

Criticism of Media Authorities in Social Media. Case Study

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ABSTRACT

Scientific objective: The purpose of this article is to characterise the discourses occurring in social media concerning people representing specific political parties and ideological circles, and presented by other media as authorities. It was assumed that this aim will be achieved by using a case study of three Facebook profiles: “Żelazna Logika”, “Raz prozą, raz rymem – walczymy z propagandowym reżimem”, “SokzBuraka” and “Prawicowa Rzeczpospolita Ludowa”. **Research methods:** The qualitative discourse analysis was used as a research method based on selected data obtained through the use of the Atlas.ti software. **Results and conclusions:** The obtained results indicated the presence of critical discourse towards: 1) people recognised by *mainstream* selected media as personal authorities, 2) institutional authorities. On their basis, it was proposed about the possible location of these profiles in the process of political communication. **Cognitive value:** The problem raised provides cognitive value on the subject of existing political and ideological discourses in social media being in opposition to mass media supporting selected personal and institutional authorities.

KEYWORDS

Criticism, mass media, social media, receivers, impact



The theory of radical constructivism assumes, among others, that mass media are content relays that do not represent the real picture of reality. This creates the possibility of exerting a greater impact on regular and occasional consumers. Persons responsible for the television programme's shape or magazine's thematic profile look for new forms of communication not only to arouse curiosity in their recipients, but also to propagate their adopted way of describing political, historical, social or other realities (Michalczyk, 2010; Brzoza, 2015). An alternative for them are, e.g. various profiles in online social media, the creators of which are usually amateurs presenting content (at least partially) outside the main streams of narrative.

The level of effectiveness of actions of both types of media (in their recipients accepting the propaganda narrative, creation and promoting images of people, companies or institutions, representatives of institutions monitoring pro-social and antisocial behaviours) depends, among others, on the techniques used to exert influence, that is "a series of psychological procedures aimed at causing a different person (here: mass recipient – P.P.) specific behaviours, whereby a person subjected to this process does not have to be aware of the situation in which he/she is" (Pisarek, 2008, p. 264; Znyk, 2008, p. 41). One of such behaviours may be the unreflective acceptance of discourses situating specific persons, institutions or political parties on the positions of authorities. For this purpose, among others, illustrative materials are used, intended – in the minds of their authors – to influence the emotions, thoughts and decisions of consumers, because

“(…) Despite the distrust, authority figures never stopped to influence people. Paradoxically, it is thanks to it, that the influence of authorities has strengthened, and thanks to the mass media it has become perhaps bigger today than ever before”.
(Jacko, 2007, p. 20)

This article addresses the creation and dissemination in social media of content criticising people identified as political and ideological opponents, and presented by *mainstream* media as authorities. This issue will be considered as a case study, on the example of Facebook profiles “Żelazna Logika” [Iron logic] (ŻL), “Raz prozą, raz rymem – walczymy z propagandowym reżimem” [We fight the propaganda regime with prose and rhymes] (RPRR), “SokzBuraka” [Beetroot juice] (SzB) and “Prawicowa Rzeczpospolita Ludowa” [Right-wing People's Republic of Poland] (PRL), which represent different views on political and ideological issues (as will be discussed later in this paper). The analysis carried out on their examples will include the characteristics of the elements of the discourses present there.

Review of the Literature on the Subject

Examples of literature referring to the subject matter under study were divided into three groups of publications: (1) those referring to the characteristics of the media in the context of the impact on the mass audience, an example of which is (2) creating and promoting people presented as authorities (in various areas of human activity), and (3) defining them (which will be described in more detail later in this paper). The choice was dictated by the limited volume framework of this article.

Tomasz Prauzner (2010), paying attention to three human cognitive levels (cognitive, behavioural, emotional), indicates the decisive influence of the media on the shape of reality imagined in the minds of recipients. One of the elements of constructing these ideas is the influence of broadcasters on the human subconscious in order to evoke reactions among recipients that are consistent with media expectations. These reactions are responses to media messages about “authorities” and “idols” (defined later in the article), which indirectly indicates, among others, by Michał Drożdż (2008). The author quoted suggests at the same time greater support

from both types of media for representatives of the second category, which is manifested by the increased number of new projects related to “idols”. In addition, among others according to Paweł Tarasiewicz (2011–2012), there are possibilities to distinguish the category of “authority” from the “pseudo-authority”.

Jan Jaroszyński (2010) points to the erroneous identification in the mass media of “authority” with the “expert”. It is also an unfavourable phenomenon to locate “idols” in the role of “authorities”, when e.g. physical predispositions of athletes or attractiveness of models are treated in media discourses as equal to personality abilities or having a high intelligence quotient. However, the question remains whether these physical predispositions cannot be treated as a means to reach the position of an “authority” (Sieber & Pawelec, 2016).

Projects aimed at supporting “authorities” and “idols” are present not only in the mainstream media, defined as “media companies with a well-established position” (Mitchelstein & Boczkowski, 2010; Nowak, 2012, p. 15), but also in social media treated by Leah A. Lievrouw and Sonia Livingstone (2006), among others, as physical objects and devices within which communication activities or practices take place and the accompanying social arrangements situating these media as involved. Therefore, the postulate expressed by Małgorzata Laskowska (2012) to study media influence on recipients in order to determine the forces shaping the opinions of the contemporary consumer seems purposeful.

Authority

The concept of authority is considered from the point of view of many scientific paradigms, therefore in this space there is no unequivocal approach to the issue (Tuziak, 2010). For example, the term “authority” can be read – as Andrzej M. de Tchórzewski says (2017, pp. 188–189) – in two ways. In the first case, the authority comes from the characteristics of individuals and/or institutions that use public and social credentials (official authority); in the second – from interpersonal relations, based on which people decide who they trust (voluntary authority). “Therefore, authority may mean the authorities or individuals, which is associated with their influence on the life of both external and/or internal individuals and their collections (...).”

Thomas Gordon (2010), cited, among others through Małgorzata Kosiorek, distinguishes four types of authority figures: 1) based on experience (knowledge, education, wisdom, abilities); 2) based on position and titles (specific environment, functions, responsibilities); 3) based on informal agreements (concluded by individuals through daily interactions with other units); 4) coming from the power (issuing commands, forcing, controlling, influencing behaviour). Robert Merton (2002), on the other hand, presents authority as an organisation of power that is commonly accepted at the level of a given culture. This authority does not take an institutionalised form, but is based on individuals having specific features that would appear by dominating and explaining specific content and attitudes and presenting them as role models for recipients (Kosiorek, 2014).

Max Weber points out, however, that social faith in the authority of anyone is irrational. Identification of three categories of authority: charismatic (belief in the characteristics of a specific person), traditionalist (power based on references to various political, religious or social traditions) and rational and legal (fulfilling social functions using personal competences in certain norms and rules) (Weber, 2004; Wysocka, 2011), results in a question about reasons conducive to their disappearance in contemporary social discourse. Such reasons may be: lack of people with charisma; lack of social awareness in preserving traditions conducive to the creation of new authorities; inability of some social institutions to maintain a high level of trust in society (Kowalik, 2006).

The functioning of authorities in social life should serve the concept of the common good, which he mentioned, among others, by Ives R. Simon. According to him, the authority figures are intelligent individuals with a consciousness of social good. “They are people who have authority in the community, able to penetrate with their wisdom the range of goals that constitute the common good and at the same time that they are able to define these goals well, are perceived by the community as authority figures” (Tasak, 2015, p. 194). It seems logical, then, that religious authorities will be aware of the religion they represent, and political authorities – institutions, political and ideological circles.

Another feature of authority is that the given individual has the charisma considered by Józef M. Bocheński as a three-element relation comprising the subject (the one who owns), object (the subject itself is an authority) and the field (the subject is the authority for the object) (Sękowski, 2012). Apart from the philosophical character of the author quoted, it can be stated that every social unit that can be considered as an authority wishes to be perceived – also by mass media – as the one that fully corresponds to the recalled characteristics.

Media Authority

The category of authority is located in various spheres of various cultures and in areas gathering units that have a common system of values, which, however, is subject to transformations (Kosiorek, 2014). In the media sphere, this authority is

“the image of a person who is well presented, created and disseminated by the media. Being in its essence an institutional construct, it remains available and dependent on the media (...). It is seasonal, short-lived, exchangeable (substitutable) and self-referential”. (Janiak, 2012, p. 62)

The development of mass communication has caused the appearance of such authorities, that is, people allegedly endowed with features that allow them to be treated as creators of widely promoted opinions. Therefore, people assigned to the category of media authorities are considered unreliable by critics of the media. This is due, among others, the possibility of impact of criticised characters on specific groups of broadcasters through the collaborating environments and organisations with controversial political and/or ideological profiles. However, because the media itself is granted the status of authority by some recipients, it is possible to distinguish the subcategory of subject-object and subject-institutional authorities (Piotrowski, 2016).

Małgorzata Molęda-Zdziech (2013) divides the mentioned authorities into opinion leaders, advisers, expert-scientists and celebrities. Opinion leaders (local or cosmopolitan) are dependent – as Merton pointed out – on the types of relationships with communities (quality and quantity of social contacts and knowledge). Advisors – in sociological terms defined mainly by auxiliary activity for politicians – are people who “effectively operate knowledge”, theoretically they are close to experts-scientists whose competencies are recognised in their professional environment. The last category are celebrities whose opinions – expressed in different fields – are only to attract viewers, listeners and/or readers of a given medium.

The question arises, however, whether some of them are – using the phrase proposed by Pierre Bourdieu (2009) – *fast-thinkers*, or commentators-thinkers “who think faster than their own shadows...”, using linguistic clichés, shallow all attempts of deeper analysis of a given problem. It is worth mentioning Marek Palczewski’s theorem (2010, p. 202), referring to Bourdieu’s opinion on journalists: “From his characteristics describing journalists emerges a picture of cynical ignorants, not fully educated editors who call themselves the creators and rulers of someone else’s fate. They, like the Creator, decide in television programs about topics,

ways of conducting conversations, they choose the interlocutors, decide who and how long to give voice (...). According to Bourdieu, most journalists are anti-intellectual; therefore, they often do not understand what intellectuals or scientists give them. They hide their ignorance in the form of concern for the recipient's understanding of the message, which is why they try to simplify the statement, which – without losing any sense – cannot be reduced to a commonly understood statement”.

Subject-object authorities are treated by broadcasters (subject-institutional) instrumentally. They become elements in the processes of creating a given medium as a transmitter of important opinions, at the same time taking the roles of “idols” (Wasylewicz, 2016), accompanied by specific narratives (selective skipping or emphasising selected features), perseverations (repetitiveness of specific narratives) and labelling and transfer (authority has intentionally granted metacompetences) (Sobczak, 2016). However, their receiving valuation remains a debatable issue (Klos, 2012), which (potentially) may be disturbed not only because of the low skills of some recipients, but also by communication forms and techniques that foster information noise and the selection of program offers (Jaroszyński, 2010). More aware recipients may, however, treat these activities as attempts to manipulate them (Dziadzia, 2007), which in consequence may lead to resignation from the personal perception of a given person or institution (media) in the position of authority. Such reactions may result in the emergence of a crisis in the adoption of a priori communication order established by the media and/or mentioned authorities (Janiak, 2012).

A separate category functioning in the aforementioned communication space is the “moral authority”, grouping people acting for the benefit of others and gaining prestige and respect. They are presented in the media as moral role figures, which does not

“results from any « professionalism », but is constituted by reference to specific moral values (...) It seems that it is primarily about two moral values: truth and responsibility (...)”. (Stróżewski, 1997, p. 35)

The variety of understanding of the definitions of truth and responsibility in the contemporary media discourse, however, results in the diversity of attitudes among recipients towards this type of authority. Therefore, the “moral authority” becomes a category including the expressors of own opinions in the discourses of specific groups of broadcasters, at the same time resigning from promoting them among other broadcasters.

Communication in Social Media

The emergence, development and transformation of new media forms resulted in the crystallization of new journalistic genres, such as Internet interviews, chat or blog reports (Szymoniak, 2008). Jakub Nowak (2012) draws attention to the process of the occurrence of changes in patterns of information circulation enabling its circulation in the form of a horizontal circulation: “With the development and popularisation of *social media*, the scale of the process of bottom-up dissemination of information is increasing, which, if it is considered important or interesting or fun, quickly spreads on the web (...)” (p. 18).

In turn, Anna J. Parzonko (2015) proves that the creation of this type of media contributed to the development of multi-directional communication (technical solutions enabled immediate interaction), limited so far by its own one-sidedness, and whose wider availability contributed to the loss of control of large broadcasters for unknown so far propagators of the idea of free access to independent information. However, there are also opinions that the independence of social media does not mean that there is no material manipulating recipients in them, and in

many (quantitatively unspecified) cases, the impact of such content depends, among others, on the lack of a critical approach on the part of media consumers (Szews, 2014), manipulated by the alleged freedom of speech.

The policy of social media owners at least sympathetic to specific ideologies (e.g. leftist) has an impact on the above actions. This results in transformations in the range of receiving association, engagement, information exchange, decision-making, common interests and the willingness to share important information and experiences from the point of view of the transmitters and interactions and the possibility of receiving recommendations and support while maintaining control (Kubiak, 2015). In the social media space, mainstream printed press, radio stations and TV stations have become objects of not only ridicule of the content presented in them, but also of people working there and their behaviour (journalists, invited guests, etc.), and memes became the dominant form of presentation (satirical character, readability and convention) (Brylska & Gackowski, 2017).

Aim, Questions and Research Methods

The purpose of this article is to characterise the discourses occurring in social media regarding people representing political parties and ideological circles, and presented by other media as authorities. It was assumed that this goal will be achieved by using a case study of the mentioned Facebook profiles: “ŻL”, “RPRR” (representing themselves as critical towards liberal and leftist ideologies and political trends), as well as “SzB” and “PRL” (respectively: national and right-wing). The profiles mentioned represented different approaches to economic, political, social and other topics.

This objective would be accomplished based on the applied method of qualitative analysis of media discourse (Kawka, 2014) (i.e. a set of coherent texts and images convergent with each other and having a specific “grammar” enabling their direct or indirect identification with a given issue; Shevchenko, 2002).

The aforementioned method was used to analyse “real, unprepared, unfragmented, previously mismatched materials of written text and illustrated materials” (Lisowska-Magdziarz, 2006, pp. 25–26). The study involved the occurrence of 1) “direct quotes *versus* indirect references”, 2) “references to individuals”, 3) “use of modal expressions”, 4) “expressing personal beliefs”, 5) “explicit expression of evaluations” and 6) “first person singular forms” (Gruber, 2011). For this purpose, the Atlas.ti computer software was used for qualitative research, by means of which codes were coded, categories were sorted, categories were created and potential relationships and dependencies between codes and categories were sought (Niedbalski, 2014). Entries included in these profiles were analysed within thirty days (15.10.–14.11. 2018).

The following research questions were posed: 1) Did the profiles “ŻL” and “RPRR” contain criticism related only to persons representing Polish parties and liberal and leftist circles? 2) Did the “SzB” and “PRL” profiles contain criticism related only to people representing Polish right-wing parties and national environments? 3) Which types of authorities (opinion leaders, advisers, experts-scientists and celebrities) were criticised most often?

It should be noted that political parties were assigned to certain program categories based on their own programs, despite some objections raised by some researchers (Woźniak, 2017). On the other hand, people, groups and/or organisations representing similar or identical views were assigned to the category of political environment as well as groups that identified with them, and individuals, groups and/or organisations identifying with ideology professed by particular political parties were included in ideological circles. but not fully identifiable with their actions taken to achieve common goals (assignments to these categories took place during the analysis).

On the other hand, the inclusion of negative assessments and phenomena referring to a specific person as a descriptive or evaluative character was considered criticism. It has the form of “subjective considerations about the activity or conduct of the criticised individual”. In contrast to press criticism, it may be aimed at teasing, humiliating or ridiculing media content in the view of recipients (Fischer, 2006, pp. 107–108).

Results

The discourse analysis carried out gave various results. The obtained results are presented using appropriate charts.

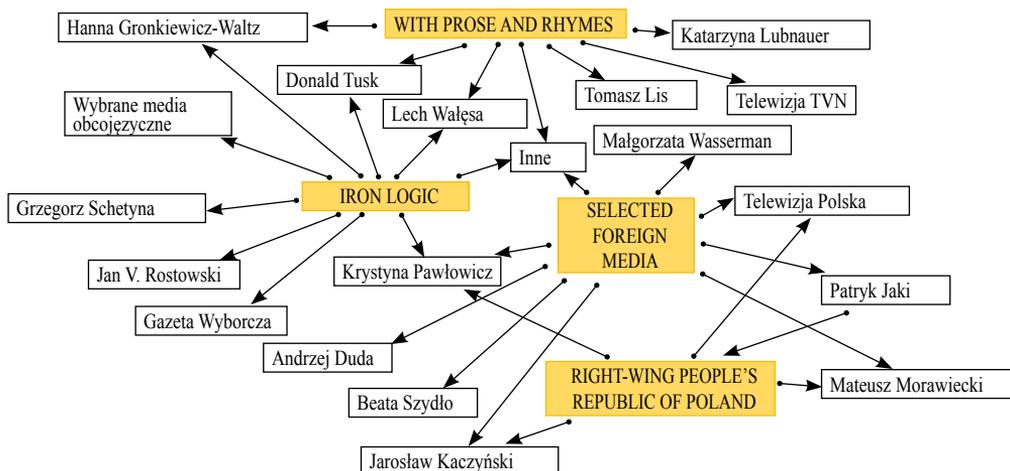


Chart 1. Selected Facebook profiles and authorities criticised by them

Source: own study

The results presented in Chart 1 indicate the relationship between selected four Facebook profiles and those treated by them as non-authorities. It should be noted that people and media that were not criticised by them played the roles of authorities for the authors of these profiles, so the lack of any criticism meant unequivocal support for the actions of distinguished individuals and media.

Differences between the profiles of “ŻL” and “RPRR” and “SzB” and “PRL” indicated a clear polarization of attitudes in this area (the exception is the member of Law and Justice, Krystyna Pawłowicz, criticized by “ŻL” for wrong selection of expressions in political discourse). Criticism of people and media belonging to right-wing parties and political circles, with explicit criticism of their liberal and leftist counterparts by “ŻL” and “RPRR”, and reverse reactions by “SzB” and “PRL”, are an example of ideologization of the media message. Therefore, the answers given to the first and second question confirm that all four profiles contain criticism only of persons belonging to opposite political and ideological options. In addition, it was indicated (as an answer to the third question) that the criticised authorities were individual opinion leaders (politicians) and institutional opinion leaders (media).

Supplementing the answers to the above-mentioned questions required carrying out the said analysis for the occurrence of appropriate types of statements. The obtained results were presented in Chart 2.

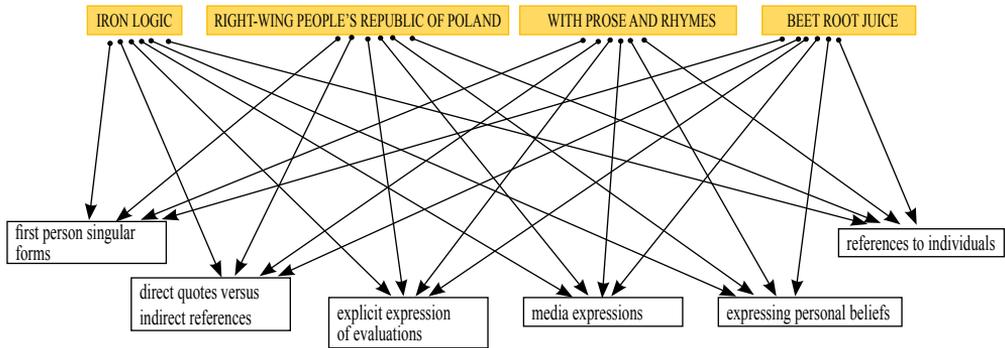


Chart 2. Elements of discourses of four selected Facebook profiles

Source: own study

All four analysed profiles had direct quotes *versus* indirect references

(e.g. “Fukuyama about the president and the prime minister who joined the fascists by posting a photo from a year ago. This is further conveyed by Kluzik, and he also comments on Petru that “it will not be easy to remedy the Poland’s nationalist image”, which is liked by Sikorski. Apart from fakes and moaning against Poland, fascism = nationalism for them”. – “ZŁ”).

to individuals (e.g., “As part of the policy of love, opposition to contempt, respect for Poland and not using different political occasions, Donald came to Poland, insulted millions of Poles by calling them “Bolsheviks”, made his own celebrations and celebrated Independence speaking about current politics” – “ZŁ”) and modal expressions (e.g., “And you? Have you already apologised to Aśka Senyszyn for visiting the graves of your relatives?:)”) – “RPRR”). In addition, there was also expressing personal beliefs (e.g. “If I were Kukiz’s voter, and if it was only about writing stupid things being drunk – after the apology, I would consider the case closed, maybe a little flaw would remain, but it would not affect the whole picture. There are no ideal people, and in our political world – even more so – “RPRR”), explicit expression of evaluations

(e.g., “This is not a joke, Ladies and Gentleman. Andrzej Duda congratulated ALL participants of the march. FN is a symbol of Italian fascists who enriched this “patriotic” event with their participation at the invitation of their colleagues from ONR. The latter are the organisers of the march, in which Andrzej Duda took part today and with whom Andrzej Duda got along. SHAME. Warsaw will never forget it”. – “SzB”).

as well as first person singular forms (in the case of many authors – plural: “WE LOVE THIS GUY (Lech Wałęsa) AND WE LOVE ALL MALE AND FEMALE POLES WHO VOTED YESTERDAY!” – “PRL”).

Conclusions

Referring to the results of this short analysis, it is important to point out the possible reasons why some of the media broadcasters dominant in the “pre-social media” era have ceased to be seen as independent centres for creating socially relevant opinions. In the course of deliberations, two main (obviously not the only one) reasons were distinguished.

The first reason results from the use of the pushy – in the view of recipients – information policy. Recipients may feel that they are an object of continuous manipulation, the aim of which is to “educate” them for uncritical support of the indicated authorities (without due care of broadcasters for information reliability). On the other hand, the content of the opinions of people using the media would be supported by the effects of the activities of the centres for creating and transmitting information (e.g. during election campaigns).

The second reason is the ideological beliefs characteristic of the media recipients themselves, which in the vast majority are not identical to the program trends represented by the dominant broadcasters of media messages. Therefore, the use of mutually exclusive discourses inevitably leads to conflicts whose main goal is to gain broad support of the recipients for own imaging of reality (used, for example, in social media communication). In addition, some of the recipients who criticise the rules adopted by these media may make decisions to resign from their programming offers:

“The best evidence for this is statistics. The general level of confidence in the mass media has dropped compared to the survey from four years ago (in 2012), and the source of information for the media, which the respondents most often indicate, is the Internet. In addition, a large proportion of respondents believe that there are a lot of topics in the media standing for the hidden interests of companies or politicians”. (“Confidence in the media decreasing – the results of Millward Brown’s research”, 2016, acc. 13–19)

For this reason – as pointed by, among others, Tomasz Gackowski (2016) – the media, presenting political and/or ideological conflicts, gain recipients, at least some of whom treat discourses offered to them with reserve. Therefore, media involvement in discussions usually results in a decrease in the level of trust in them (“Confidence in the public and private media decreasing. »Messages in various media contradict each other, people trust them less and less«”].

Summary

The increasing number of formalised and unformalised media broadcasters increasing the media space contributes to the expression of free thoughts, but also favours the emergence of messages manipulating their recipients. “Realities” are constructed in which the recipients represent specific attitudes. Conflicts arise at various levels of social reaction: from individual cases of exchange of opinions to aggressive activities, which are usually based on religion, economics and political ideologies. In turn, these conflicts become the subject of a “media illustration” of events, in accordance with the narratives adopted by them. In other words, political opponents who engage in polemics with sympathisers of a given group on their Fanpage refer to sources that are perhaps not very popular among people with whom they discuss, but are treated by themselves as credible, because that is the logic of the dispute (Matuszewski, 2018, p. 38).

The continuity of this transformation is adapted from the point of view of the media performing the function of an observer of the social system, dividing it into society and its environment. Their actions – aimed at attracting recipients – consist in the continuous production and processing of the so-called content, sensitive, or causing more or less radical reactions of recipients (Matuszewski, 2018, p. 76). Participation in such processes of individuals created as authorities questions their impartiality and honesty, and may give rise to doubts signalled, among others, by Anna Gębalska-Berekets (2013, p. 86), stating that the media want to “educate” the recipients in accordance with their own expectations. It would be less important to absorb their

attention with content related to socially recognised values, which should be found in candidates for authority figures, because “(...) human perception is largely focused on the visual way of perceiving” (also perceiving of the authorities).

List of Abbreviations

- PRL “Prawicowa Rzeczpospolita Ludowa” [Right-wing People’s Republic of Poland]
 RPRR “Raz prozą, raz rymem – walczymy z propagandowym reżimem” [We fight the propaganda regime with prose and rhymes]
 SzB “SokzBuraka” [Beetroot juice]
 ŻL “Żelazna Logika” [Iron logic]

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