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Information management and engaged journalism in the conditions of manipulated mainstream media transmission – OKO.press as the example

Introduction

Nowadays, it is really difficult to tell the truth from hypocrisy and populism. It is enough that politicians throw several false statements and, in an instant, a significant part of the public follows the views of their political idols – instead of seeking the truth. The public these days

This conflict gains power from continuous stretching the point so that the truth fits particular party needs. In this conflict, Poland, as a nation, a country, and a society is what counts the least.¹ Therefore, (not only) in Poland there is this enormous urgency for reliable and engaged journalism practiced to the benefit of the social and civic interest. The authors assume that in order to speak about journalistic craftsmanship in the above categories, we need to combine the elements of both the engaged

¹ G. Marczak, “Świetny serwis dziennikarski o ‘prawdzie’”, Antyweb.pl, 24 June 2016, <https://antyweb.pl/dziennikarstwo-sledcze-oko-press> [accessed 14 December 2022].

and civic journalism known from common definitions and guard the professionalism. This is the only combination that can provide an antidote to lies and manipulation.

The article presents the fact-checking logic of a Polish press title published online since 2016, OKO.press, which in the authors' view is an excellent example of reliable journalism practiced to the benefit of the public. The study was of a qualitative nature, and it was preceded with research review and theoretical deliberations on the social engagement in the era of new media and the definition issues directly related to the engaged and civic journalism.

An internal fact-checking procedure in authors opinion is a mandatory procedure for journalists, an important and necessary stage in a journalistic routine.² The good practice is that the journalists do internal fact-checking every time they publish a news piece. Based on their decision-making patterns, they select the method of fact-checking or – unfortunately – sometimes skip this stage. We called these patterns “fact-checking logic” as a part of general media logic. Media logic is a concept intended to describe relations between media and the information that they hold. In a general sense, it is a set of criteria that journalists usually use to decide whether some particular information should be covered in the news outlet or not.³ It is also worth noting, right from the beginning of the analysis, that there are no standardized practices for journalists on how to provide fact-checking.

Trying to prove the assumption, the authors, in their qualitative research, analysed the contents of the press title's website, methods of information management – ways by which the editorial office collected information and the methods for verification of this information. In this aspect, the authors considered the concept of “infomorphosis” in the new media, as the theoretical basis. It is a process that presents internal dynamics, is open, and shows the importance of many new elements (eg commercialization of the internet, geography of information flow, shrinking field of freedom and the increasing scope of control on the internet), as well as mechanisms that have not been investigated yet, and remains unrecognized.⁴ In view of the need to limit the volume of the article, as well as following the Silverman's recommendations⁵ to limit the research material as much as possible, authors decided that it would be appropriate to look closer at the tab on the OKO.press website called “true or false”. A short time interval was chosen – a few days before the Russian invasion of Ukraine till the

² L. Graves, M.A. Amazeen, “Fact-Checking as Idea and Practice in Journalism”, [in:] *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Communication*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228613.013.808>.

³ More: T. Harcup, D. O'Neill, “What Is News? Galtung and Ruge revisited”, *Journalism Studies*, 2(2), 2001, pp. 261–280.

⁴ M. Nowina-Konopka, *Infomorfoza. Zarządzanie informacją w nowych mediach*, Toruń: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, 2018.

⁵ D. Silverman, *Interpretacja danych jakościowych*, trans. M. Głowacka-Grajper, J. Ostrowska, Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 2012.

end of March 2022. The authors make an assumption that the journalism practiced by OKO.press can be considered engaged, civic as well as professional.

New media and engagement in contemporary public affairs

Two main approaches can be indicated in various research that focuses on the analysis of relations between using new information and communication technologies, in particular from the internet, and the level of activity, knowledge and actual participation in public life.⁶ We can find at least two opposing viewpoints. On the one hand, there are those who assume that using new technologies has no correlation whatsoever with the phenomenon of participation (its growth or decay). They argue that individuals who get their political knowledge from the internet are mostly those recruited from groups of very high political activity or interested in politics to such an extent that access to the internet bears no relevant impact on the increase in their political participation. We should add that it is not advisable to expect any individuals not interested in politics, seeking information in this field on the internet.

Leaning on the above diagnosis, it seems justified to assume that the current knowledge about politics, and thus the level of political participation within a given society, despite consistent improvement in internet access, fails to show any particularly pronounced growth trends.⁷ Even worse, in a more extreme case, the internet may to some extent be dangerous and disastrous to participation, encouraging individuals to restrict themselves to their private affairs and limiting their interactions with others only to the social dimension.⁸ In addition, it may pose a threat to less prepared recipients and become a tool for deliberate manipulation and spreading disinformation. Currently, we are dealing with a number of manifestations of the so-called hybrid war, in which the internet and the skilful generation of an alternative, untrue reality play a major role. However, on the other hand, a more optimistic belief comes to rescue, shared by a relatively sizable group of experts in the field. They assume that using technological innovation increases engagement in public affairs in a more or less direct way. In their opinion the internet strengthens political effectiveness, at the same time improving the knowledge on political topics, and this further positively influences the level and intensity of individual participation. Apart from the role played

⁶ K. Kenski, N.J. Stroud, "Connections between Internet use and political efficacy, knowledge, and participation", *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, vol. 50, issue 2, 2006, pp.173–192.

⁷ M. du Vall, M. Majorek, *Nowe media w służbie sieciowych aktywistów*, [in:] M. Wysocka-Pleczyk, B. Świeży, *Człowiek zalogowany*, Kraków: Biblioteka Jagiellońska, 2013, p. 28.

⁸ J. Wojniak, Uczestnictwo polityczne w obliczu nowych technologii informacyjnych i komunikacyjnych, [in:] M. du Vall, A. Walecka-Rynduch, *"Stare" i "nowe" media w kontekście kampanii politycznych i sprawowania władzy*, Kraków 2010, p. 88.

by an information source in political issues that are important from the society's viewpoint, the internet is undoubtedly a medium that greatly facilitates the contact with politicians, and provides the citizens with the feeling of control over their actions. Furthermore, it is also worth noticing that the internet specificity does not make the individuals uncomfortable with their ignorance in the field of politics.⁹

Hence, we can conclude that an increase in accessibility to a medium, the internet, and an increase in the level of education, not only technological education, exert some impact on a greater level of public participation of the citizens. What is more, it is worth noting that the internet provides some new possibilities of using personal and political freedoms. The supporters of IT influence on democracy believe that this will save the world from further dictatorships and the creation of closed societies. It can be also stated that an information society features a far greater freedom of participation, and first of all the possibility to make more informed choices accompanied by an opportunity for fuller self-determination and thus broader autonomy in decision-making.¹⁰

Engaged civic journalism

While analysing the normative social theory of the media, Denis McQuail distinguishes the basic elements that construct the paradigm of social responsibility. In the first place, the researcher points out the obligations of the media and journalists towards society. In this context, he points to media ownership as a commodity entrusted by the society. Secondly, the media – first of all the news media – should be characterized with a specific system of values composed of truthfulness, reliability, honesty and objectivity. The third element of “Social Responsibility Theory” is the freedom of the media, albeit subject to self-regulation. The main issues at stake here are freedom of speech and freedom of journalism. Another imperative is the need to adhere to established codes of ethics and good professional practices.¹¹ According to the above-mentioned rules, the engaged journalism is the way how a journalist understand, experience and carries out their profession, which consists in adopting the responsibility for researching and presenting to public opinion a given issue, event or social process where the evil is escalated, while this evil – unseen by the public opinion, hidden on purpose, etc. – is the cause of individual suffering, the spread of corruption or the growth of social pathologies. Therefore engaged

⁹ *Ibidem*.

¹⁰ L. Carter, F. Bélanger, “Internet voting and political participation: An empirical comparison of technological and political factors”, *ACM SIGMIS Database*, vol. 43, issue 3, 2012, pp. 26–46.

¹¹ B. Secler, A. Stępińska, A., E. Jurga-Wosik *et al.*, “Model dziennikarstwa zorientowany na obywateli w perspektywie paradygmatu społecznej odpowiedzialności mediów. Przykład prasy w Polsce”, *Acta Universitatis Lodzianensis Folia Litteraria Polonica*, vol. 2, issue 32, 2016, p. 168.

journalism is sometimes called civic journalism. The reason for moving to the position of engaged journalism may be their own reflection, shock caused by a meeting with a “witness of conscience”, collusion of the environment (especially the establishment or lobby), etc. A committed journalist leaves the position of a neutral observer relating “a plain course of events”. They explore the subject, taking the side of the wronged individual or the common good of the community in their reports, documentaries or columns. Hence, engaged journalism does not mean propaganda, political or marketing journalism, where a journalist – for the sake of benefits, due to party connotation or so-called wealth of the company – defends a wrong issue or promotes a product that does not deserve the customers’ interest. An exposed or disclosed evil can affect the journalist themselves (ostracism of the environment, threat of losing their job, direct or indirect threat to life, death). Engaged journalism reveals the dimension of journalism as a vocation.¹²

Andrew Boyd wrote that journalism is biased. According to Boyd, journalistic bias can be justified and justified in the name of the universal good of humanity. It is characterized by creative expression combined with social responsibility, strong emotional saturation, that experiencing the described reality excludes objectivity.¹³ Ryszard Kapuściński’s attributes another important feature to engaged journalism – its intentionality.¹⁴ An engaged journalist sets goals and tries to carry out some form of transformation of reality and audience.

The engaged journalism is bravely taking the side of those defenceless and harmed, triggered by the sense of responsibility; it is showing that there is some hope, that you can change something; it opens one’s eyes to harm. Engaged journalism is always intentional – it has some clear objectives, the achievement of which is the journalist’s priority, regardless of the consequences. Engaged journalists know what they fight for, and what is important is that is also known by their audience. They take steps that take them closer to their goal, but they do not pursue this goal ruthlessly. The engaged journalism is supposed to draw attention to a certain issue, where the evil escalates. It is intended to somehow “open the eyes”, not to destroy a man. Of course when we talk about dictatorship that violates human rights we cannot overlook a dictator. But the theme that a journalist is supposed to devote themselves is to tell the public opinion about injustices that affect people, not to destroy a man who stands behind it. An engaged journalist is aware of their responsibility for their words, especially in the face of a certain issue, event or social process. This is when they change their position and transform from a neutral observer into an integral part of the reality they describe. By revealing the escalation of the evil done, a journalist fights either on the side of the

¹² A. Maślana, “Dziennikarstwo zaangażowane – poszukiwanie zagubionego sensu”, *Kultura – Media – Teologia*, issue 3, 2010, pp. 121–129.

¹³ A. Boyd, *Dziennikarstwo radiowo-telewizyjne. Techniki tworzenia programów informacyjnych*, Kraków: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, 2006, p. 281.

¹⁴ R. Kapuściński, *Autoportret reportera*, Kraków: Znak, 2008, p. 20.

injured or on their behalf. The journalist is forced to deeply research the raised issue and explore the topic – which by the way is their natural reflex when they face the reality that cannot be left unsaid. Engaged journalism is the responsibility that cannot be framed within political correctness, it is the responsibility for noticing something more, the responsibility ready to take the consequences (environmental ostracism, the threat of losing the job, direct or indirect life threat or even death). This is journalism understood as a missionary profession, a vocation to serve the truth.¹⁵

In this paper we are interested in the category of civic journalism, which is based on civic media created by communities – both real and virtual – and the existence of a medium created by this community.

In documents and studies devoted to this type of media, most attention is paid to two basic types of communities that make it up: those that share a common residence or interest. The virtual space is a special type place, where people while connecting through computer networks can communicate on both levels – individual and group. This fosters development of new social forms, namely the virtual communities. The research shows that communication through new media keeps the social bonds because it provides the users with the sense of belonging. However, it should be borne in mind that it is not a separate reality, an isolated social phenomenon. A network is just one of the forms of interactions which people undertake while accompanied by their “background” meaning the socio-economic status, cultural environment, age, sex, relationships from the real world, to name a few.¹⁶ Nowadays, the internet should not be separated from other means of communication between human beings. Large internet networks based on weak relationships and accessibility of interpersonal online interaction modes actually support collective actions.¹⁷ The Internet is a medium that fosters development of relatively weak social bonds, in specific contexts consciously valued higher by people than stronger bonds (weak bonds turn out to be more useful when it comes to implementation of organizations’ or social movements’ objectives). In this context, “hidden” bonds – potentially possible but not activated by social interaction – are also important. Individuals belonging to the same network (eg through digital networking: mailing lists, social networking profiles, databases) have developed “hidden” ties, accessible through communication structures that, when activated, have weak yet potentially strong ties.¹⁸

It is worth pointing out what are the characteristics of the civic media created by those communities. According to the definition of civic media proposed in the

¹⁵ A. Maślana, *op. cit.*, pp. 121–129.

¹⁶ M. Szpunar, “Społeczności wirtualne jako nowy typ społeczności – eksplikacja socjologiczna”, *Studia Socjologiczne*, issue 2(173), 2004, pp. 107 and 99.

¹⁷ L.A. Lievrouw, *Media alternatywne i zaangażowane społecznie*, Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, 2012, p. 199.

¹⁸ J. Nowak, *Aktywność obywateli online. Teoria a praktyka*, Lublin: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej, 2011, p. 86.

Declaration of the Committee of Ministers on the role of community media in promoting social cohesion and intercultural dialogue,¹⁹ media types should meet the following conditions: be independent of governmental, commercial or religious institutions as well as political parties; operate on a non-profit basis; be based on cooperation of volunteers from civil society members in their conduct and management; act for the benefit of civil society and the community they serve; be owned and accountable to the community they serve; be involved in activating representatives of various social groups and intercultural dialogue.²⁰

Civic journalism is undoubtedly a manifestation of civil society – one that feels responsible for itself. “I” understood in individual terms is replaced by “we” in civil society; the responsibility for one’s own and one’s relatives’ development is gradually supplemented by the need for responsibility for others, the “strangers”. This manifests itself in greater political participation, greater interest in the idea of volunteering, as well as concern for the life of local communities.²¹

To sum up this section, the civil journalism involved is co-responsible and participatory. Nowadays, it uses technology to create, select and disseminate information. Its objective is to provide people with information that help them make decisions in a conscious manner. It uses the democratic potential of the internet and of the new-type (virtual) societies, thus transforming the previous centralized social structure. This activity consists in raising awareness and advocacy.

OKO.press’s information management strategy in the face of democracy instability

Throughout the 20th century, the role of print media and television in shaping political processes was decisive. It became clear that independent press and other media along with have been seen as the fourth power, promoting economic and social growth, looking at the decision-makers’ hand in particular. This view is supported by the fact that significant part of research in this scope shows that freedom of the media has some substantial impact on public policy of democratic governance. On the other hand, the theoretical and empirical knowledge of mechanisms

¹⁹ *Declaration of the Committee of Ministers on the role of community media in promoting social cohesion and intercultural dialogue*, Council of Europe, 11 February 2009, www.coe.int/en/web/freedom-expression/news-media/-/asset_publisher/Mo0WV0OwvbhA/content/declaration-of-the-committee-of-ministers-on-the-role-of-community-media-in-promoting-social-cohesion-and-intercultural-dialogue-adopted-on-11-februar?inheritRedirect=false [accessed: 16 April 2022].

²⁰ U. Doliwa, “Dziennikarstwo obywatelskie, czyli jakie?”, *Nowe Media*, no. 3, 2012, pp. 81–100.

²¹ “Dziennikarstwo obywatelskie – definicja, diagnoza i przyszłość”, *E.redaktor*, 6 June 2011, <http://eredaktor.pl/media-internetowe/dziennikarstwo-obywatelskie-definicja-diagnoza-i-przyszlosc> [accessed: 13 April 2022].

that stand behind the global variability in the freedom of the media is more limited. This is a result of semi democratic systems, or even facade democracies or hybrid systems that distort the space for the flow of information. Hence, the widely held view among the media experts and analysts of this space that the majority of regimes describing themselves as democratic should be classified in terms of autocratic statehood due to the interference in the flow of information. A direct factor that influences this classification is the tendency to more or less suppress media messages and treating censorship as an inseparable component for functioning of a system.

Imbalances in the relations between the power and media along with the intensity of these imbalances allow to show some authoritarian subtypes within which it is possible to identify the levels of media freedom. However, it is worth asking a question about what do we mean by the simple term “freedom of the media”? The freedom of the media, or more precisely its scope, is defined as a degree to which each country allows for the freedom in the flow of information that depends mainly on: the scope of political interference, eg through intimidation, censorship or coercion (which is influenced by the political environment); implemented constitutional standards and the regulations resulting from the constitution (legal surroundings); and the independence of the publishers’ decisions from the commercial or private interests (economic surroundings).²² According to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of the United Nations (UN), freedom of expression is a universal human right protecting the right to “seek, receive and impart information and ideas by any means, regardless of frontiers.”²³ It seems that this approach would need to be adopted as a starting point for further deliberations on restrictions to the freedom of the flow of information. Thus, the importance of civic journalism, combined with the overarching principle of freedom of speech, understood in terms of human rights, create (in a sense) a space for the emergence of grass-roots publishers that will provide a reliable analysis of reality and will guard the integrity of the message. OKO.press is an example of this type of online publisher.

“OKO.press has been established as a result of concerns with the situation in Poland – authoritarian aspirations of the political majority, radicalization of social attitudes, especially the right-wing fundamentalism and nationalism, the increasing conflict but also the weakness of the opposition. Our response is reliable analysis of words and deeds in public life, tracking forgeries and lies, revealing the political corruption, populism and purges. A critical approach, without any preferential treatment, with discipline.”²⁴

²² M.J. Abramowitz, J. Dunham, “Freedom of the Press”, Freedom House, 2017, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-press/freedom-press-2017> [accessed: 15 April 2022].

²³ Powszechna deklaracja praw człowieka, art. 19, ONZ, https://amnesty.org.pl/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Powszechna_Deklaracja_Praw_Czlowieka.pdf.

²⁴ “Ruszył serwis OKO.press patrzący na ręce władzy. W redakcji dziennikarze z “GW”, “Polityki”, TVN i TOK FM”, Wirtualne Media, 15 June 2016, <https://www.wirtualnemedia.pl/artykul/>

The OKO.press website tells us that this is a portal that verifies the facts and carries out investigative journalism. This is a social medium and an archive of public life. First of all, this is the “civic tool for control over authorities.”²⁵ The medium was created in the face of concerns about the paralysis of Polish democracy and as a shield protecting from the flood of words spoken without any responsibility, lies and half-truths.

From the very moment of its creation the portal has been repeatedly appreciated and awarded by the journalistic environment itself, it among others has received several Grand Press²⁶ awards, and in 2018, the journalist of OKO.press received the Amnesty International Poland “Pen of Hope” award. It is worth mentioning that the engaged nature of journalism may be proven by the courage and tenacity of those who write for the portal. A small independent editorial office has repeatedly embarrassed the powerful media corporations and taken its toll on the authorities. At the same time, we should not forget that the Polish law enforcement authorities tried to cool down the OKO.press’ enthusiasm, among other things they abused their power towards this independent medium by harassing journalists and carrying out illegal searches in order to obtain journalistic materials.²⁷

An element that clearly demonstrates the engagement and civic character of the presented website is the emphasis on cooperation with readers. As it has been already stressed, one of the OKO.press website’s missions is to reveal any irregularities and scandals related to operations of the public institution, as well as publicizing corruption, nepotism, cronyism and other abuses of those in power. It would not have been possible without the help and engagement of the society, the members of which encounter misuse of powers in the workplace or in everyday life. However, the editorial staff, being aware that subsequent regulations implemented by the Polish authorities, making the surveillance of citizens easier, does not encourage cooperation with media, made a secure and anonymous inbox available to its readers – “SYGNAŁ” (SIGNAL). What is important, it was the first editorial office in Poland to do this, using an Internet tool that protects both the communicated contents and the identity of the informants.²⁸ It can be clearly seen that the editorial office cares that the persons sending information about any abuses or crimes committed by the people in power do not only feel safe, but are actually provided with this security.

ruszyl-serwis-oko-press-patrzacy-na-rece-wladzy-w-redakcji-dziennikarze-z-gw-polityki-tvn-i-tok-fm [accessed: 14 April 2022].

²⁵ *O nas*, OKO.press 2022, <https://oko.press/o-nas> [accessed: 14 December 2022].

²⁶ Grand Press – an annual prize awarded from 1997 by the nationwide journalistic monthly magazine “Press” for the best Polish press, radio and TV journalists.

²⁷ E. Siedlecka, “Policja przeszukała mieszkania dziennikarzy OKO.press i zabrała materiały dziennikarskie”, *Polityka.pl*, 2018, <https://www.polityka.pl/tygodnikpolityka/kraj/1774768,1,policja-przeszukala-mieszkania-dziennikarzy-okopress-i-zabrala-materialy-dziennikarskie.read> [accessed: 12 April 2022].

²⁸ “Jak oceniamy prawdę i fałsz”, OKO.press, 2016–2019, <https://oko.press/oceniemy-prawde-falsz>. [accessed 14 December 2022].

The OKO.press contact box is available in the TOR browser,²⁹ allowing for anonymous access to the internet. The readers can leave their accounts of various irregularities and abuses of those in power, documents, pictures and videos on the “SYGNAŁ” page. The materials are encrypted and transferred over the TOR network. Only the investigative journalists from OKO.press have access to those materials, but they also do not know who the sender of the message is, unless the sender disclose this information themselves. It is important that even then the informant – according to the press law – has the choice of whether to reveal themselves in the OKO.press articles or remain anonymous for other readers.³⁰

Darknet that the above-mentioned TOR browser is a part of is popular among journalists and political bloggers, especially in those countries where censorship and political prison are common. Online anonymity allows the people, also the informants, to communicate with their “sources” and publish contents without being afraid of their security. The readers can use the same anonymity to access the information published in a local network, which is blocked by various agencies, created for that purpose, operating mainly in authoritarian or totalitarian regimes.³¹ The activists use the Darknet also with a purpose of free self-organization, without being afraid of the intervention from the authorities that they oppose.³²

The above suggests that full anonymity is possible on the internet, although we often hear some information that all we do on the internet may be easily identified. This is undoubtedly right, and an average Internet user associates using the Darknet tools with something complicated, unreachable, with comprehensive procedures and super-fast hi-tech computers.³³ However, it turns out that using the Darknet is not particularly complex (at least to some extent) and it does not entail the need to invest in any technological innovations. TOR browser gives the user a much greater potential for anonymity in the virtual space, can be used to surf the web while providing the user with additional protection against unwanted traffic observers, and above all it protects the user against hackers, various forms of online espionage, collection of

²⁹ TOR is a network that prevents network traffic analysis and consequently provides users with almost anonymous access to internet resources.

³⁰ “‘Cebulowy ruter’ przeciw cenzurze internetu w Rosji. Czyli pora na Tora. I na Snowflake!”, OKO.press, 20 March 2022, <https://oko.press/tor-przeciw-cenzurze-internetu-w-rosji> [accessed: 14 December 2022].

³¹ Q. Wang, G. Xun, G.T.K. Nguyen *et al.*, “Censospoof: asymmetric communication using ip spoofing for censorship-resistant web browsing”, *Proceedings of the 2012 ACM conference on Computer and communications security, ACM*, 2012, pp. 121–132, www.researchgate.net/publication/221672885_CensorSpoofing_Asymmetric_Communication_with_IP_Spoofing_forCensorship-Resistant_Web_Browsing.

³² A. Klimburg, “Roots Unknown—Cyberconflict Past, Present & Future”, *S&F Sicherheit und Frieden*, no. 32, issue 1, 2014, p. 2.

³³ M. Majorek, “Darknet. Ostatni bastion wolności w internecie”, *Bezpieczeństwo. Teoria i praktyka*, issue 4, 2017, pp. 85–96.

personal data without the user's will and consent, and of other sensitive information.³⁴ The tool also gives you the opportunity to visit websites published anonymously on the web, which are inaccessible to people surfing the virtual space in a traditional way. This is one of the most frequently used features of the browser.³⁵

The OKO.press website's structure is very clear, and a reader can easily find any topics that are interesting for them. The whole thing is divided into seven main tabs: about us, investigations (OKO.press conducts reliable journalistic investigations; vets the activities of politicians and officials, publicizes corruption, nepotism, cronyism; intervenes in cases of obstructing access to public information; reports on court trials), true or false (OKO.press checks whether politicians are telling the truth; it analyses the statements of politicians, senior officials, church hierarchies, leaders of social movements, and each verified statement is discussed in more detail in the article), analyses and surveys (OKO.press publishes analytical texts on economic, demographic and social problems; popularizes studies and reports of non-governmental organizations, scientific circles, think tanks, independent media; it orders its own and discusses other opinion polls), events (the portal publishes articles on current political events, abuses of power, acts of social resistance), audio-video (here you can find reports and documentaries, live reports from events, editorial discussions, podcasts), support us. An additional tab appears for the election time #OKOnaWybory (#OKOforElections) (where election programs are analysed, election campaigns are evaluated, results of polls are published or election results are commented on). It is even easier to reach specific materials using the "Our Topics" panel prepared by the editorial team, where we can choose from the following keywords: scandals, education, ecology, economy, history, women, church, culture, LGBT+, media, nationalism, NGO, disability, opposition, police and services, social policy, foreign policy, human rights, animal rights, propaganda, protests, judiciary, refugees and immigrants, power, elections, health.³⁶

The fact-checking logic of the OKO.press journal

It is worth taking a closer look at selected texts published on the portal. The authors decided that in order to illustrate and prove the engaged character of journalism in OKO.press it will be appropriate to look closer at the tab on the website called truth or false. A short time interval was chosen – few days before Russian invasion of Ukraine till the end of march 2022.

³⁴ *Ibidem.*

³⁵ M. Spitters, S. Verbruggen, M. van Staalduinen, Towards a comprehensive insight into the thematic organization of the tor hidden services, [in:] *Intelligence and Security Informatics Conference, 2014 IEEE Joint*, ed. J.E. Guerrero, Danvers, MA: IEEE Computer Society, 2014, pp. 221–222.

³⁶ OKO.press, <https://oko.press>.

In the “Truth and false” tab, OKO.press checks whether the politicians tell the truth. A “falsometer” is used for this purpose, based on 12 principles:

1. We analyse statements of politicians, senior state and local government officials, church hierarchies, leaders of social movements, leaders of influential organizations, leaders of economic life, etc. We do not analyse statements of media people, artists, bystanders, anonymous opinions in social media, etc.
2. Every day we search through public speeches, party and governmental documents, media, social media, etc., for statements worth checking.
3. The choice is based on whether or not the statement:
 - Is verifiable, whether we can reach information that will allow to assess it;
 - Refers to facts, describes events, gives figures, etc;
 - Considers an important issues and/or the speaker is a relevant figure;
 - Is catchy, confirms a stereotype, may infect the mass imagination;
 - Is in such a form that the receivers find it hard to decide whether it is true or not without having any deeper knowledge.
4. We follow the rule that at least one third of the attention is paid to the statement of people outside the ruling group.
5. We assess the statements with the ‘Oko falsometer’, which can indicate six states:
 - False – manifestly contradictory to facts;
 - Rather false – there is some truth in it, but the whole is contradictory to the facts and/or the context is misleading;
 - Half-truth – rather factually correct, but no important information is available;
 - Almost true – in fact, it is this way, but it is not precise enough;
 - Truth – the statement is true, there’s evidence to prove it;
 - The ‘falsometer’ is breaks down – absurd, insinuation.
6. Furthermore, ‘Oko’ awards two ‘distinctions’:
 - *Koziołek matolek*³⁷ – for statements that are exceptionally foolish, proving lack of elementary knowledge or orientation in the subject matter;
 - *Dyzma*³⁸ – for insulting, ruthless statements, manipulation of the truth.
7. We take context into account.
8. We assume that when making a statement, a politician (a public person) should present facts that support it. Evidence lies with whoever informs/discloses information to the public.
9. While verifying whether a given statement is true or false, ‘Oko’ provides factual arguments, figures, statistics. We refer to the sources we use.

³⁷ Literary character created by Kornel Makuszyński and Marian Walentynowicz in one of the first children’s picture stories in Poland

³⁸ *Nikodem Dyzma* – fictional literary character. The title character of the novel “*Nikodem Dyzma career*” by Tadeusz Dołęga-Mostowicz and its subsequent adaptations.

10. We try not to impose our assessments and we are open to criticism of our work. We update the assessment when something important changed. We accept suggestions, corrections and hints. In justified cases we publish corrections and apologize to those who we misjudged. Each correction of an assessment is written on the primary version, and it remains visible.
11. Even if we use a lighter tone or a humorous title, we analyse as reliably and honestly as we can.
12. We discuss every assessment in a team, and we also use the help of experts in a given field if we need it.”³⁹

Considering the above, since the beginning of the war in Ukraine (February 24, 2022), OKO.press has not ceased to fight fake news and has been trying to reveal false information to Poles, which is largely necessary for maintaining relative peace in the face of ongoing war. Particularly noteworthy is the construction of the new section devoted to the war in Ukraine. This department is called “Goworit Moskwa”. It is devoted to reporting on and analysing every slice of Russian propaganda presented daily in the government media. The analysis presented in the indicated section shows the point of view of the recipient of the message, which has been manipulated for years (the assumption is that it is the average Russian watching government TV). OKO.press focuses on specific terminology, showing its enormous strength. Here we are talking about denazification, special operation, defence of the Russian-speaking population. Added to this we have the anti-Christian character of the defenders of Ukraine, who are compared to the occultists and the servants of Satan.⁴⁰ On the one hand, it may seem absurd, but OKO.press perfectly explains this type of aberration, which gives answers to questions about the possibility of denying obvious facts. This denial of facts on the Russian side is carried out in an extremely well thought out and exceptionally organized manner. The “Goworit Moskwa” series is an excellent example of a reliable refutation of fake news and an in-depth analysis of each sentence uttered by the aggressor.

In the context of spreading disinformation, great concern was caused, inter alia, by reports of fighting and a fire at the Enerhodar nuclear power plant, which raised concerns about radioactive contamination in Europe. After the fact checking procedure was carried out, OKO.press showed that today nuclear power plants are built in such a way that they are not threatened by fires or, for example, aircraft falls, and that the fire in Enerhodar did not affect the reactors at all.⁴¹ Subsequent reports related to the

³⁹ “Jak oceniamy prawdę i fałsz”, *op. cit.*

⁴⁰ A. Jędrzejczyk, “Goworit Moskwa, 10 uzasadnień zniszczenia Mariupola i zabicia jego obrońców”, OKO.press, 20 April 2022, <https://oko.press/goworit-moskwa-10-uzasadnien-zniszczenia-mariupola> [accessed: 20 April 2022].

⁴¹ “Największa elektrownia jądrowa w Europie płonęła po rosyjskim ostrzale. Bać się? Wyjaśniamy”, OKO.press, 4 March 2022, <https://oko.press/najwieksza-elektrownia-jadrowa-w-europie-plonela-po-rosyjskim-ostrzale-bac-sie-wyjasniamy> [accessed: 14 December 2022].

radioactive threat said, among others, about the need for Poles to obtain Lugol's iodine fluid. Pharmacists reported that people were buying up liquid from pharmacies en masse. Journalists proved that Ukrainian power plants are too far away for a radioactive cloud to reach Poland, and that Lugol's iodine liquid can be very harmful to some people, especially when used without medical supervision.⁴²

OKO.Press also denied the words uttered by the Russian President Vladimir Putin in his speech on February 21, 2022, in which he stated that "Modern Ukraine was entirely created by Russia, or, to be more precise, by Bolshevik communist Russia." Journalists proved that this information was false and clearly emphasized that the Ukrainians created their own state in 1918.⁴³

Another topic in the OKOPress True or False section is the issue of Russian coal and its import by Poland. The newspaper specialists analysed, among others, statements by Paweł Szrot (Poranek TOK FM) on March 25 and by Speaker of the Senate, Tomasz Grodzki (statement to the Supreme Council of Ukraine) on the same day. The first statement assumed that Poland no longer imports coal from Russia and that was considered as a half-truth. It was explained that the available data show that the state and state-owned companies do not buy coal from Russia. At the same time, it was recognized that the Polish government had not done enough to push Russian coal out of the market so far. On the other hand, Grodzki's statement, who explicitly stated that the government imports Russian coal, was found to be false after a fact checking inquiry by journalists. Similarly to the above – yes, Poland has a problem with Russian coal, but it is not brought by the Polish government or state-owned companies. It is done by private entities, and coal is burned in small heating plants and domestic boiler houses.⁴⁴

One of the popular arguments preached in the public debate, that Europe could not afford an embargo on Russian energy raw materials, was also refuted. This claim was found to be false. Yes, some economies will lose at first, but they will be able to adapt quite quickly, and the financing of the Putin regime is much more dangerous.⁴⁵

Both the "Goworit Moskwa" section and the True or False section refer to high standards in the context of examining irregularities and inaccuracies in the media

⁴² "Płyn Lugola – pić, czy nie pić? Nie pić, bo może zaszkodzić! I nie ma zagrożenia radioaktywną chmurą", OKO.press, 4 March 2022, <https://oko.press/plyn-lugola-pic-czy-nie-pic-nie-pic-bo-moze-zaszkodzić> [accessed: 14 December 2022].

⁴³ "Ukrainę stworzyła komunistyczna Rosja? Było inaczej. Pokazujemy, jak Putin fałszuje historię", OKO.press, 22 February 2022, <https://oko.press/ukraine-stworzyla-komunistyczna-rosja-bylo-inaczej> [accessed: 14 December 2022].

⁴⁴ "Rząd zapowiada embargo na rosyjski węgiel. Do przyszłej zimy już trzeba się przygotować", OKO.press, 29 March 2022, <https://oko.press/wegiel-z-rosji-w-polsce> [accessed: 14 December 2022].

⁴⁵ "Obecne sankcje to za mało: czas odciąć ropę i gaz z Rosji. Europa poradzi sobie bez nich", OKO.press, 18 March 2022, <https://oko.press/rosja-na-razie-nie-bankrutuje-czas-na-sankcje-na-ropie-i-gaz> [accessed: 14 December 2022].

coverage. In the present situation, when hybrid and conventional war is waged, the analysis and interpretation of the message, as well as the translation of hidden content is a necessary condition for maintaining proper social awareness. We are talking about Poland, but similar initiatives probably arose or are being created elsewhere. Working in accordance with the patterns described above gives a chance to create a solid counterbalance to the wave of Russian disinformation that is present in social media around the world.

Final remarks

At a basic level, contemporary engaged journalism is practiced in the virtual space, and it is a significant change and an example of improving the ways of communication and cooperation with community members. This is journalism that has been reformulated in a way – from the (one-way) function of broadcasting, the focus is shifted to the community and the content is communicated in two directions. The message is now a kind of a flow, a form of conversation with the community, and the messages are more relevant, responsive and they reflect the interests and needs of the community. In this case, OKO.press absolutely meets the above requirements, and what is more it also fits into the model of missionary journalism, which requires the authors to have particular predispositions, especially when they deal with topics that are inconvenient for the representatives of the establishment. Another element that confirms the thesis is a business model of the OKO.press portal, which is based on grants and community funding. There is no doubt that a website which relies on engaged investigative journalism needs significant resources for the reliable implementation of the topics under investigation, and therefore this model, although in line with the principles of participatory journalism, may prove difficult to be maintained in the long term.

The important element of the original assumption which gives rise to most of the doubts when it comes to the civic character of the discussed portal, namely the professionalism, is undoubtedly necessary for the quality and reliability of the published contents. It is often pointed out that engaged, civic journalism does not go hand in hand with journalism practiced by professionals. Nevertheless, the analysis of the content published on the discussed portal and the parallel analysis of the current political situation allows us to state that this untypical model of journalism is extremely valuable to citizens. The model of information management presented by OKO.press, assuming an in-depth analysis of the content and exposing false assumptions and statements by the rulers, both in Poland and in the international arena, should be assessed positively. Indeed, this type of publisher seems necessary from the point of view of maintaining properly functioning mechanisms of democracy and preventing the spread of fake news and mass disinformation. The

professional and engaged approach to the investigated issues allows the citizens to feel sure that the presented information is reliable and to keep the hope that the strongly undermined democratic mechanisms that guard the freedom of expression are used to the maximum extent for the public good.

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Information management and engaged journalism in the conditions of manipulated mainstream media transmission – OKO.press as the example
Abstract

The article presents an internal fact-checking procedure which in the opinion of the authors is a mandatory procedure for journalists, an important and necessary stage in a journalistic routine. The good practice is that the journalists do internal fact-checking every time they publish a news piece. Based on their decision-making patterns, they select the method of fact-checking or – unfortunately – sometimes skip this stage. We called these “fact-checking logic” patterns as a part of general media logic. In this article, we present the fact-checking logic of a Polish press title published online since 2016, OKO.press, which, in the authors’ view, is an excellent example of reliable journalism practiced to the benefit of the public. Particular attention was paid to information management methods: obtaining, verifying and presenting information. Nowadays, there is enormous urgency for reliable and at the same time engaged journalism practiced to the benefit of the social and civic interest. The authors assume that, in order to speak about journalistic craftsmanship in the above categories, we need to combine the elements of both the engaged and civic journalism known from common definitions and to guard the professionalism. This is the only combination that can provide an antidote to manipulation and disinformation. The case study was of a qualitative nature, and it was preceded with research review and theoretical deliberations on the social engagement in the era of new media. The main goal is to present and analyse the activities of the OKO.press journal in the context of combating disinformation spread in the media dependent on the Kremlin’s authorities.

Key words: information management, engaged journalism, fact-checking, civic interest, independent journalism, disinformation