

Original Strategies for Building the Sender's Reliability in the Polish Technology Blogosphere on the Example of the "Kuba Klawiter" Channel on YouTube

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ABSTRACT

Scientific objective: The purpose of the paper is to determine how technology bloggers ensure the communication independence necessary when conducting information-related activities that affect the purchasing decisions of recipients. **Research methods:** The implementation of the indicated goal was carried out by a case study based on the analysis of the content of the "Kuba Klawiter" channel on YouTube. *Results and conclusions:* As a result of the conducted research, it was found that technology bloggers construct their own reliability based on a clear distinction of advertising content in created messages, conclusion of partnership and sponsorship agreements only with companies that do not provide technology, personal authenticity, and a certain degree of convergence of their activities with rules of modern journalism. **Cognitive value:** The presented research can be a starting point for further analyzes devoted to changes in the perception of the status of bloggers and journalists in a network environment, as well as the transformations of the Polish media market occurring as a result of the development of individualized mass communication.

KEYWORDS

blogs, technology blogosphere, mediamorphosis, YouTube



Interest in media statements about technology seems naturally related to the development of technology and the increase in public interest in using it in everyday life (Kolasa, 2001, p. 109). In fact, education, work, and even health increasingly depend on the degree of technological competence, and the recipients are somehow forced to be “up to date.” Their social status, but also their lives in general (“Lo and behold”, 2016), depend on how computer equipment and the Internet are used (“Wykluczenie cyfrowe w Polsce” 2015, p. 3). It is not surprising then that there are many communication channels dealing with technology. Daily newspapers (e.g. *Gazeta Wyborcza*, *Rzeczpospolita*) and weeklies (e.g. *Polityka*, *Wprost*) have their technology columns, as well as monthly magazines and specialist periodicals (e.g. *CD Action*, *Computer World*, *Linux Magazine*). TV stations distribute programs about technology (e.g. “Technologiczny koniec świata” TVN Turbo), and the Internet has many institutional and social platforms dedicated solely to these issues (e.g. Nt.interia.pl, Tech.wp.pl, Portaltechnologiczny.pl, Antyweb.com). Add to this all the messages prepared by the marketing and public relations departments of technology supply companies, such as product websites or moderated groups of their users and fans, as well as the non-media views of local opinion leaders (family, friends).

The coexistence of such different channels, assuming a certain level of thematic convergence, raises the basic question for recipients: Which sender to trust? The question is difficult because some users use this group of messages only when seeking opinions and advice on a specific product, and therefore—occasionally and not on purpose. Meanwhile, like any other communication activity carried out in the media, the creation of materials on technology is an activity conditioned by many external and internal factors that can negatively affect the quality and reliability of content made available by broadcasters. One of such incentives is the need to achieve or maintain financial stability, which, according to the creators’ opinions (Worsowicz, 2017, p. 442), makes media employees much more susceptible to the influence of advertisers. This observation is confirmed by the analysis devoted to the multidimensionality of corruption in the media (Nowakowski, 2017, pp. 133, 137) and research on the understanding of the profession of journalist (Barczyszyn-Madziarz, 2019, p. 76), according to which 20.4 percent of journalists in Poland, regardless of the medium represented and the subject matter implemented, see nothing wrong in cooperation with the promotion departments of external companies. Meanwhile, it is the autonomy that is considered the most important criterion for assessing the professionalism of broadcasters (Szot, 2016, p. 371).

Publicized cases of violations of professional ethics, closing down further specialized magazines, including highly recognizable magazines like *Chip* and *PC World* (Kowalski, 2017; Wirtualne Media, 2018), combined with growing trust in online broadcasts (Fletcher, Kalogeropoulos, Newman, & Nielsen, 2019, p. 101), may lead recipients to search for bottom-up communication channels about technology. The departure from institutional media proves both the validity of claims about the loss of the monopoly on “describing and interpreting the world” by professional media (Doktorowicz, 2015, p. 86), as well as Poulet’s triumph of information (Poulet, 2011). Above all, however, it draws attention to new and more popular forms of presenting specialized content, such as technological video blogs hosted on YouTube.

According to the new media theory (McQuail 2012, pp. 153-156) vlogs do not have a clearly defined ownership structure and can be used in any way (without any plans or contracts). This significantly hinders the identification of information flow paths dominating within them and negatively affects the ability to manipulate and control by external entities the messages made available through them. Video bloggers, although they do not work as representatives of editorial offices (Nożewski, 2015, p. 37) and do not perceive their own communication activity as opposing the activity of institutional media (Więckiewicz-Archacka, 2016, p. 42), they may

seem more independent, and information, comments, and reviews they provide, more reliable. However, contrary to these expectations, vloggers are not free from external influences and “do not guarantee the truth” (Rettberg, 2012, p. 115). To find out about it, just look at the titles of advisory literature devoted to them, e.g. “ProBlogger: Secrets for Blogging Your Way to a Six-Figure Income” (Garrett & Rowse, 2012), “How To Blog For Profit: Without Selling Your Soul” (Soukup, 2017), “Trust, or the Currency of the Future: My Way From Zero to 7 Million From a Blog” (Szafranski, 2018). One of the most recognizable Polish youtubers, Krzysztof Gonciarz (2012), even claims that the financial success of the blogger translates into the quality of his / her content, because thanks to the funds obtained from cooperation with companies he is able to create more better videos (p. 66).

Of course, this type of motivation cannot be attributed to all broadcasters. As in the case of traditional journalism (cf. Donsbach, 2016, pp. 18–19), despite the prevailing voices about the fall of credibility of vloggers, among the huge number of authors and materials they disseminate, examples of their professionalism can still be found. Technology bloggers who want to provide valuable messages to recipients, and at the same time make a living from their communication activities, are forced to look for new ways of gaining the trust of viewers. One such strategy was proposed by Kuba Klawiter, a presenter on TVN Turbo, the owner of the Klawiter Media production group and a video blogger.

Case Study—Research

The next part of the paper is a case study based on analyzing the content of the “Kuba Klawiter” channel on YouTube, which aims to identify the way in which the reliability of a technology blogger in Poland is built. According to the accepted hypothesis, vloggers are able to gain and maintain the trust of recipients similar to those of institutional broadcasters.

The research sample was made up of public videos made available on the above-mentioned channel in the period from October 1, 2013, to August 31, 2019. Based on a preliminary analysis that showed the presence of repetitive publishing series on the blog (37 playlists, 25 cycles), 63 videos were classified for further research, which corresponds to 20 percent of all materials available on the channel. The selection used the principle that the series of up to 10 videos represents one video (last published), series up to 20—two (first and last), and above 20—three (first, middle and last). In addition, nine clips not assigned to any cycle or list were included in the sample. The unit of analysis was the audio and visual layer of videos, as well as the accompanying captions. All materials classified for analysis were viewed twice with a weekly interval. There was also a transcription of verbal statements referring to the author’s reliability (fragments revealing factual errors and methods of working with sources), traditional media and sponsored materials. According to the website regulations (YouTube 2019), it was not possible to download and secure the videos on a private disk.

Based on the review of literature devoted to blogging and modern journalism, three criteria were distinguished, which were used when assessing the collected research material: (1) forms of commercial cooperation of the vlogger with external entities—content sponsorship, advertising, and product placement are promotional activities that require due diligence and ethical standards by both parties to the contract, ignoring this requirement may be associated not only with a reduction in the effectiveness of the planned campaign, but also with the loss of credibility of the blogger (Mazurek 2008, pp. 84–94); (2) personal authenticity of the vlogger—the reliability assessment in the blogosphere is based not on verification of the professionalism of the sender, but on individual feelings of recipients regarding his / her honesty (Rettberg, 2012, p. 116); (3) convergence of vlogger’s communication activity with journalism—blogging and journalism

intersect, *inter alia*, when vloggers intentionally create messages that meet the requirements of journalistic statements (see Blood, 2003).

Commercial Cooperation

In a situation where 37.4 percent of Internet users are looking for information on products and services they plan to purchase on blogs (“Rola blogerów i youtuberów we współczesnym świecie” 2016, p. 27), the issue of independence of technology bloggers from the influence of producers and suppliers of reviewed technologies seems to be the key criterion for assessing their reliability in relation to recipients. Unlike traditional journalism, the independence of vloggers from advertisers is not required by law (cf. Journal of Laws 2018 item 1914 Article 12 paragraph 2) nor does it result from the independence of the media they represent (Szot, 2016, p. 376). The level of their sovereignty seems to be the consequence of individual moral decisions and a number of organizational and production activities aimed at providing video bloggers with freedom of expression on the one hand, and external financing sources on the other.

In the case of the “Kuba Klawiter” channel, at least four ways of conducting commercial cooperation can be distinguished, which can be considered as conducive to a positive assessment of the credibility of the blogger and the materials he creates.

First of all, Klawiter rarely cooperates with external entities (13 cases out of 63 videos analyzed), and if he does, he does not consistently cooperate with companies responsible for production of technology. His partners are chain stores (OleOle!, Media Markt, x-kom), comparison websites (Ceneo), telecommunications service providers (Netia) or banks (Santander Bank Polska). Information about the partner is given publicly—both in the caption accompanying the video, and in the material in which the vlogger presents the reasons for establishing cooperation, e.g. “How do I get the money for the trip? I go there mainly for my money, but Ceneo also added a bit. It turned out that we have a common mission—they also do not like selling reviews” (Kuba Klawiter, 2018a). In the announcement of the “#whatisbetter” (Pol. “#colepsze”) series, Klawiter explains that the adopted model of business cooperation allows him to freely test and compare technologies, without the risk of interference by external entities in the content of created messages: “I can compare such equipment (...) to any other equipment and no manufacturer will tell me how to do it and therefore I will be more independent” (Kuba Klawiter, 2015a).

Secondly, if the contract concluded with the company requires placing promotional content in the program, the sponsored fragment is limited in time and is clearly visually marked (with the frame with the inscription “Sponsored material” or information boards “Paid advertisement” / “End of paid advertisement”). In addition, the “monetization” of the video containing it is disabled, which, according to Klawiter, protects the recipient from incurring double costs for receiving the content provided by him: “We turn off (...) advertising in the video, before the video, so as not to pull money out of the viewer twice, (...) if we got money for the video, we don’t want to collect it for the second time” (Maciej Orłoś, 2019). The form of promotional messages posted is also noteworthy. These are not ready ads provided by the sponsor, but videos prepared by the YouTube channel owner and his team. Their character is adapted to the vlog style visually (e.g. advertisements in the “Tech Week” series, like any other material presented in this program, consist of a presentation of the view of the web browser screen with the partner’s offer and the blogger’s verbal commentary attached to it) or on content level (e.g. sponsorship material “The Wheel of the Lowest Price Guarantee” in the reports from MWC 2019 is based on the abstract humor and pastiche of the game “Wheel of Fortune”).

The third procedure confirming the integrity of the sender is also a warning for companies that do not share the ethical principles adopted by it. Vlogger publishing on the channel maintained

evidence of extortion and tampering of producers providing him with their equipment for free, and therefore the assumption of reliable reviews. In the “Tech Year 2017” video, Klawiter provides the content of the GoClever distributor email, in which the company representative complains about skipping the review authorization process and directly asks about the possibility of editing it (Kuba Klawiter, 2017a). The facilitator informs that he is publicizing this matter because he first encountered this situation and describes it as a “scandal” and “pathology.” He also asks other bloggers to separate reviews from advertising. The described event, apart from drawing the attention of viewers to the disputable behavior of the technology creators, strengthens Klawiter’s image as a person fighting with influence and caring for his recipients.

The last identified action raising the credibility of a vlogger is that he does not take up topics that are not directly related to his interests, and whose undertaking would make him more susceptible to external suggestions. In the analyzed period, Klawiter informed the recipients that he refused to participate in the premiere of the Nissan Leaf, because he did not know enough about the automotive industry to be able to speak honestly about electric cars: “From my material I would only learn how to drive a car” (Kuba Klawiter, 2018). In turn, when a year later he puts a record of travel in these types of vehicles in the material, he asks viewers not to make any buying decisions based on the video he made, because he expresses only his subjective feelings.

The pursuit of specialization observed here is, according to some journalists, “the only way to gain a position in the environment and build credibility” (Worsowicz, 2017, p. 439). However, as theorists believe, “focusing on interesting personalities of journalists-reporters specializing in selected fields or the activity of controversial bloggers leads to consent to combine information and journalism into one stream” (Kozioł, 2015, p. 71), which may threaten implementation by assumptions of the factual pact. The assessment of vloggers’ reliability, however, does not depend on the degree of their professionalism, but on the individual beliefs of Internet users regarding their integrity, which Jill Walker Rettberg describes as “personal authenticity” (2012, p. 116).

Personal Authenticity

Building the identity of the media brand and the community organized around it is the basis of the success of modern media (Borkowski, 2014, p. 20). However, today the media brand is increasingly not the medium, but the employees representing it (Godzic, 2016, pp. 70-71). The situation is no different in the videoblogosphere dominated by the “cult of individualism”: “It is not only content that matters—users watch the film because they are interested in the next recording of a given author” (Rudzińska, 2015, p. 110). Therefore, the author should not only provide decodable and interpretable messages based on facts verified to a greater or lesser degree, but also take care of their attractiveness and subjectivity, and above all their own diversity. That is why, among the basic activities of the blogger-sender, self-promotion, and self-expression are mentioned (Więckiewicz, 2012, pp. 200-228). Revealing the creator’s identity, discovering the views and values behind him / her, does not only lead to an increase in his / her recognition among viewers. Belief in a specific personality translates into an assessment of vlogger’s credibility.

Kuba Klawiter’s identity as a vlogger is most clearly manifested in the way the author behaves in front of the camera. The video blogger assumes the role of a presenter known from traditional media. Like TV announcers, he sits at a large table, shown in medium or half-plan view, thanks to which his facial expressions can be read. The changes to the full frame result from the nature of the materials he makes—the need to show the whole figure during tests or the adopted format (“Tech Show”). Implementation procedures are complemented by correct diction, proper narrative pace, and fluency in the way of passing between individual messages, which prove a high level of sender’s professionalism. However, a YouTuber’s mediagenicity

does not correspond to classical conventions (Lisowska-Magdziarz, 2015, pp. 287–288, 292–296). The video blogger breaks them, creating a unique collage from individual fragments. With the exception of aestheticization, therefore, in Klawiter's programs we will find: objectification (displaying professionalism and knowledge, everyday attire not drawing the users' attention from the topics taken up); subjectivization (rich idiolect, high representation of fatal statements); redundancy (a large variety within the series and individual episodes, characteristic, which can be regarded as an inappropriate sense of humor, using variable, playful and metadiscursive images as the background); ordinariness (colloquial language, directness at the addressing level, information on planned trips, fatigue, etc.).

Belief in the blogger's honesty, in addition to professionalism in the way of mediation, also supports appropriate substantive preparation and the lack of fear related to expressing one's ignorance or pointing out mistakes made as a result. In his programs, Klawiter confesses to ignorance: "I do not know. I hope I am not telling you nonsense" (Kuba Klawiter, 2018b), "I do not know much about them, so I won't lie to you" (Kuba Klawiter, 2018c). When he makes a simple factual error, e.g. he gives the wrong price or does not remember all the data from the technical specification of the characterized equipment, the unfortunate fragment is not removed from the program, but at the stage of editing short video is added to the videotext messages that simplify or supplement the messages. In case of more serious mistakes, the author corrects in subsequent programs and attaches to them a personal comment explaining the reasons for the error.

Kuba Klawiter can also be recognized by some recipients as the face of a technological program called "A New Gadget," broadcast in the years 2013–2019 by TVN Turbo. The image of the expert built in traditional media can affect his perception on the web. However, considering the viewer's comments cited by the vlogger indicating that they are not interested in this type of media offer, e.g. "Dude, I have not had a TV for 5 years, so what is up" (Kuba Klawiter, 2017b), this supposition cannot be treated as certain. The more so that Klawiter in blog statements strengthens the beliefs of the recipients about the dubious attractiveness of television materials, e.g. "Television is a place where different people do various weird things" (Kuba Klawiter, 2019), "on TV they broadcast various harsh things" (Kuba Klawiter, 2015b). He exposes his attitude to television as a medium even at the language level, using clear presupposition he talks about "watching TV," not television. At the same time, which may arouse sympathy and strengthen the image of a blogger as a reliable broadcaster, Klawiter criticizes the unethical behavior of technology journalists representing other broadcasters and admits to "novice mistakes" that diminished the quality of his television programs. He informs, for example, that when he started working at TVN Turbo, his programs included paid and unmarked product advertisements, which he convinced to resign from producers only a few years after starting cooperation (Kuba Klawiter, 2017c).

The emanations of the vlogger's personal authenticity described here complement the video deconstructing activities of showing the production process in the materials shared. In the analyzed programs, Kuba Klawiter repeatedly improves camera settings or talks to crew members outside the plan. Thanks to this, the creative process seems much less professional and less planned than traditional television productions. The disclosure of "journalistic cuisine" makes the video more accessible. By bringing the sender and recipient closer, it "favors creating the impression of intimate contact at a distance" (Lisowska-Magdziarz, 2015, p. 290), which after Manuel Castells should be called a manifestation of mass self-communication (Castells, 2013, pp. 65-66).

Convergence with Journalistic Activities

The criteria for assessing journalistic activity can be categorized in many different ways. In each of these classifications, however, there are some unchanging indicators that help recipients assess the degree of professionalism of the sender. They are: independence and multilateralism, factual reliability, comprehensibility, and attractiveness for recipients (Furman, 2016, p. 336; Michalczyk, 2013, p. 41). Adapting these criteria to Kuba Klawiter's video blog, special attention is paid not only to the previously described concern for the image of a reliable and trustworthy sender, but also thought-out selection of media forms encouraging reception and appropriate documentation of the messages presented in them.

The video formats proposed by vlogger attract formal diversity. The main series implemented as part of the video blog consist of obligatory elements that facilitate the recognition of materials that make up the cycle (in the "Tech Show" and "Tech Week" programs it is the lead) and optional, responsible for changes in the narrative method, used genre patterns, etc. Dominant the form of expression present in Klawiter's films is commentary and review, and therefore patterns that assume high subjectivity of the argument.

Despite the individualization of the regular message for the blog, the analyzed materials also show care for proper documentation of the messages transmitted. The whole team, including people responsible for finding information about new technologies, sometimes works on the preparation of Klawiter movies, as we learn from the vlogger's statements or thanks to the presence of colleagues in his video. Their selection of content can be seen most clearly in the "Tech Week" cycle, which is a weekly summary of technological events. During a video lasting several minutes, which resembles a TV news service, the recipients are notified on average of the 15 most important events (from 3 to 23 in one material). What is more, almost each of the information provided is illustrated with a screenshot of the website, which is the source of vlogger's knowledge, and the URL links pointing to these websites are provided in the video captions.

The sender's reliability, as well as his ability to compile various data, is also demonstrated by the presence of tests and comparisons in the analyzed videos. As a reviewer, Klawiter presents viewers the properties and functions of the characterized gadgets. When the features of the reviewed technologies can be represented not only in words, but also in images, the frame is brought closer to the described product so that the viewer can independently assess the presence of the properties mentioned by the blogger. In other cases, the reviewed equipment is subjected to various, sometimes non-obvious tests, e.g. the resistance of the CAT S60 phone to high temperatures is checked using a kitchen oven (Kuba Klawiter, 2016), and the durability of screens and smartphone casings tested in the "Tech Show" series—for with the help of a toy tank. The confrontation of products with similar technical parameters is similar. The reviewed equipment is combined with each other at the same time or with a time interval. In the second case, the creator uses objective criteria during the tests. For example, small electric vehicles were compared in terms of range offered, maximum speed, weight, and price, and telephones and cameras—in terms of the possibility of photo-video in day and night light.

Summary

Technology video blogs, like most bottom-up communication channels, seem to be free from mainstream business obligations. They give the impression of an authentic and at the same time a more personal form of transferring knowledge and opinions on new technologies. However, the progressing process of professionalization of the blogosphere, and with it the increase in the recognition of some authors, made these platforms as susceptible to external influences as

other means of mass communication. That is why vloggers who want to keep the audience built on the belief in their creative independence are forced to develop new ways to maintain and confirm their own integrity, because those known from traditional media do not always meet the conditions of mass self-communication.

The autonomy of technology reviewers on the Internet requires above all a clear separation of information and reviewing activities from advertising. For this purpose, bloggers may not undertake to implement topics inconsistent with their specialization, do not enter into marketing cooperation with technology companies, and when they use external sources of funding—clearly mark all sponsored materials (both in the audiovisual layer of the video, as well as the accompanying signatures). Notifying the recipients about attempts to violate their independence and publicly referring to ethical standards adopted by them will play an equally credible role. All these efforts can be strengthened by consistently built personal authenticity. The image of the sender based on a set of substantive competences, mediation skills, and technical and formal measures aimed at showing the video production process, are conducive to blurring the communication distance resulting from the mediation of the message. This makes the video blogger closer and more real, as if he / she were a good friend of viewers. The assessment of its credibility may be seriously difficult because of this, because the recipients may at some point depend primarily on maintaining regular contact with the sender, and not on the critical perception of the content provided by him / her. Therefore, if a vlogger wants to be considered reliable and refute this explicit objection, he / she can direct his / her communication activity towards journalism, which includes, among others, the presentation of current and attractive messages supported by reliable verification of sources and care for the intelligibility of messages based on them.

Technological video bloggers who adhere to the presented rules have a chance to get the status and trust of recipients similar to those of traditional broadcasters. Especially in a situation where the credibility of vloggers is increasingly being questioned and the media market they represent is not stable. By simplifying the processes of message selection and eliminating the schedule, vlogs can perform information functions almost on an ongoing basis, responding to both the real needs of recipients and the pace of technological changes taking place around them.

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