



LITMUS TEST FOR A DEMOCRATIC PUBLIC SPHERE? DISCUSSION ON THE ABORTION ISSUE ON POLISH TWITTER

PAPIEREK LAKMUSOWY DEMOKRATYCZNEJ SFERY
PUBLICZNEJ? DYSKUSJA NA TEMAT ABORCJI
NA POLSKIM TWITTERZE

*Julia Trzcńska** 

— ABSTRACT —

The paper's aim is to present key findings of the analysis of the discussion on the abortion issue on Polish Twitter. Social media are believed to be a tool serving the political periphery to participate in political discourse and with the COVID-19 pandemic they have become crucial in our everyday communication. In this context, the Twitter discussion on abortion issue and Women's Strike protests that took place in October 2020 in Poland was analyzed. The discussion on the abortion issue itself in many countries brings broader questions on the state of public discourse and democratic processes, and the protests brought even more inquiries about freedom of speech or the right to protest. In total, 68,716 tweets were collected from October 20 till November 15, 2020, and analyzed with MAXQDA software to answer two main research questions: RQ1: Who was shaping the discussion in the analyzed period? RQ2: Were the two sides of the conflict represented in the discussion? The analysis showed

— ABSTRAKT —

Celem artykułu jest przedstawienie kluczowych wniosków z analizy dyskusji na temat aborcji przeprowadzonej na polskim Twitterze. Media społecznościowe są narzędziem służącym tzw. peryferiom politycznym, a wraz z pandemią COVID-19 stają się kluczowe także w naszej codziennej komunikacji. Mając na uwadze ich ważną rolę, przeanalizowano dyskusję toczącą się na Twitterze na temat aborcji i protestów Strajku Kobiet, które miały miejsce w październiku 2020 r. w Polsce. Dyskusja na temat samej aborcji w wielu krajach prowokuje szersze pytania o stan dyskursu publicznego i procesów demokratycznych, a protesty przyniosły jeszcze więcej pytań o wolność słowa czy prawo do protestu. Ponad 68 tys. tweetów zostało zebranych i przeanalizowanych za pomocą oprogramowania MAXQDA, aby odpowiedzieć na pytania badawcze dotyczące autorów wpisów, reprezentacji różnych stron konfliktu oraz potencjału Twittera jako platformy komunikacji wspierającej sferę publiczną.

* University of Wrocław, Institute of Political Science.

great potential that Twitter has for Polish public discourse, but also many obstacles, problems, and even social cleavages manifesting in the analyzed discussion.

Keywords: public discourse; polarized society; abortion issue; Poland; Twitter

Analiza wykazała duży potencjał, jaki ma Twitter dla polskiego dyskursu publicznego, ale także wiele przeszkód, problemów, a nawet podziałów społecznych ujawniających się w analizowanej dyskusji.

Słowa kluczowe: dyskurs publiczny; społeczeństwo spolaryzowane; kwestia aborcji; Polska; Twitter

INTRODUCTION

Social media are the topic around which we center our discussions on communication the most over the last years, but there are still many concerns regarding their role in public discourse. Since the beginning of the 21st century, when social media were created, they have been a very important tool for politicians, journalists, activists, and citizens. Undoubtedly, social media have made the communication process faster, easier and cheaper, but discussions on the quality of this process and its influence on public sphere are still very relevant – especially with COVID-19 pandemic restricting our face-to-face interactions.

Although scientists tend to agree that we should consider social media to be a part of media system of any given country (Lakomy, 2014), arguing that it is hard to imagine the flow of information devoid of this tool, more and more works raise the issue of threats to freedom of speech, equality and pluralism that these platforms may bring about. In their often cited work, Entman and Usher (2018) provide an insightful theoretical approach and introduce the concept of the so-called “pump-valve”. The metaphor shows that social media platforms provide many opportunities, but can actually be a threat as well, acting as a possibly disruptive force and reinforcing echo chambers.

When applying Habermasian discursive theory, the main asset that social media bring is the fact that they can be seen as a tool for the political periphery. While the state and political parties (the political center) can use many channels of communication, autonomous actors or grassroots organizations and groups tend to have less options. Nevertheless, public discourse nurturing democratic processes should include both perspectives and that is why social media seem to gain even more importance, and force us to find our ways through the “networked public sphere” (Benkler, 2006).

Having this in mind, the following text will try to analyze the use of Twitter in a fervent discussion on abortion issue among Poles in October and November 2020. The coverage of this topic in other countries has already been analyzed by many scholars who saw it as a tool for addressing a broader set of questions about democracy and the public sphere (Hunter, 1994; Tribe, 1990). In their view, abortion issue “more than any other illustrates the failure of democracy to grapple effectively with really tough questions or to create a space in which practical solutions to contested issues can be found” (Ferree et al., 2002). The topic of discussion on abortion in Poland falls into a broader context of research on discourses in this CEE country. Galasińska and Galasiński (2010) argue that in the mainstream discourse present reality in Poland seems to be rejected and this was one of the reasons to look into narratives constructed by Poles on social media in more detail.

The aim of this paper is to provide information on how the discussion on abortion, being one of the most controversial topics in most democracies, looked like on Polish Twitter. The use of this platform in Poland constantly changes. Just a few years ago it was used almost only by journalists and politicians – the political center, but it became more popular among other users as well. A good example in this regard could be the Polish K-Pop (South Korean pop music) fandom, gathering mostly women aged 15–25, who use this platform very actively in their daily fannish activities, but occasionally engage in politics as well. Moreover, comparing Q1 2020 and Q1 2021, there was a +4,4% (1.3 million) change in the number of Internet users and a +10,5% (2.5 million) change in the number of social media users (Kemp, 2021) – proving that social media are not only increasingly important, but also constantly changing.

The article, focusing solely on Polish case, will show the results of the mixed methods analysis of users’ content and try to answer the questions: What does the topic of discussion on abortion issue on social media tell us about Polish public discourse and can it be seen as the so-called litmus paper for democratic public sphere in Poland?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The influence of Twitter on broadly understood political communication is an undisputed fact in terms of the amount of changes it brought. This social media platform that at the very beginning of its existence was seen merely as

a trivial tool, built only to share simple facts from users' lives, has now become a powerful instrument that is being analyzed by researchers all around the world (Puschmann et al., 2014; Rogers, 2014). No one doubts that it is being used not only for entertainment, but also for politics (quite frequently blurring the line between the two spheres). There are many works describing the conventional use of this tool during election campaigns (Gainous & Wagner, 2014; Galdieri, Lucas, & Sisco, 2018; Hixson, 2018; Lee & Xu, 2018; Perry & Joyce, 2018; Pfeiffer, 2018), in everyday communication with voters (Maireder & Ausserhofer, 2014; Ott & Dickinson, 2019), or by diplomats in the so-called *twiplomacy* (Sandre, 2013; Lakomy, 2014). But there is also a vast literature on less conventional use of Twitter in activism and protests' organization (Norris, 2012; Wolfsfeld, Segev, & Sheaffer, 2013; della Porta & Mattoni, 2015; Papacharissi, 2016; Salem, 2015; Tufekci, 2017; Murthy, 2018), or even on the ways how we argue on this platform (Johnson & Cionea, 2020), and on the language that we use there (Zappavigna, 2012). More and more researchers stress that there is no one way of using this tool and that even citizens of the same country discussing the same issue can differ between themselves and display other user practices. For example, before Donald Trump became the president of the United States of America in 2016, Twitter was seen as a medium used more often by Democrats than Republicans (Marietta et al., 2018), which proves that certain social media platforms or applications can be associated with certain political views and ideologies. Nevertheless, as we could witness in the 2020 elections, this connection is much more labile than one could think. Literature studying Twitter and social media can be placed on an axis with works characterized by strongly positive approach on one end and those which see it as a threat to democracy as we know it on the other (Bouvier & Rosenbaum, 2020a). Surely, Twitter leaves no one indifferent.

In the presented analysis, the topic of Women's Strike protest on Twitter was chosen. While it was still a topic still very closely related to abortion issue, it also triggered some other themes related to the quality of democracy, such as the right to protest or freedom of speech. Although, similarly to other countries, abortion was always considered to be a controversial issue in Poland, discussed widely since 1993 when the previous consensus was ruled out, it was the Constitutional Tribunal's decision from October 22, 2020¹ that took people to the

¹ According to the 1993 law, abortion in Poland was criminalized unless one of the three attenuating circumstances occurred: 1) a pregnancy was the result of a crime (e.g., rape), 2) a pregnancy was a threat to woman's health or life, 3) there was a high possibility of fetus' severe malformation or

streets and reignited the discussion on Twitter as well. The abortion issue is a relatively well researched topic, with papers on general issue, its relations to law and politics (Layman & Carsey, 1998; Berer, 2017), activism (Morgan, 2017), but also specifically focusing on Polish case (Jelen & Wilcox, 1997; Szlek Miller, 1997; Chełstowska, 2011; Bielińska-Kowalewska, 2017; Mango, 2017; Hussein et al., 2018). Nevertheless, there are no papers that cover abortion issue as the aforementioned tool for addressing broader questions on the interconnection of democratic processes, public sphere and social media in Polish context.

The article focuses on just a part of the discussion on the abortion issue – the one happening on Twitter – and tries to assess what research on public discourse on social media in Poland can tell us. Firstly, the question who shaped the discourse will be answered, with the focus on verifying the role of the elites, ideological media and the so-called rogue actors (trolls, fake news creators; Entman & Usher, 2018). This will allow to assess the role of the political center and the political periphery in the analyzed discussion. The work will also look in detail into the discussion itself, to analyze how Poles were discussing controversial, but very important issues and to see whether Polish public discourse is closer to the aforementioned “networked public spaces” or rather “mass self-communication” (Castells, 2009). The paper aims to answer two main research questions:

RQ1: Who was shaping the discussion in the analyzed period?

RQ2: Were the two sides of the conflict represented in the discussion?

The presented research could be a starting point for further research on the use of social media as a platform possibly enhancing civil society in post-communist countries.

METHODS

In order to answer the research questions, tweets were collected with the use of MAXQDA software, which allows for importing data with a given hashtag, from certain users or by searching for a keyword. For this project, tweets with the #StrajkKobiet [English: Women’s Strike] were collected². It can be seen as

illness. Constitutional Tribunal decided that the third circumstance is unconstitutional and abortion in this case should also be penalized.

² Strajk Kobiet [English: Women’s Strike] is the name of the Polish women’s rights social movement and its origins can be traced back to 2016 and the so-called “Black Protest” (October 3, 2016).

an example of a hashtag-driven political discourse (Maireder & Ausserhofer, 2014), because sometimes even posting hashtag only with a lightning/high voltage emoji³ could mean support for the protests. Although it surely does not exhaust the whole variety of hashtags or keywords used in the discussion on Constitutional Tribunal's ruling, it provides a certain axis as it was the most commonly used hashtag by both supporters and critics of the protests. In total, N = 68,716 tweets were collected from October 20 till November 15, 2020. Constitutional Tribunal's ruling took place on October 22, but it was already well known a few days before that there will be a debate on this topic. After that day the tweets were being collected for three more weeks and analyzed with MAX-QDA software, using mixed-methods approach. The analysis was conducted on two levels – a division quite similar to the one proposed by Einspänner, Dang-Anh and Thimm (2014). Firstly, basic information such as author, number of likes, retweets, etc., was gathered. This level of analysis allowed for identifying main actors in the discussion. The second level of the research was focused on discourse analysis, trying to find out not only who spoke and about what, but also in what way and what were the narratives that emerged from the analyzed materials. Language means not only exchanging information, but also creating narratives, and suggesting understanding (Gee, 2001). We adjust our language to a given situation, but we also create situations (and “ourselves”) by using language (Jorgansen & Phillips, 2002). Gee argues that it is sometimes helpful to focus on the discourses we represent and “carry” while we think about political and social issues, rather than just people themselves, because they existed much longer than we did as individuals (2001). Having this in mind, it was important to identify some frames and the way in which Polish Twitter users were constructing their messages. Of course, this was merely an introduction to more in-depth linguistic analysis, but it allowed for some observations and could be a starting point for future research focusing solely on narratives and frames.

It is used while referring to an organization led by M. Lempart and K. Suchanow – Ogólnopolski Strajk Kobiet (OSK) [English: All-Poland's Women's Strike], but also, more generally, to all the protests regarding women's rights in Poland.

³ The lightning symbol was spontaneously adopted by protesters and it appears on All-Poland's Women's Strike's posters. Members of the Law and Justice Party argued that it is a symbol similar to Hitlerjugend and SS symbols and therefore should be seen as totalitarian references, although it is widely known that those organizations' symbols were actually runic letters (mainly rune Sig, symbol of victory).

RESULTS

The total number of tweets (N = 68,716) proves that the topic was a very important one among Poles. On average, M = 2,643 tweets were posted per day. There was a big difference in number of tweets that appeared in the first days of the protests, but it must be stressed that even in the second week of November there were still many messages and discussions.

Among collected posts, 71,4% were retweets, 16,8% tweets and 11,8% replies. Retweeting a post is much easier and faster than creating one's own content, that is why it is not surprising that most of the posts were retweeted. It must be stressed, however, that sharing others' posts instead of one's own words can also be a way of avoiding responsibility for certain views and can reinforce echo chambers as well.

The analysis started with finding out who posted the most tweets with #StrajkKobiet hashtag. Fifteen users with the highest number of tweets were determined (Table 1).

Table 1. Users Who Posted the Most Tweets with #StrajkKobiet in the Analyzed Period

Username	Frequency	Percent	Percent (without other)
aniqua16	210	0,31	11,48
OnetWiadomosci	176	0,26	9,62
PrawdaJan	166	0,24	9,07
urwis1977	119	0,17	6,50
Bartek93794875	118	0,17	6,45
Ewa33872319	115	0,17	6,28
MarekRekowski	111	0,16	6,07
zOstatniejChw	111	0,16	6,07
hubal63	110	0,16	6,01
wirtualnapolska	109	0,16	5,96
GCC49245083	102	0,15	5,57
ryszard_andrzej	97	0,14	5,30
CentrumPol	96	0,14	5,25
tadeusz38725389	96	0,14	5,25
dankadanka75	94	0,14	5,14
TOTAL (without other)	1830	2,66	100,00
OTHER	66886	97,34	-
TOTAL	68716	100,00	-

Source: Author's own elaboration.

Among the users who posted the most, only two accounts were run by Polish online media (Onet and Wirtualna Polska) and no politician could be found. Quite interestingly, there were many accounts that looked like automated or semi-automated bots (Mowbray, 2014), with only one account openly stating so (@zOstatniejChw)⁴. While the rest of the accounts (e.g., @Bartek93794875, @Ewa33872319) cannot be unanimously classified as bots, the amount of tweeted posts and their regularity, as well as the fact that all of the posts were only retweeted, make it very likely. Moreover, some of the tweets could not be accessed just two months after being collected. Table 2 shows an example of retweets that appear to be generated by automated or semi-automated Twitter accounts.

Table 2. An Example of Retweets Posted by Seemingly Automated Accounts

Username	Date	Type	Text
Anna Anna69490757	22.10.2020 20:27	Retweet	@lis_tomasz A może ogólnopolski strajk kobiet? I omaszaściowy strajk mężczyzn? 🇵🇱
Anna Anna69490757	22.10.2020 20:27	Retweet	@lis_tomasz A może ogólnopolski strajk kobiet? I omaszaściowy strajk mężczyzn? 🇵🇱
Anna Anna31783466	22.10.2020 17:50	Retweet	@lis_tomasz A może ogólnopolski strajk kobiet? I omaszaściowy strajk mężczyzn? 🇵🇱
Anna Anna31783466	22.10.2020 17:50	Retweet	@lis_tomasz A może ogólnopolski strajk kobiet? I omaszaściowy strajk mężczyzn? 🇵🇱

Source: Author's own elaboration.

The most active user, @aniqua16, who posted 210 tweets in the analyzed period, is also a quite interesting case. Although the user is followed by Tomasz Lis (then Newsweek Poland editor-in-chief, and well-known journalist) and seems to be engaged in discussions by retweeting and occasionally posting own comments, the number of tweets posted from the creation of the account in May, 2018 is almost unimaginable (284,429 as of February 25, 2021, roughly 280 tweets per day). The analysis of the user's activity is also ambiguous, with zero

⁴ Adopting the users' perspective, it was decided that the content originating from the automated and semi-automated accounts should be included, as it is difficult to clearly distinguish such accounts from strongly active, but non-automated ones. The disruption of the discourse was analyzed as part of it.

replies in the last 100 posted tweets, 63 tweets posted between 8 and 9 AM, 27 tweets between 11 AM and 12 PM, and 10 between 19 and 20 PM⁵. Those hours are well-known for being popular among social media users and posting in those hours is advised for people professionally managing their accounts. User's information section warns others that "RT doesn't always mean support". There were also highly engaged users whose activity did not seem neither automated nor semi-automated, but those were scarce.

Another interesting set of information could be obtained from the analysis of the users with the highest number of followers, who used #StrajkKobiet (Table 3). Those users can easily reach wider audience and therefore should be seen as potentially more influential, however it did not necessarily mean that they were active in this discussion (some users posted just one tweet with #StrajkKobiet).

Table 3. Authors (Twitter Name) by Number of Followers

	User	Followers
1.	W Radio Colombia	4084773
2.	Noticieros Televisa	3129873
3.	tvn24	1449156
4.	Radosław Sikorski MEP PLEU	1015954
5.	Tomasz Lis	932506
6.	NewsweekPolska	908719
7.	Gazeta Wyborcza.pl	786258
8.	portal tvp.info PL	708437
9.	Jarosław Kuźniar	601688
10.	Kancelaria Premiera	590733
11.	Palikot Janusz	553558
12.	WPROST.pl	427475
13.	Tomasz Sekielski	376023
14.	Bartosz Węglarczyk	356755
15.	Radio TOK FM	331619

Source: Author's own elaboration.

⁵ This analysis was supported with data from <https://foller.me/> to compare with more recent data, not only the one obtained in the analyzed period.

Unlike it was shown in case of the most active (posting) users, among the most popular tweets' authors we can find mainly traditional media, such as TV channels (e.g., TVP, TVN), newspapers (e.g., "Gazeta Wyborcza", "Wprost"), radio stations (TOK FM), but also renowned journalists (e.g., Bartosz Węglarczyk, Tomasz Sekielski, Jarosław Kuźniar, and the aforementioned Tomasz Lis). On the list we can see the names of politicians (e.g., Janusz Palikot, Radosław Sikorski), and also the Chancellery of Prime Minister. What was the most surprising here, was the fact that the two most popular accounts were not Polish accounts, but Colombian radio station (W Radio Colombia) and Mexican news portal (Noticieros Televisa). Both of those countries are known for their very similar strict anti-abortion law and protests that took place in 2020 (Turkewitz, 2020; *BBC News*, 2020), which explains the interest in Poland (it must be stressed that both accounts used the hashtag in Polish, which means that they were following the events and discussion on social media). Among noticeably often retweeted users, the account of K. Feusette (@FeusetteK) – a journalist associated with rather conservative views – should be mentioned. Although his profile was not among the fifteen most popular ones, his tweets seemed to generate a lot of reactions from other users.

The most popular hashtags that appeared in the analyzed tweets were: #StrajkKobiet (also mistakenly written as "strajkobiet"), #wieszwiecej ["you know more", the name of TVP Info's program), #wypierdalać [Fuck off], #piekłokobiet [Women's hell], #tojestwojna [It's war], #bojówkikaczyńskiego [Kaczyński's fighting squads], #pis, #covid19, #niestrajkuje [I'm not striking], #strajk [Strike], #wyborcza [Electoral, but most likely referring to "Gazeta Wyborcza"], #protestkobiet [Women's protest], #warszawa [Warsaw]. All of the hashtags originally using Polish letters were also used without them (e.g., #bojówkikaczyńskiego and #bojowkikaczynskiego). Some of the most popular words seemed to appear on the list only because of a few very popular and often retweeted posts, such as the one about the vegan pizzeria in Poznań that was sprayed with fascist symbols, because its owners supported Women's Strike, which proves that it was relatively easy to influence the discussion or become more visible.

⁶ The use of this highly offensive word was widely discussed even among people supporting the protests, who argued that children should not be exposed to such vocabulary, as well as that it will not allow for a dialogue with "the other side" of the conflict. On the other hand, feminist movements argued that this kind of word used by men would not cause such a commotion, which is only a proof that it should be used more.

Interestingly, the most active users, the users with the most followers and authors of the most popular tweets do not form one group. Only T. Lis could be found both among the users with the highest number of followers as well as on the list of authors with the most popular tweets.



Figure 1. One of the Most Popular Tweets in the Analyzed Period

Note in English: “A nationwide women’s strike maybe? And the men’s solidarity strike?”, October 22, 2020, 17:21 EST. Retrieved from: https://twitter.com/lis_tomasz/status/1319312990802501634.

The most popular tweet (1237 retweets, 5243 likes as of the moment when tweets were collected) was posted by music news portal (Music News Facts Poland) and was a retweet of Barbara Nowacka’s (Polish MP) post with a video showing spontaneous protest in Warsaw on October 22, 2020⁷.

By looking closely at posted tweets, it was possible to determine some themes in the discussion. It was done mostly by checking in what context some words appeared, the most important being, obviously, abortion. The word itself was mentioned 3390 times, however quite often when referring to *Aborcja Bez Granic* [Abortion Without Borders], an initiative helping women who need abortion to do it in a legal and safe way (mostly abroad). The notion was also very often clearly opposed to Catholicism. While analyzing messages using the word “abortion”, it was noticeable that there was a widespread lack of comprehension of the main demands of the protesters. One of them being “abortion on desire” understood by Twitter users as a possibility to terminate pregnancy till the very last day of it, and not the 12th week. Moreover, some users seemed to

⁷ The original tweet did not use #StrajkKobiet and therefore was not included in the analysis. The retweeted post can be accessed here: <https://twitter.com/musicnewsfactpl/status/1319365549621653504>.

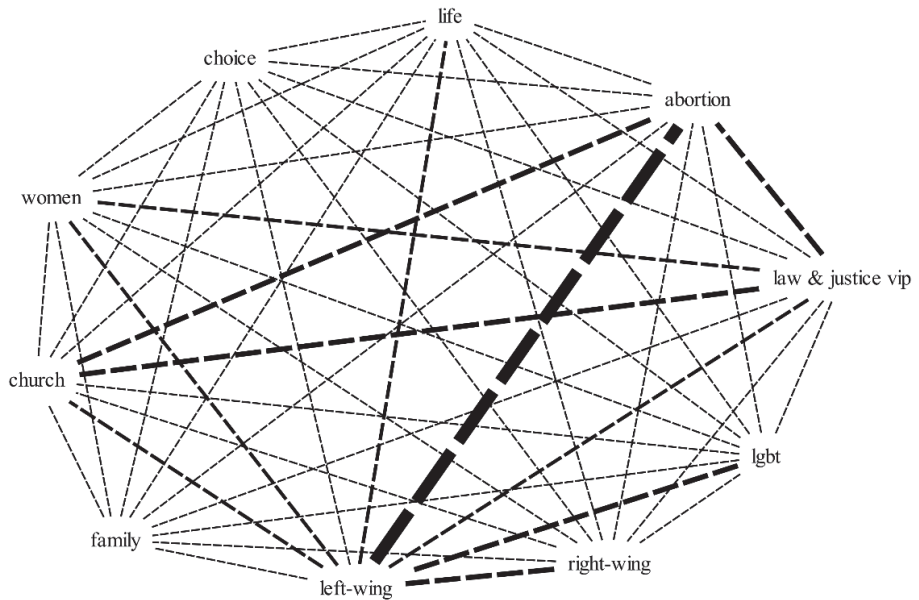


Figure 2. Notions Co-occurrence Model of the Analyzed Tweets

Source: Author's own elaboration.

be confused about “abortion on desire”, “abortion on demand”, and “compulsory abortion”. Some of the posts were very vulgar, referring to protesting women who already have children as hypocrites and using the name “aborcjonistki” [Abortionists], which meant in this context a person who is a part of the pro-choice movement, but it has a strong derogative nuance. Another word that was being analyzed was “compromise” [Polish: *kompromis*], expected to be present in the discussion because of the so-called “1993 compromise” and some postulates calling for a compromise in this case as well. The word, however, was used only 236 times. Surprisingly, the word “women” was also scarcely used, even in relation with “women’s rights”. It appeared almost only while referring to Women’s Strike.

The analysis of the most frequently mentioned issues brought important information on the way in which they were connected by the users (Figure 2).

Although one may think that discussion on the abortion issue would revolve around pro-life versus pro-choice opposition, the analysis of the connections

between the mentioned issues showed different themes and narrations. The most regularly connected notions were “abortion” and widely understood, however usually negatively associated, “left-wing ideology” (1506 tweets mentioned it together). It was often stated that abortion was something that only leftists might do, and as it was already mentioned, it was also strongly opposed to Catholicism (751 tweets referencing church and abortion together). In the analyzed discussion, “leftist” and “rightist” became insults, which seems to be a part of a broader trend in Polish public discourse, reinforcing polarization of the society. Law and Justice, the ruling party (and its representatives), was also quite often connected to both church (653 tweets) and abortion (654 tweets).

DISCUSSION

As Woodly (2015) argues, “the way that we talk about issues in public both reflects and determines what solutions are considered desirable or plausible in the commonplace logics that shape the politics of a particular moment. Close attention to public discourse not only allows us to keep up with politics as it happens, but also reveals important truths about the meaning, linkages, and effects of the nondiscursive activities we traditionally consider political, such as voting, interest group activities, and movement campaigns”.

The above presented results allowed to answer the research questions. The findings of this study clearly show that recent events were very important for public opinion in Poland. The topic was widely discussed, generating many comments and opinions. Regarding the first question (RQ1) – who was shaping the discussion in the analyzed period – it was possible to determine a few groups. The main actors were mostly citizens, journalists, but also rogue actors (mainly automated or semi-automated accounts, however there were also cases of spreading misinformation or even fake news). What was interesting, though, was the fact that even if an account looked like a bot, it was surprisingly easy to determine its political orientation as it was built on simple symbols. This is probably the most problematic part of the analyzed posts – their authors were often simplifying complicated issues that demand broad discussion based on knowledge, instead of simply repeating what others say. This kind of behavior, done by private users or bots, reinforces echo chambers and strengthens polarization of Polish society. It must be also noted that politicians were not present in the analyzed discussion. There were only two politicians who appeared

on the list of users with the most followers – R. Sikorski, who is currently a member of the European Parliament, and J. Palikot, who quit politics and is now a businessman.

Second question (RQ2) – whether two sides of the conflict were represented in the discussion – can be answered positively. Twitter seemed to be a platform where different views could be presented. Poles, according to the original assumption of this study, used #StrajkKobiet to both support and criticize the movement. Therefore proving that if necessary, they can engage in conversation with “the other side”. This could perhaps be seen as a contrast to the situation in traditional media (especially TV channels) that seem to consequently follow either liberal or conservative perspective, rarely showing different narratives without spiteful commentaries.

The question of polarization brings a different issue of the social cleavages in Poland. The aforementioned accounts that could be automated were clearly either Law and Justice-supporting (using symbols such as: Polish flag, #Duda2020 – used since the 2020 presidential campaign, quoting Law and Justice politicians and conservative journalists), or Civic Platform/Committee for the Defense of Democracy-supporting (using European Union flag, sometimes American flag and #Trzaskowski2020, quoting D. Tusk and journalists such as T. Lis). This division is a well-known division of Polish politics that has been observed for at least 10 years and reflects the differences between conservatists and liberals. The discussion on abortion issue and Women’s Strike reflected, however, a different phenomenon that could be probably at least partly assigned to generational change in Poland. The other line of division was mostly reflected in the discourse analysis part, where two stereotypical figures could be distinguished: one being a conservative Catholic believing in traditional understanding of family with clearly divided gender roles, and the other being a left-wing oriented, LGBT+ community-supporting young people. This division between left and right, instead of “right and even further right” (referring to Civic Platform and Law and Justice) is typical for younger generation of teenagers and young adults and might foretell future changes in Polish politics. Nevertheless, the analysis proved that the discussion was strongly connected to domestic politics, sometimes shading the true nature of this controversial issue.

The discussion originated almost 70,000 tweets, proving that Poles actively used Twitter to talk about the issue. It is questionable, however, how active in this discussion they actually were. If we think about being active in terms of actually adding something to the discourse by posting one’s own comments,

sharing research, etc., then Polish Twitter users' activity might be considered unsatisfactory. Nevertheless, it should be stressed once again that we can observe more and more engagement from citizens who are visible in the discussion on platform that just a few years ago was dominated by politicians and journalists. It proves that Poles learn how to use different communication channels. Some of the skills that users presented can also be seen as a display of their engagement in discussions on social media. For example, the use of #BabiesLivesMatter shows that Polish Twitter users were following Black Lives Matter movement in the United States and played on the hashtag, without using its abbreviation (#BLM) that could actually lead to the original content.

As it was already mentioned, social media can play a role of a platform that allow marginalized groups voice out their opinion and there are many examples of women fighting for their rights from all around the world (e.g., Black Twitter – a group of black women forming a community in order to break the mainstream information flow with their own story; Maragh-Lloyd, 2020). In Poland this was probably true for more left-wing supporting young adults who do not use traditional media either because they prefer Internet sources, or because most of the traditional media have liberal or conservative line. It would be difficult, however, to find well-organized politically-oriented groups (not fan communities) using Twitter to form communities and spread their messages with the scale of Black Twitter. Even groups that are already established for their offline activities did not mark their presence in the analyzed content, which might be especially surprising in case of women's rights organizations or the All-Poland's Women's Strike itself. This brings us back to the question of the public discourse including both the political center and political periphery and the answer is not easy. Twitter certainly does have the potential for both spheres, but it seems that it is most actively (however not necessarily effectively) used by individual citizens and journalists, and less frequently by politicians or NGOs.

The overall assessment proved that the analyzed discussion was rarely substantial or factual. It was mostly emotional and, what is more important, quite often repeating the same statements without trying to understand "the other side". One of the limitations of this study would be the fact that only tweets with #StrajkKobiet were analyzed and this could also affect this observation, meaning that maybe there were more in-depth discussions under different hashtags, or maybe even without any. Nevertheless, it was the #StrajkKobiet hashtag that played the role of an axis in this dispute, somehow bridging people with different opinions. Therefore we can assume that even if there are discussions more

beneficial for civil society, they are not in the mainstream flow of information of Polish Twitter.

CONCLUSION

The events of October and November 2020 certainly made history in Poland in terms of citizens' engagement. For the first time in many years younger generation proved their personal involvement. The struggle for the right to abortion was (similarly to protest in 2016) linked to other struggles for democratic freedoms, and the attempt of Law and Justice to tighten the abortion law was understood as another attack on democracy (Bielińska-Kowalewska, 2017). This seemed to be an exceptional opportunity to analyze public discourse on the topic happening in social media.

Social media proved that "being political" can be a part of everyone's everyday life – it does not require being a member of a party or undertaking a life of an activist. There is also no clear division on "real discussion about political things" and jokes or insults on Twitter (Bouvier & Rosenbaum, 2020b). They coexist and blend together. It does force us, however, to ask about the quality and outcomes of such discussions. The analyzed discussion on abortion was mainly an oversimplified one, lacking arguments and focusing on emotions. With the function of threads that allow to link tweets, it is difficult to assign this only to the limited space that Twitter offer its users. Those who want to post longer messages (and have the skills to do it) are able to do it and the separation in the form on individual posts is sometimes used in a similar way to markers in text documents.

Discussion on abortion and women's protests on Polish Twitter was a fervent one and it certainly shows a change in the use of this social medium, proving that Poles are becoming more tech-savvy and media-oriented. It also proved the greater engagement of young adults and the end of years-long division in Polish politics on Law and Justice and Civic Platform supporters that left no place for other ideologies and viewpoints, making many people tired and resigned when it came to politics. What is worrying is the amount of semi-automated or automated accounts that were present in this discussion and are probably disrupting many issues that are discussed by Polish public opinion. The views presented on those accounts were quite different from the ones stated by, for example, young adults or even older, but certainly human users. This phenomenon may reinforce

not only echo chambers and filter bubbles, but also other phenomena, such as the spiral of silence (Noelle-Neumann, 1974), because it disrupts our perception of what is a dominant opinion.

The discussion on abortion issue on Twitter in Poland certainly revealed some interesting points about public discourse in this country, but it is just a starting point for further research. Twitter seems to be a platform with the potential to bring two sides of the strongly polarized Polish society – something that traditional media fail to do. Nevertheless, this potential is not used fully by its users, who still quite often resort to – typical for social media – emotional, nonfactual discussions. Moreover, it seems that political center and political periphery have two separate discourses that rarely meet – a situation that reveals yet another cleavage in Polish society and a challenge that will require overcoming in the future.

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