraid – the reaction of recipients, advertisers, sponsors, etc. Public media are also financed from advertising, after all. This is also about them. Well, of course, it was simple here. I don’t think anyone expected them to protest.

Despite the varying degrees of involvement in the protest and the differences in the actions taken, the interviewee believes that the event should be considered a manifestation of solidarity of all these organizations:

[I3]: I remember that all major nationwide media participated. Even Polsat. Those that didn't join probably didn't want to risk facing the authorities or openly support them, that's how I see it. But I don't think there was a lack of solidarity among us – the solidarity was so significant that it succeeded and restrained the authorities.

They were also asked if other forms of protest or an extension of the blackout for the next days were considered. The responses received indicate that no extension of the suspension was planned, and no other form of protest was considered.

The interviewee shared their insights from workday. They mentioned that during the protest, journalists and media personnel were primarily occupied with observing how recipients, business partners, and politicians reacted:

[I3]: I remember that day was different from a normal working day in that we were constantly monitoring the response, what people were writing on social media, reading the letters that were coming in from our readers.

The blackout protest was an innovative venture. Some of the protesting organizations have never stopped their activities before. They decided to take this step to demonstrate the effects of introducing an additional financial burden. The use of silence allowed the message to be more noticeable in the following days.

### 3. Evaluation of the effects of the protest

Internet and social media monitoring tools played a significant role in assessing the effects of the protest. The interlocutors indicated that they were monitoring the reaction of the audience on an ongoing basis:

[I3]: On social media, we could see opinions and emotions about the protest. Our readers write to us relatively regularly, but then their support was particularly visible. We also talked a lot among ourselves that day and shared our thoughts on how this action was perceived, how the protest was going, who stood out.

During the interviews, it was also noted that the close relationship with the recipients is responsible for the generally positive reception of activities during the protest. The surveyed organizations assumed that this form would be accepted by them, because they know and understand the values and ideas professed by the recipients:

[I3]: A significant portion of our readers have been with us for years. Because of this, we feel that we are forming a certain community, united by sensitivity, perception of the world, and values that we want to defend and will always defend. Of course, we may differ

in assessments, sensitivities, and views – after all, in our editorial team, there are representatives of various currents; some are more liberal, others leftist, and there are also a few conservatives. But what also unites us with our readers, are the values of liberal democracy – the rule of law, judicial independence, freedom of speech, freedom of the press, respect for individual and minority rights, etc. And we will never give up on these values, we will always fight for them when any authority threatens them. That’s why during this protest, we received only support from our readers. For which we are very grateful.

The “Media without choice” protest surpassed the organizers’ expectations both in terms of visibility and level of support. According to a study conducted by *Kantar Polska* for the Radio Research Committee, which surveyed 1010 individuals aged 15–75 years old using the CATI technique on February 11, 2021, it was found that 91% of Poles noticed the protest.<sup>13</sup> This high percentage was consistent across different demographics, with even the oldest recipients (87% of individuals aged 60–75) and rural residents (also 87%) showing awareness.<sup>14</sup> Notably, in smaller towns (20–100 thousand inhabitants), the action was noticed by an exceptional 98% of the population.<sup>15</sup> Kantar Institute summarized the findings as impressive, particularly given that not all Poles engage with media on a daily basis.<sup>16</sup>

The study revealed that 62% of Poles stand in solidarity with the media organizations’ protest, despite sparse information about it during its occurrence (with many media outlets abstaining from broadcasting altogether).<sup>17</sup> An additional 18% remained undecided, possibly due to the initial lack of detailed information about its motives.<sup>18</sup>

The highest support was observed in the age group of 15–24 years – 71% of individuals from this group expressed their support.<sup>19</sup> This is a group of recipients who, for the most part, were born and grew up in a democratic system and have been dealing with private media all their lives. Among adults (25–59 years old), the campaign was supported by nearly 2/3 of the respondents (63%).<sup>20</sup> Even among the oldest individuals (60–75 years old), the strike was supported by the majority, with a significant proportion of people in this category being unaware of the reason for the protest, and 27% were undecided.<sup>21</sup>

Support for the protest was highest in large and medium-sized cities (with populations ranging from 20,000 to 500,000) – reaching 70–72% there.<sup>22</sup> In smaller

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<sup>13</sup> Komunikat prasowy, 2021.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>15</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>16</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>17</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>18</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>19</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>20</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>21</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>22</sup> *Ibidem.*



towns (up to 20,000 inhabitants), it reached 62%, only slightly lower than in large metropolitan areas (over 500,000), where it stood at 64%.<sup>23</sup>

The protest action has achieved its intended goal. The organizers wanted to make their recipients aware of the negative consequences of introducing new contributions and taxes for the independence and pluralism of the media:

The protest captured the imagination and showed what Poland could look like without independent media. As much as 69% of respondents were made aware by the campaign of the importance of having access to diverse online platforms, TV programs, and radio broadcasts. The vast majority of Poles believe that independent media are guardians of democracy in Poland and fear a world without them. The survey indicates that Poles are aware of the negative impact of the new tax not only on the media but also on ordinary viewers, listeners, readers, or internet users, and they fear it will trigger a surge in prices. The study also revealed that according to Poles, the government is exploiting the COVID-19 pandemic to weaken independent media. At the same time, they observe that the government's previous aid to businesses affected by numerous lockdowns is insufficient.<sup>24</sup>

The protest can be considered one of the largest and most significant protests in recent years:

Taking into account all the data and underestimation of posts with only graphics, it can be estimated that the potential reach of the campaign in Poland was approximately 60 million (content reached a large group of internet users several times through various communication channels, hence this high number, significantly exceeding the population of Poland). This is a substantial figure – only the October Women's Strike could recently count on higher interest in a political issue.<sup>25</sup>

The protest of Polish media organizations was also reported by the largest foreign agencies, including BBC, Reuters, AFP, Politico, France24, Guardian, Times, Washington Post, Telegraph, Financial Times, Irish Times.<sup>26</sup>

During the interviews, interviewees were also asked about possible criticism. Some interviewees indicated that they met her to a small extent:

[I2]: The reactions were rather positive. A lot of people supported us in the protest on social media. We had such comments that people understood what we were doing and why it was important. Although there were also negative comments to be honest. Much less than positive, but they were there.

They were accused of selectively engaging in and reporting on other social protests:

[I2]: Some accused us of greed. Well, we make money from advertising, but that's how we make a living. There were also comments that someone wrote that they did not support us because some journalist from our station criticized, for example, the protest, farmers,

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<sup>23</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>24</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>25</sup> Mierzyńska, 2021.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibidem.*

miners. (...) The media do not have a particularly positive image in my opinion. We, journalists, are often accused of manipulation, favoring interests, bias... (...) Everything can be called manipulation, if you want, what words we use, whose speech we broadcast. It's never possible to please everyone. That's why we have a lot of different editors. This is why the fight for media freedom, independence and diversity is important. That is why this protest was so important – because a lot depends on funding. This tax and the high taxation of the media in general threatens them, because the higher the costs of doing business, the more difficult it is to do our job. There is no democracy without free media.

The interlocutor mentioned the “negative” image of the media. The analysis of comments on Internet portals showed that private media are accused of bias and dependence on sponsors – advertisers, owners, etc. He was also asked about these issues:

[I2]: In my opinion, this is a problem that cannot be solved, because what is the alternative? Financing the media solely from taxes? It would certainly be less because we can't afford it. Secondly, the public media is so financed, so what? And are they free? Are they independent?

The reasons for this problem are sought in the relatively young democratic system in Poland:

[I2]: Perhaps it's a matter of tradition? We have a relatively young democracy. We are still learning the ropes of this system, unfortunately. I think it will take many years, perhaps even decades, before public media cease to be puppets of the ruling camp, used to promote themselves and their actions.

He was also asked about an alternative to “traditional” media, as some users of social networking sites in their posts about the protest suggested that free media is possible only in the online sphere, where the user decides about the content with which he comes into contact:

[I2]: I've encountered opinions suggesting that social media stand out because they're somehow independent, as anyone can post, reach people, express their opinions, and build communities. But this is only superficially true. Algorithms and other technologies control what is visible and what is not. When it comes to more political topics, they are also shaped by opinion leaders. Besides, we have all sorts of information bubbles, where we simply interact with opinions and people we already agree with. They [social media] are not a remedy for media manipulation or any unethical, inappropriate behavior, and phenomena. In fact, we often don't even know why we see what we see, who is showing it to us, what data is being collected, and what is being done with it. Sometimes I think that this new era of media could turn out to be even worse – there might be even more manipulation.

He noted that such a belief is illusory because content on the Internet is also directed to the recipient in terms of his profiling, and users are stuck in echo chambers.

The protest was also criticized in the public media and in statements made by politicians of the ruling party. Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki reacted negatively to the undertaking of media organizations:

The project in no way will restrict freedom of speech or harm media pluralism. On the contrary, it may break the oligopoly of international giants that dominate the Polish media market, triggering a hysterical reaction from those benefiting from the monopolization of media communication under one dictate.<sup>27</sup>

Morawiecki assured that the project would not “affect media pluralism” and that the additional financial burden would affect the structure of the media market, as it would “break the oligopoly of international behemoths”.

The TVP Info portal also commented negatively on the protest and presented an analysis of the reception of the actions under the “Media without choice” campaign as follows:

The analysis of data reveals that about one-third of online comments express a lack of understanding for the entire initiative. Users don't fully grasp the source of the entire dispute.<sup>28</sup>

After the main broadcast of the “Wiadomości” program on Telewizja Polska [TVP] on February 11, 2021, Senate [upper house of the Polish parliament] Marshal Tomasz Grodzki delivered his address in response to the protest by media organizations. The address was delivered just before the final of the club World Cup in football and was preceded by a screen referencing the screens used during the “Media without choice” protest. TVP viewers saw a black board with a white inscription: “Here was supposed to be your favorite football match,” which referred to the slogan “Here was supposed to be your favorite program”.

The Senate Marshal expressed opposition to the law, reminding that media freedom is the cornerstone of a democratic system:

Yesterday, free media fell silent, paused momentarily so we could grasp the stakes of the game. It's not about money. It's about freedom. It's about truth. Thankfully, the young generation doesn't remember, but on December 13, 1981, the ominous darkness of martial law began with the absence of “Teleranek” and disconnected phones. Media fell silent yesterday briefly so they wouldn't have to fall silent forever. But to prevent that, we cannot remain silent, nor can the democratic Senate.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>27</sup> “Media bez wyboru. Premier o podatku: to nie uderzenie w wolność debaty, ale łamanie oligopolu”. Onet.pl Wiadomości, 13.02.2021, [https://wiadomosci.onet.pl/kraj/protest-mediow-premier-morawiecki-komentuje-sprawe-podatku/4p4h21t?utm\\_source=wiadomosci.onet.pl\\_viasg\\_wiadomosci&utm\\_medium=referral&utm\\_campaign=leo\\_automatic&srcc=ucs&utm\\_v=2](https://wiadomosci.onet.pl/kraj/protest-mediow-premier-morawiecki-komentuje-sprawe-podatku/4p4h21t?utm_source=wiadomosci.onet.pl_viasg_wiadomosci&utm_medium=referral&utm_campaign=leo_automatic&srcc=ucs&utm_v=2) (access: 1.08.2022).

<sup>28</sup> PO, KF, 2021.

<sup>29</sup> *Orędzie Marszałka Senatu prof. Tomasza Grodzkiego – 11.02.2021 r.*, YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AT1qW3zACDg> (access: 5.09.2021).

On February 19, 2021, the Senate adopted a resolution “Regarding the Threat to Media Freedom in Poland,” expressing opposition to the proposed law. It recognized that the introduction of a new fee could threaten the existence of some media organizations and deemed the draft law as “a part of the process of undermining free media and subordinating them to the current interests of the authorities”<sup>30</sup> which contradicts the “Polish rationale of state and the interest of citizens, whose right is access to diverse and reliable sources of knowledge.”<sup>31</sup> The Senate expressed solidarity with the protesting organizations:

The Senate of the Republic of Poland expresses its strong opposition to limiting the freedom and civil rights of Polish women and men by the actions of the government of the Republic of Poland aimed at liquidating independent media, and the planned new media fee will greatly weaken independent media – including local and regional ones – whose financial functioning is based on advertising income and at the same time will strengthen the privileged position of state-owned media supported by funds from the state budget.<sup>32</sup>

One of the interviewees points out that despite some criticism, protest was noticed and made an impression on many entities:

[I3]: Criticism of the protest came from the political right: pro-government media workers attempted to ridicule and discredit the protest, while TVP traditionally presented a heavily manipulated version of it. However, it was difficult for them to remain indifferent to what had happened because it was a massive protest, very visible, and the sense of community solidarity was evident. I remember noting at the time that even people who were less interested in politics, or claimed not to have a television at home, did not read newspapers, only used online media, noticed this protest, expressed support on social media platforms, and shared those black panels with the slogan on their profiles.

During the interviews, the interviewees were asked about the reactions of their business partners – they reported that their actions had not been criticized by them. The chosen crisis management strategy also took their interests into account:

[I3]: It was difficult for advertisers not to support our initiative because imposing an advertising tax on the media would result in increased costs for them. Therefore, they would have to reduce or limit certain forms of advertising.

The interviewee, whose organization does not rely on advertising revenue, suggests that the media funding model centered around advertising broadcasts could face challenges in the years ahead. The organization he represents sustains itself through fundraising, relying on voluntary contributions from readers:

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<sup>30</sup> Uchwała Senatu Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej z dnia 19 lutego 2021 r. w sprawie zagrożenia wolności mediów w Polsce, M.P. 2021 poz. 212.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>32</sup> *Ibidem.*

[I1]: This financing model is a bit crazy. (...) Currently, this funding model relies on fundraising and regular and one-time support, which is not related to the content at all. All content is available to all readers for free after logging into a free account. Financial support is entirely voluntary. However, I think this is also another trend that shows that such quality journalism, completely independent of external influences, is valuable enough that people want to support it.

He points out that the model of financing a media organization significantly determines the relationship between the sponsor, business partner, advertisers, and the media:

[I1]: We've never had any ads. But I also have a comparison, because before that I worked in another editorial office and there were advertisements. In various editorial offices, there was equal friction between the marketing department and the editorial office, but eventually someone who pays, finances, has a certain voice that may or may not be accepted by journalists. We had this financing model from the beginning, and it just works here.

The interviewees were also asked about their reflections on the form of the protest. It was indicated that the choice of the form of media blackout exceeded their expectations and turned out to be the best way to deal with the crisis situation:

[I1]: (...) I can't imagine a better scenario because this protest had a powerful impact. It had an exceptionally large reach, which we described when presenting media monitoring data.

As a result of the protest, the draft law was not submitted to the Sejm. However, shortly after the crisis was under control, media organizations again had to deal with the next threat:

[I3]: Indeed, this protest made an impression, it was hard not to notice it, and it was covered by the world media. However, it was successful because the government backtracked on the idea of introducing another levy. This doesn't mean they gave up attacking the media, because six months later they returned with the *Lex TVN*. At that time, there was no such "shutdown" or blackout, but a crowd gathered, there were demonstrations and a protest letter, signed by journalists not only from numerous nationwide editorial offices but also from local ones. Representatives of my editorial team, including myself, not only signed the mentioned letter but also protested outside the Sejm.

According to participants of the study, the success of the "Media without choice" protest is due to its unprecedented character:

[I3]: Without that idea and its execution, the protest wouldn't have been successful. Because it was 2021, in the middle of winter, it would have been difficult to organize a massive street protest at that time. Besides, with so many protests over the past few years, a street demonstration wouldn't have made as much of an impression as this media blackout did. There was surprise here, a clear form. It was something unbelievable, especially for the younger generation, which suddenly saw a country without free media. Hence the impact.

Street demonstrations are the most popular form of protest. However, their frequent use over time to express dissent and opposition gradually diminishes their significance and impact. The fresh form of protest, “Media without choice,” and the element of surprise it brought about made it noticeable:

[I3]: Street protests have already lost some of their importance, their “destructive power” is lower than a few years ago. People go out on the street to bear witness, but they also often admit that they have no illusions that this will stop the rulers. The first protest, the first demonstration, always makes the greatest impression, each subsequent one in a similar form is less exciting.

As noted by the interviewee, media organizations often resort to protests in crisis situations:

[I3]: These three protests: in 2016, Media without choice, and *Lex TVN*, are events that are interconnected. In my opinion, they were effective protests because journalists were not expelled from the main building of the Sejm, the advertising tax was not introduced, and TVN was not prevented from broadcasting in Poland. The only thing the authorities succeeded in doing was to drive journalists away from the Polish-Belarusian border. It’s a significant example. Despite the protest of many groups – but such uncoordinated, scattered protest – nothing was achieved. And this can be seen as a failure of the journalistic community because we were cut off from the drama that was unfolding there. We don’t know exactly what was happening there, so our audience doesn’t know either.

When asked what should be done to maintain media freedom and pluralism, she advises:

[I3]: Above all, we must not give up and not submit to politicians. Unfortunately, nowadays – especially evident on Twitter – journalists also very easily adopt the narrative of politicians. There is a lack of independent, critical thinking. There is a range of values that we must fight for – it’s an element of journalistic mission – and there are moments that serve as a test for us as a community.

Media organizations as a special type of organization are entangled in a set of ethical norms, which results from their impact on people.

## Conclusions and summary

The aim of this work was to examine the “Media without choice” protest, which was explored using free interviews with employees of protesting organizations and the analysis of existing data – press releases, articles, official documents. The study had limitations resulting from i.e., from the perspective of the time that has passed since the protest, but also because of the confidential nature of the arrangements between the organizations taking part in the protest.

The draft law titled “Act on additional revenues for the National Health Fund, the National Fund for the Protection of Historical Monuments and the creation of a Fund for Support of Culture and National Heritage in the Media Area” identified existing problems and changes in social life. The dynamic development of digital technology has moved many social activities online. As highlighted by the legislator, this shift has led to differences in digital skills levels and challenges in determining the reliability of media information. However, according to media organizations, the proposed changes in the draft act could cause a disruptive crisis. It is highly probable that these organizations would need to resort to employee layoffs, compromise on quality, or even cease operations altogether. The draft act can also be interpreted as an attempt to limit the activity of private media in Poland, due to the introduction of changes interfering with the dual nature of the media market.

The conducted research allowed to answer the main research question: “How was the ‘Media without choice’ protest used as a crisis management tool?”. The threat resulted from the possibility of introducing new tax. Citizens in democracies have some control over the legislative process – they have the right to initiate legislation, participate in social dialogue, social consultations, and to manifest their opposition by means of protests. The “Media without choice” protest became a crisis management tool, as it helped express opposition, gain allies, and dissuade the rulers from further implementation of the act. However, it took an unusual and unprecedented form – a media blackout.

Exploring this case study required posing specific questions. The first one was: “Why did media organizations decide to refrain from activity as part of the ‘Media without choice’ protest?”. Media organizations aimed to illustrate the consequences of the additional financial burden introduced by the law. By showing what a day in the life of someone who lacks the ability to choose media content and relies on several sources of knowledge, mostly state-owned, looks like, the protesters gained support for opposing the act. The protest leveraged the characteristics of the modern media market. The significant acceleration of media content consumption has made users reliant on unlimited access to new information. Given the contemporary media-saturated culture, the absence of media coverage on the day of the protest left a strong impression on audiences.

Then, an attempt was made to indicate: “Why was the use of media blackout an effective crisis management tool?”. The desired effect was achieved thanks to the unprecedented nature of the event. The blackout protest was an innovative venture – for many recipients, it was the first such situation in their lives when their access to the media was limited. The protest also showed the consequences of the proposed changes. The use of silence allowed the protesters’ communication to be more noticeable in the following days. The absence aroused interest and focused attention on a simple slogan and short explanations of the action. The effect was also achieved because of the scale of the protest, which was the result of the solidarity of media organizations. However, the use of blackout is not a universal tool for crisis

management. When determining how to handle a crisis, it is essential to consider the context and relationships involved, as each crisis demands a tailored approach, and relying on pre-existing templates may prove ineffective. In Poland, particularly in recent years, media organizations, journalists, and their audiences have employed various methods to express their dissatisfaction with different situations, often resorting to street demonstrations. However, the effectiveness of such forms of protest varies. Shortly after the resolution of this crisis situation, private media organizations found themselves again under threat due to the proposed amendments to the Broadcasting Act in Poland, commonly known as the *lex TVN*.

The action was noticed in all age groups and gained a lot of support. It caused a sensation, even in foreign media. This effect was achieved because nowadays the media are often considered a natural, even trivial element of life. Media communication is so redundant that it turns into noise. We do not hear the radio playing in the background, nor do we notice when we start reading news on internet portals. It was only when the silence fell that it was possible to notice the significant role the media play in everyday life. The case of the “Media without choice” protest also showed that despite competing with each other, media organizations are able to reach an agreement. The media and journalists are still guided by a social mission, which results from the power of the media. Some media organizations also came to recognize the importance of building strong connections with their audience and understanding their values and perspectives, especially during times of crisis. The support from his environment, especially in a crisis situation, was a favorable circumstance. The adopted strategy was criticized mainly by the government, their voters and the public media, but thanks to the form of protest, the intended goal was achieved – the act was not further processed.

Regulating digital media and updating current laws to keep pace with media market changes are vital responsibilities for policymakers worldwide, not just in Poland. We need to explore avenues other than additional fees to address digital exclusion and raise awareness about online threats. These challenges stem from the rapid growth of digital media. Additionally, alternative funding methods for media, like crowdfunding, merit further examination. Empirical evidence suggests that innovative funding models for media could emerge in the future.

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