Chapter 28. A letter to the editor, Hyde Park, graffiti on a wall or a garden? Whose technological and semantic space is co-created by the user-generated content in the Polish Internet?

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1. Introduction: Polish youth (multi)media tradition

In this paper, we attempt to present the metaphors ascribing – or, more often, failing to ascribe – responsibility for the modern online hate speech in the context of digital genre-communication forms. Our starting point, in the world of memes and microblogs, is the tradition of Korczak's media education.

Janusz Korczak, the famous Polish doctor and educator, executed during World War II, made observations on his contemporary media. He claimed that all media in a given cultural area resemble the media addressed to the youth, therefore the condition of newspapers may be judged by the condition of children's and young adult press. This view expressed by Korczak is known from the notes of his long-time secretary, Igor Newerly.[1] If we adopt Korczak as the patron of deliberations on media[2] – including those on the hate or contempt speech present in the media – the key question should be: what are half a million, or even up to a million Poles, especially the young ones, doing each month at the website entitled Chamsko.pl?[3]

They certainly communicate there, using the meme code which they know, and the hate speech typical of the teenage angst is often one of the elements creating new forms of speech. Communication in the Internet requires other competences than in the other media. The youth express themselves through the newly created genre-communication forms, and even though the latter are based on previous models, they constitute the template and the first reference point for the native born users – the digital natives.

The issue of popularity of Chamsko.pl was discussed within the framework of the "Liczymy się z Polakami" cycle[4] on the basis of the data from the Polish website measurement.[5] The methodology of the latter is based on several sources. It is definitely

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[1] I. Newerly, *Żywe wiązanie*, Czytelnik, Warszawa 2001.

[2] Cf. M. Filiciak, P. Toczyski, *Korczak. Aktualizacja*, "Dwutygodnik.com" 2012, vol. 95.

[3] Cf. P. Toczyski, *Tak zwana mowa nienawiści w internecie: poszerzenie perspektywy o pominięte teksty badawcze i prasowe*, in: D. Bychawska-Siniarska, D. Głowacka (eds.), *Mowa nienawiści w internecie: jak z nią walczyć?*, Helsińska Fundacja Praw Człowieka, Warszawa 2013.

[4] P. Toczyski, *2,7% internautów zażywa "codziennej dawki chamstwa"*, "Duży Format", 14 August 2013.

[5] Megapanel PBI/Gemius, September 2011–March 2013.

not ideal, but it is used in the Polish Internet market to measure the audience of websites. The data quoted at the time unambiguously state that in September 2011, the website was visited by 552 thousand "real users", i.e. Polish Internet users (the number corresponded to 2.94% of the Polish Internet user population) and in December 2011 – by 1.1 million (5.84%). In March 2013, the website was visited by 541 thousand "real users".

The audience fluctuations are not tantamount to the gradual elimination of content presented on the site from the Web. The site "Chamsko.pl", with its telling name ("chamsko" means "rude" in Polish), is just a symbol of the media visited by the young. And as a symbol, it allows to draw attention to the issue of the condition of the media as such, in confrontation with the abovementioned opinion by Janusz Korczak, which we shall return to towards the end of this paper.

2. Hateful memes in digital space

What new genre-communication forms do young Internet users make use of on the Chamsko.pl website? As we stated above, they communicate through Internet memes, a "viral" part of the online culture. According to the definition suggested by Limor Shifman, memes are a group of digital items sharing common characteristics, created with awareness of each other; and (c) were circulated, imitated, and transformed via the internet by multiple users.[6] The limits of the commonly adopted definition keep expanding: it includes both funny pictures captured spot-on with the relevant commentary, short animations in the form of GIF files, videos shared by recipients who belong to Internet communities. Memes are described by Internet users as online phenomena, good ideas, catchy concepts, humor, zingers, viruses, graphic commentaries, graphics with a caption and, increasingly often, as Internet poetry. The prevailing form is a combination of pictures and words within a single communication, therefore the sense of the message follows from the intersection of two semantic fields.

The Chamsko.pl website is positioned in the Google search engine with a motto "Website including *rude* pictures, jokes and all things *rude*! Your daily dose of rudeness." What do the memes published on that platform look like? One of them is entitled "The Cripple".[7] It consists in a screen presenting a fragment of conversation between two people, one of whom is easily recognizable due to the photograph posted on the profile, showing a young boy on a wheelchair. He initiates a conversation by addressing another person: "Mateusz, you don't know shit about rap ;]". The comment posted in response states: "Nor do you about walking :>". The screen also presents the number of "Likes" for respective utterances. The first one gained 4, the second one – as many as 48.

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[6] L. Shifman, *Memes in Digital Culture*, MIT Press Essential Knowledge, Cambridge 2013.
[7] http://www.chamsko.pl/65918/Inwalida, access: June 2015
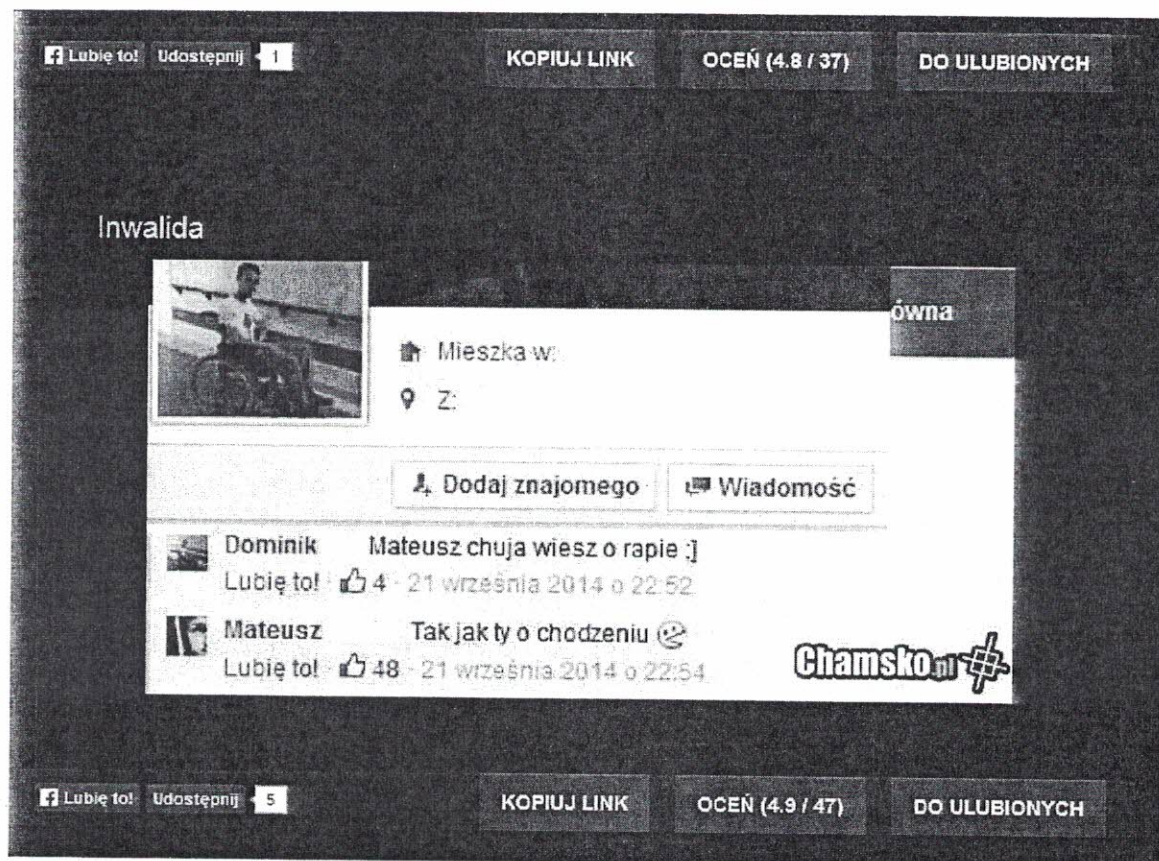
Screen from the Chamsko.pl site http://www.chamsko.pl/65918/Inwalida, access: June 2015

Meme as a genre is based on simple formulas, in terms of both graphics and narration. It is created on the basis of situational jokes or surprising concepts. The element of surprise which is generally used is based on irony and humor. We have to do with the mocking ethos (the relationship between irony, satire and parody was discussed by L. Hutcheon.[8] However, in the case of Chamsko.pl, the humor is based on the use of swearwords, discrimination and other veiled forms of hatred. A very high proportion of memes on the site may be perceived as racist, anti-Semitic or xenophobic. Native born users see the site as a source of entertainment, a way to spend their leisure time, friendly fun, creative activity and distribution of humorous content.

Why hasn't the highly popular Chamsko.pl website provoked any interest and critical reflection thus far? We claim – however, without having any studies regarding meme perceptions to support our thesis – that this genre is perceived in an entirely different manner by the young Internet users (who effortlessly recognize that form and its communicative functions) and by those for whom the Internet is a secondary medium. As we see it, the older generation does not understand much of memes. The jokes used in the online convention typical of memes often allow to conceal hate speech. The use of humor undoubtedly has therapeutic properties – it allows to tame the reality and to

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[8] L. Hutcheon, *Ironia, satyra, parodia – o ironii w ujęciu pragmatycznym*, in: *Poetyka. Wersyfikacja, stylistyka, wiersz i proza*, vol. 1, Warszawa 1997, pp. 166–199.

cross boundaries in a safe manner. The question is: where do the boundaries end and we imperceptibly enter the area of hate language? Memes, as a new genre-communication form, due to their structure and poetics, undoubtedly make it easier to cross that boundary.

Thus, the creation and reception of digital genre-communication forms reveal digital competences which may be relevant for mutual understanding between people. New genres are not just objects of aesthetic perception. They are an important and significant mass social phenomenon as a mean of intra-generational communication and as a challenge for digital inclusion work. Proponents of the New Genre Theory postulate stretching the concept of "genre" onto the whole sphere of social communication situations. After Bachtin they argue that "We speak using only certain genres of speech (...) Genres of speech are given to us in almost the same way as the native language, which we use without difficulty even before the theoretical mastery of grammar."[9] "A genre (...) is treated as an abstract theoretical construct (*conceptus mentis*), a text model including invariable and variable characteristics, regulated by usage (convention, habit, norm). This concept is often placed in the area between the system (abstract model) and its actual occurrence as text – in the norm area. The genre is then treated as a template inter-subjectively existing in the communication competence of the members of a given community in a given culture, which – even though it undergoes transformations following historical and cultural evolution – has a codifying effect."[10]

3. Responsibility for user-generated content within digital genre-communication forms

One of the basic media for the young is the general online medium based on the user-generated content and genres. The categories of "user-generated content" (UGC) and the "user-generated genres" (UGG) supposed by as (which we describe as digital genre-communication forms – DGCF) include in particular micro- and macroblogs and memes, as well as comments under texts, sometimes distinguished from the posts in the form of threads on forums or posts on social networking sites. The distinctions referred to above may be further specified, but for the needs of the deliberations that follow, it suffices to remark that UGC may have textual, graphic and audio-visual nature. Today, the physical, logical and content layer of the Internet[11] enable users to publish any kind of content created by themselves – or by others. Regardless of the saturation of UGC

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[9] M. Bachtin, *Estetyka twórczości słownej*, translated by D. Ulicka, Warszawa 1986.

[10] B. Witosz, *Tekst i/a gatunek. Jeden czy dwa modele*, in: D. Ostaszewska (ed.), *Gatunki mowy i ich ewolucja*, vol. 2, Katowice 2004

[11] L. B. Solum, M. Chung, *The Layers Principle: Internet Architecture and the Law*, "U San Diego Public Law Research Paper" 2003, no. 55, http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=416263.

with respective categories, it is worth pointing out that it is the UGC that forms the basic of the so-called Web 2.0.[12]

The new DGCFs (digital genre-communication forms) require new skills from those who would like to be engaged in communications. The determinants allowing to recognize specific genres are now phenomena which genology has never taken into account to such an extent. Researchers have dealt with message structure, stylistic determinants, subject matter.[13] What also needs to be factored in now are media and communication situations.[14]

In Table 1, we show two levels of creating and receiving DGCFs.

Table 1

Technology-related and meaning-related levels of creating and receiving DGCFs

Creation and reception can have two levels:	Creating DGCF	Receiving DGCF	Typical attribution of responsibility
Level 1. Outside the text (technology-related)	– Formal organization (a **publishing frame**, which allows for a specific visual organization of the content),	→ on the part of technological solutions provider/publisher/platform owner	
	– organization of **social circulation** that enables dialogue between the senders and their audiences.	→ on the part of technological solutions provider/publisher/platform owner and the Internet user	
Level 2. Inside the text (meaning-related)	– Strictly connected to **semantic comprehension** of logo-visual texts.	→ on the part of the Internet user and their communicative competence	

UGC, perceived together with the relevant technology as Web 2.0, is usually distinguished in business practice from the content referred to as "professional" or "quality", created by entities for whom such creation – increasingly often referred to as "content production" – is a profession.

The distinction made above is not exhaustive, since the UGC area may contain content of a more advanced nature than the "professional" one. Nonetheless, such distinction has the advantage of categorization through self-identification. If a content producer define themselves as a producer of "professional content", it may be assumed that they perceive their legal situation differently than the entity defining themselves as "user", even though obviously, for instance, a blog author who makes blogging their "profession" is simultaneously a "user" of a blog platform. As a rule, the boundary between profession and use follows the respective layers of the Internet: the physical, logical and content one.

This, in turn, leads to a question: whose space is UGC? In the legal sense, the rights to the three layers of the Internet – physical (the server), logical (the code) and content

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[12] A. Hermida, N. Thurman, *A clash of cultures: The integration of user-generated content within professional journalistic frameworks at British newspaper websites*, "Journalism Practice" 2008, vol. 2, no. 3.

[13] W. Wojtak, *Gatunki prasowe*, Lublin 2004, p. 22.

[14] W. Bolecki, *O gatunkach to i owo*, in: D. Ostaszewska, R. Cudak (eds.), *Polska genologia literacka*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, Warszawa 2007. pp. 216–218.

(the text and the picture) are held by different entities, and each ownership rights are related to various kind of legal responsibility. In the physical layer, we might usually expect such concepts (often metaphorical) as the owner, the lessor or the user, whereas the closest terms in the logical layer would be licensor and licensee, and in the content layer we would probably attribute responsibility to a person perceived as author, editor or publisher. We use the conditional mode due to the lack of known research analyzing the condition of social awareness regarding the Internet and its division into the three layers, as well as the related framework of social acceptance or the awareness of the legal framework for operation of such layers. The awareness may, of course, be subject to reconstruction on the basis of discourse, especially on the basis of specialist or self-reflexive texts, published principally online, on websites for Internet professionals.

4. Metaphors used with regard to user-generated content and genres

For a sociologist, the aspect more interesting than the analogies referred to above is responsibility in the social sense, or in other words: who do the communities perceive as responsible for UGC? Since we are discussing the content layer – "user-generated content" – the question of responsibility needs to be asked with regard to the persons managing such content, and it would be: who is the author, editor and publisher in Web 2.0?

The metaphors used with regard to UGC will help to answer this question. The sources where the metaphors appeared were quoted in detail in the supplementary materials for the post-conference publication by the Observatory of Media Freedom.[15] Here, we are going to further develop their interpretation.

Metaphors which are used to describe online communication attempt to identify the texts created in the Internet through terms such as: "letter to the editor", "Hyde Park" or "graffiti on a wall" and apply both to intra- and to intertextual factors, since they refer both to the information medium and to its semantic meaning.

The first metaphor is graffiti on a wall, discovered in the report on the "Internet culture of abuse" (with a question mark in the title), elaborated for Interactive Advertising Bureau Polska.[16] The report, occasionally using the metaphor of graffiti on a wall, attempted to prove that hate speech only occurs sporadically in the UGC. Such claim, if substantiated, would be favorable for the business model based on pay-per-impression advertising. It is assumed that the owner only makes available the wall on which the graffiti appears. The wall has neither an editor, nor a publisher, the creative functions are fulfilled exclusively by the author.

However, the discussion regarding "rudeness" in the Internet usually concentrates around the axis dividing the "old" media from the "new". The persons connected with

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[15] P. Toczyski, *Tak zwana mowa nienawiści...*, op. cit.

[16] *Internetowa kultura obrażania?*, academic editor K. Krejtz, Ośrodek Przetwarzania Informacji, Warszawa 2012.

the "old" media prefer to use the letter to the editor metaphor with regard to UGC.[17] The persons connected with the "new" media rely on the Hyde Park metaphor, probably referring to the Speakers' Corner, where everyone can say what they want without any consequences.[18]

The "graffiti on the wall" and "Hyde Park" metaphors are definitely favorable for the online advertising business based on the pay-per-impression model. The pay-per-impression model, i.e. settlements for the publication of advertisements depending on the number of page views, also applies to UGC. The content accompanying the advertisements is irrelevant in this model. Even if it consists in "contempt speech" or "hate speech", the advertiser usually does not control it, whereas the publisher and the intermediaries in advertising sales make a profit.

On the other hand, the "letter to the editor" metaphor would be less favorable for such a neutral pay-per-impression model. If forum comments were selected on a similar basis as letters to the traditional, "old-style" press editors, the volume of published content would decrease. Less content would mean less page views and therefore – less advertising space for pay-per-impression advertisements.

The "Hyde Park" metaphor includes an implied, indirect waiver of responsibility: it underlines the fact that the platform for UGC only constitutes infrastructure and as such it only pertains to the physical and logical layer – and, as a result, carries no responsibility for the content. This metaphor also suggests that not every speaker propagates hatred. A similar message appears in the "graffiti on a wall" metaphor: the implied consequence of this metaphor is that not every graffiti is offensive. This observation, true in principle, also results in an almost total waiver of responsibility for the content – as for the content of the graffiti which, in the Polish legal and social system, does not require removal by the owner.

The "letter to the editor" metaphor suggests that the editors are responsible for the selection of the published materials and therefore, at least partly responsible for their content. The metaphors used by the admirers, or supposed admirers, of the "old" media include, apart from the normative "letter to the editor" metaphor, also such terms as "cesspool":[19] it is a descriptive metaphor, which carries certain normative meaning as it is stylistically marked (implying that the cesspool needs cleansing).

5. Instead of conclusions: UGC as a garden – another metaphorical attribution of responsibility for memes

The dilemma recurs: what metaphors should be used to determine the issue of responsibility for hate speech in the Internet in a conclusive manner? Is it enough to state

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[17] J. Żakowski, *Chamstwo hula w internecie*, "Gazeta Wyborcza", 10 August 2009.

[18] M. Olszewski, P. Wujec, *Cenzura nie łagodzi obyczajów w internecie*, "Gazeta Wyborcza", 10 August 2009.

[19] K. Varga, *Forum nienawistników*, "Duży Format", 20 August 2009.

that the percentage of contemptuous or hateful content within the entire UGC area is relatively small, supporting the claim with the "graffiti on a wall" metaphor,[20] and to regard the UGC space as the Speakers' Corner at the Hyde Park? It would appear that such metaphor does not solve the problem reflected in the longing for the mechanisms known from the press, such as letters to the editor – or even for cleansing or draining, as follows from referring to the online UGC as cesspool. The quality of discourse is defined by more than the quantitative description of the small percentage of offensive utterances. To realize that, it is enough to imagine a social or official meeting, disrupted by a single sender of hateful messages.

Determining the relevant metaphors may be assisted by reference to the Janusz Korczak's idea mentioned in the introduction. Korczak was a UGC practitioner six decades before the Internet appeared: his work with the young editors of "Mały Przegląd" had "proto-Internet" characteristics. In the milieu inspired by Korczak's perspective, the metaphor of UGC as a garden appears.[21] And every garden requires a gardener. It remains open for discussion who assumes the gardener's task and what kind of media education may favor the formation of such gardener-like attitude. The metaphor implies assuming responsibility at one's own initiative, but it does not attempt to attribute responsibility in the legal sense.

So far, the metaphor of UGC as a garden has not become widespread in media communication, nor in public relations communication of Internet publishers. It may be worth confronting Korczak's little-known thoughts on the media with the publishing and business practices of the latter. In the approach inspired by that metaphor, the responsibility for the text, typically attributed to the user (cf. table 1) would also apply to the owner of the publishing technology and framework.

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[20] Cf. *Internetowa...*, op. cit.

[21] H. Bortnowska, *Dalej czytam Grossa*, "Myślennik" 2008, http://halinabortnowska.blox.pl/ 2008/01/DALEJ-CZYTAM-GROSSA.html.

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Professionalism in Journalism in the Era of New Media

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