Poland Media Report

The Future of Media and its Impact on Politics and Society

Trends and Analysis of the Media Landscape in Poland

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Research content

History of Polish Media

Polish Media Landscape Report

Polish Media Legislation and Freedom of speech

Poland's trust in the media

Geopolitics of the Visegrad group

This research covers an array of topics related to media literacy and the present day situation in Poland. It gives an in-depth portrait on the media landscape of Poland and examines different aspects of it.
A Brief History of Polish Media

Gwyneth Jones

Poland has a long history of state-controlled media. During the Second World War, only a few heavily censored newspapers were available under Nazi rule, with possession of a radio receiver being punishable by death. Later, the communist rulers took control of the media, with journalists being heavily censored and acting as political propagandists; however, during this time around 10% of press was private and a small group of politically motivated journalists slowly developed an underground press, which in the 1970s formed the backbone of the opposition movement against communist rule.

In May 1989 the Gazeta Wyborcza - the first legal opposition newspaper - was born; a moment that would supposedly change the face of Polish media forever. And in 1992, shortly after the fall of communism, Poland passed the Broadcasting Act 1992 – a law that would usher in a new era of press freedom. Until that point, almost all media had been owned by the state, with the Main Office of Control of the Press, Publications and Public Performances ensuring that public opinion was not misled by untrue news.

Following the 2010 plane crash in which the late president Lech Kaczyński died in Smolensk (Russia), the media were subject to more change and reform. Right wing discourse began to increase its volume once again, and the media landscape began to shift into a more polarized and partisan environment. According to Reuters, a new “journalism of identity” reared its head as the press found a sound business model in appealing to different sections of a fragmented market, meaning that people became more entrenched in their views from consuming media that appealed to their political identity.

The Law and Justice party came into power in 2015, and since then the media has swung its messaging further to the right. At the end of 2016, Gazeta Wyborcza remained the largest broadsheet newspaper with the circulation of around 130,000 copies and 100,000 digital subscribers. However, in early 2016, Poland’s Law and Justice party introduced a new bill on public radio and television, which gave the government direct control over broadcasters and their newsrooms.

Despite huge street protests, nearly 230 journalists have been fired or left in protest since the passing of the bill, and the Gazeta has been a cut in its funding from state-controlled advertisers and state institutions. This political pressure was an extra blow to printed press, a medium already suffering from declining readership and shrinking advertising revenues. Even news sources that continue to rely on foreign funding and advertising could lose this source of funding: further changes to the law could limit the share of foreign capital allowed in the media business, in a supposed attempt to “repolonise” Poland.

Since 2016, changes in news programming have apparently been noticeable, with several accusations made that news shows have become the government’s “fake
According to Reuters, this shift in programming may have driven viewers to alternative news sources: in 2016, the main state channels (TVP 1, TVP 2 and TVP Info) lost up to 10% of their daily views and up to 17% of viewers aged 16-49. Privately owned broadcasters are benefitting from this; for example, the privately-owned Polsat has overtaken TVP 1 as the most watched station.

Reuters Digital News Report 2017; Academia.eu “Media Landscape of Poland”
Reuters: http://www.academia.edu/9757354/Media_landscape_of_Poland

Is There A Chance For Non-Partisan Media In Poland? - Krzysztof Dzięciołowski; Reuters Institute Fellowship Paper with the University of Oxford
Media landscape report of Poland
Justyna Hinz

Youtube (64% of the population use it actively) is the leading social network in Poland, followed by Facebook (61%), Facebook Messenger (41%), and Google + (29%). Other social media accounts being used by Poles include Skype, Instagram, and Snapchat. Overall, 45% of the Polish population is active on one or more social media platform as of 2017.  

The Law and Justice Party (PiS) currently governing Poland have called for control of Polish TV and Radio Broadcasts. Andrzej Duda (the President), along with other government officials, has the right to decide what will be broadcasted (and by whom), with the aim of only showing "impartial, objective and reliable" state media. The government claims that journalists tend to be biased on “public service channels," and therefore some restrictions are required. One of such TV programs virtually taken over by the government is TVP, which is one of the most viewed channels by Poles.  

A “re-Polonization” of Polish media is necessary, since the state claims that most of the media has been taken over by foreigners. Three channels account for 70% of the overall TV Market in Poland: Polish TV, TVN and Cyfrowy Polsat, with Polsat and TVN being the two main media networks (funded by Poles until 2015 when it was taken over by a US investor). As of 2016, there were 4,515,047 viewers of the ten biggest TV stations, with 69% being funded with Polish capital. TVN is perhaps the most controversial channel, with the popular slogan ‘TVN lies’ being spread. It is known for its extreme, biased right-wing political stance. Gazeta Wyborcza is the most popular non-tabloid Polish daily newspaper, followed by Rzeczpospolita. Religion also plays a big role in media, with the anti-Semitic, patriotic, radical Catholic radio station Radio Mariya being listened to all over the country.

One can see the media landscape is divided into mainstream media and PiS-related media (with each accusing the other of false and biased information). Interestingly enough, the younger generation that is mostly on the political right favors the PiS media. The National Media Council assessed these divisions, concluding that the PiS media and Radio Mariya is the most biased while Polsat and public TV provide the most accurate information.  

As Nielsen Audience expressed, TVP 1, TVP 2, and TVP Info lost 10% of their average viewers in 2016. This can be related to the 2016 Bill that gives the government permission to control broadcasters. Polsat and TVP have taken over as most-watched stations.

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3 Orynski T. 2018. Polish media under fire. A great transformation, or a standard changing of the guard? Retrieved from Visegradrevue on May 7th, 2018
Printed media has also radically decreased, with Gazeta Wyborcza laying off 200 employers in late 2016. Overall, newspaper consumption has decreased by over 50% since 2007. Online platforms prove to be the most favored by the population, particularly Onet and Wirtualna Polska.

The top TV, Radio, and Print outlets (from highest to lowest % of Poles using them weekly) are

| TVN News (57%) | Regional/Local newspapers | Rzeczpospolita (9%) |
| Polsat news (42%) | Fakt (17%) | Dziennik Gazeta Prawna (8%) |
| RMF FM (40%) | Angora (12%) | Gazeta Wyborcza online (22%) |
| TVP (38%) | Super Express (11%) | Gazeta Wyborcza (22%) |
| Radio Zet (30%) | Newsweek Polska (11%) | Regional/Local newspapers website (11%) |
| Gazeta Wyborcza (22%) | Polskie Radio (10%) | GazetaPrawna online (11%) |

The top online platforms used weekly include

| Onet.pl (52%), WP.pl (46%) | Fakt online (18%) | Radiozet.pl (11%) |
| TVN24 online (37%) | TVP News (18%) | Regional/local newspaper website (11%) |
| Interia.pl (29%) | RMF24 (16%) | GazetaPrawna online (11%) |
| Gazeta.pl (24%) | Polsat News online (12%) | Money.pl (11%) |
| Gazeta Wyborcza online (19%) | Newsweek online (11%) | Sport.pl (10%) |

Politically left-wing viewers tend to favor Gazeta Wyborcza online, TVN24.pl, and Onet.pl, whereas politically right-wing viewers tend to favor WP.pl and TVP.info.

To view these online platforms, viewers mostly use computers, as compared to smartphones in most EU countries. And the source of news mainly comes from Online (87%) and TV (76%), with printed media ranking last with 28%. 53% of Poles state that they trust the media in portraying accurate news, with only 20% stating that the news is free from political influence. ⁴

Media legislation and freedom of the press in Poland
Heidi Koelle

Poland has seen a significant decline in its freedom of the press in only a couple of years. RSF ranked Poland as 58 in the 2018 World Press Freedom Index. Since the right-wing Law and Justice party victory in 2015, Poland has passed several acts of legislation that severely hinder the freedom of the press. Poland has slipped 40 places in the rankings. Freedom House estimates that at the moment the media in Poland is in a similar situation as in Fiji or in the Dominican Republic. Poland used to be on the same level as countries such as Canada in the past rankings.

Shortly after gaining power, the Law and Justice party introduced a new bill on public radio and television in early 2016. The bill enabled the government to seize direct control over the public broadcasts and newsrooms. There have been nearly 230 journalists that have been sacked since 2016. The new government replaced the heads of the public television and radio broadcasters, appointing one of its former lawmakers as director of TVP. Wiadomości, TVP’s main news program, has become a propaganda outlet for the government.

The public media has been formally renamed as the “national media”. Poland has decided to take action in limiting foreign media outlets. This was motivated by anti-German sentiment and further frustration of other foreign media that is critical of the right wing government. The Law and Justice party unveiled plans for another bill that would limit the share of foreign capital in the media business. The plan is to reduce the amount of stake a foreign company can have in a media outlet from 40 to 15 percent. If this is enforced, it could threaten investments of Ringier Axel Springer (an owner of the largest internet portal, Onet, and the biggest tabloid, Fakt), and Verlagsruppe Passau (a publisher of most regional newspapers and web portals across Poland via its subsidiary, Polska Press). Many regional publications are negatively affected automatically as many of them are owned by foreign outlets and subsidies.

One of the largest owners is Polska Press, which now publishes 20 regional dailies across 15 of Poland’s 16 regions, as well as over 150 local dailies. According to its website, the company reaches 6.3 million readers in Poland on a daily basis. Lewandowski justified these changes by arguing that any legal changes will comply with the EU rules, provide a phase-in period for investors, and won’t targeting owners from specific countries.

The new government has brought change to Poland’ judiciary branch. New legislation gives the justice minister the discretion to appoint, dismiss, and “discipline” presidents of ordinary courts. The reforms bring the National Council of the Judiciary, a formerly

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5 RSF 2018 Poland Profile
6 Bartosz T. Wieliński, Gazeta Wyborcza Polish government continues efforts to stifle free media May 11 2018
7 Chapman Annabelle’ The assault on Press Freedom”
8 Reuter's Digital Media Report 2017: Poland
9 Marek Strzelecki and Marta Waldoch August 4th, 2017 “Poland’s Planned Media Revamp May Force Some Foreign Owners Out”
self-governing body, under full control of the parliament. This forced 40% of Poland's supreme court judges into early retirement. This caused the European Union to take some action. In December 2017, the European Commission launched proceedings against Poland under Article 7.1 of the Lisbon Treaty, declaring that the year's judicial reforms constituted a "clear risk of a serious breach of the rule of law in Poland." In theory, this process can lead to the suspension of Poland's voting rights within the EU. However, the likelihood of this is very slim as it requires a vote from each EU member state. The Visegrad group members are doubtful to vote against each other within the EU parliament.

At the beginning of this year, the Polish legislature passed a controversial "Holocaust bill" which makes it a crime to accuse Poland of having any complicity in the Holocaust. The exact provisions state that whoever accuses, publicly and against the facts, the Polish nation, or the Polish state, of being responsible or complicit in the Nazi crimes committed by the Third German Reich... shall be subject to a fine or a penalty of imprisonment of up to three years. The president President Andrzej Duda signed it and said that Poland has the right "to defend historical truth". Poland has long objected to the use of phrases like "Polish death camps", which suggest the Polish state in some way shared responsibility.

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10 Mai De La B Blume MEPs back triggering Article 7 against Poland https://www.politico.eu/article/european-parliament-triggering-article-7-poland-judicial-reform-voting-rights
11 BBC Poland President Duda 'will sign' controversial Holocaust bill February 42018
Polish Trust in the Media

According to Reuters, it is difficult to separate journalism from politics in Poland. The Gazeta Wyborcza actively promotes attending political rallies, while the head of the Polish Journalists Association openly stands up for the government. As a result, it seems that the public are losing trust in the media: a 2017 poll by Reuters showed that 79% of Poles agree that “the message in the media is so diverse that Poles no longer know where the truth lies” while 64% think journalists simply express their views rather than providing information.

It seems that one cheap entertainment option for Polish TV channels with little funding has been to invite politicians with opposing views to argue, reducing Polish political debate to “a contest of values where there is no middle ground…knowledge is not important. Everything is about emotions now” (Dzięciołowski) – a claim that reflects current lamentations about how feelings seem to increasingly trump facts and raises the question: are we truly moving into a “post-truth” era?

For many, the internet has become a place of refuge: Ucho Prezesas (The Chairman’s Ear), a political satire show launched on YouTube, has up to 8.5 million viewers. Independent startups such as BiqData.pl and TruDat continue to pursue journalistic investigations, and online outlets are becoming an increasingly used source of news – some reaching half of the population. Recognizing the need to adapt and change, several outlets are experimenting with audio and video, with some businesses launching their own digital TV channels.

Blogging is also an increasingly popular forum for news; Patronite.pl is a crowdfunding platform for story-tellers, and the story of Michal Szafranski, a journalist who became a full-time blogger, has inspired many: rather than the usual €10,000 per annum that a journalist in Poland can expect to make, he boasted a €300,000 profit after eight months.

Yet, despite this seeming shift away from state-owned news channels, from the 34 countries polled by Reuters, Poland scored 3rd and 4th on trust in the news - both that people use personally and news overall, respectively. This may be surprising, given the increasingly polarized and partisan nature of Polish news media, but it is believed that journalists are transparent about their biases, which in turn wins the trust of audiences.

*Reuters Digital News Report 2017; Academia.eu “Media Landscape of Poland” Is There A Chance For Non-Partisan Media In Poland? - Krzysztof Dzięciołowski; Reuters Institute Fellowship Paper with the University of Oxford*