VOTERS IN THE FILTER BUBBLE: LOCAL GOVERNMENT ELECTION CAMPAIGN IN POLISH OPINION WEEKLIES IN THE LIGHT OF THE “ECHO CHAMBER” CONCEPT

Summary. The aim of the article is to present the results of analysis of the content of Polish weeklies in the period of local electoral campaign in the context of “echo chamber” concept. This theory assumes that media are willing to perpetuate the views and attitudes of recipients, who in turn reach for titles in which the materials are created in accordance with a political line that is consistent with their views. The study aimed to verify the hypothesis that social and political weeklies do not confront opinions and conduct discussions, but to achieve the goal of maintaining and perpetuating readers’ views and confirming their position.

Keywords: echo chamber, content analysis, socio-political weeklies, local government elections

Introduction

Despite the existence of many scientific concepts proving the huge role of the media in shaping political events and their perception by the
public, recent years bring new evidence relating to these theories. Brexit, US elections won by Donald Trump, the importance of the media in the hybrid war between Russia and Ukraine or the ubiquitous number of fake news are only selected phenomena, the analysis of which provides numerous examples of the broad scale of media interactions. Only seemingly seems that the rational use of the media allows for a good orientation in socio-political reality. In-depth research, however, leads to conclusions that the selection of sources of information we use, whether made by us or through search engines and social media, as well as our existing knowledge and beliefs have a strong impact on the perception and evaluation of political phenomena.

The concepts of „echo chamber” and „filter bubble” are valuable cognitively and conducive to conducting empirical research in the indicated area. They show that as a result of various reasons, both on the side of the media recipient and the media infrastructure, readers and viewers receive materials that confirm their knowledge, beliefs, attitudes and opinions about the world of politics. Media recipients first of all search for materials that would prove that their assessments are correct, which in turn may lead to the fact that the individual is in a metaphorical room with an echo, and thus does not receive views, evaluations and opinions polemic or critical about its position. The choice of press title, TV program or website for most media users is not an expression of the world’s case or curiosity, but a realization in line with the psychological confirmation strategy, i.e. a tendency to prefer those sources of information and opinions that confirm already

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existing expectations or hypotheses\(^6\). For exemplification, supporters of free access to weapons tend to read and prefer those sources of information that prove that such a solution has more advantages than flaws. Similarly, opponents are looking for such sources that would prove the shortcomings and threats of unlimited access to weapons.

The second of the indicated concepts, or „filter bubble” proves that the tendency to search for media confirming the recipients’ beliefs is also used by algorithms used on the Internet. Using well-known search engines, such as Google, or users of social networks Facebook and Twitter have little chance to meet entries, materials or opinions contrary to those expressed by the user. Search engines and social media using the knowledge about what has been liked by a given recipient, and in particular which topics and opinions followed for the most time, quickly create a filtering bubble. Thanks to it, the user is always in the group of topics and points of view similar to his own, and he will never be directed to different values, incompatible with his system\(^7\). In this way, the recipients of modern media are convinced that they remain in the majority, because all the sources with which they are dealing not only confirm, but deepen their thinking, which strongly shapes political views and favors their polarization\(^8\).

The purpose of this article is to try to determine whether traditional media, or Polish opinion weeklies, in the course of the local election campaign in 2018 presented their readers different points of view, or rather expecting what preferences a buyer of a given kind of weekly has, editors tried to create for them a room with an echo that will not let them hear any foreign message.

**Methods**

The conducted study used a qualitative and quantitative analysis of the press content\(^9\). The most popular Polish opinion weeklies, ie magazines addressed mainly to this part of the society, which is particularly interested

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in current political problems, were selected for the study. It should be presumed that this group of recipients is dominated by readers who take part in elections, who deliberately reach the press to get more in-depth knowledge, from what is available in daily TV news programs and to get to know wider comments and opinions about socio-political life. The research included selected Polish opinion weeklies, which appeared during the six weeks preceding the second round of local government elections, that is, on November 4, 2018. On the basis of data on the distribution of paid press in October 2018, when the study was started, a decision was made to select specific titles. The table below provides detailed figures.

Table 1. Dissemination paid jointly by socio-political weeklies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>October 2018</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gość Niedzielny</td>
<td>118 111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Polityka</td>
<td>96 372</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wprost</td>
<td>85 352</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newsweek Polska</td>
<td>82 431</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do Rzeczy</td>
<td>41 481</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sieci</td>
<td>40 178</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: own study based on the data of the Press Distribution Control Association available on the portal wirtualnemedia.pl

The weeklies „Polityka”, „Wprost”, „Newsweek”, „Do Rzeczy” and „Sieci” were selected for the study. Despite the fact that the highest distribution score was held together by the „Gość Niedzielny”, due to the specificity of this weekly, it was not taken into account in the research.

Subsequently, a detailed analysis of the content of six numbers of each of the five surveyed journals was performed. All materials that were in any way related to the issue of the local government electoral campaign were qualified for further research. Selected publications were subjected to a deeper quantitative and qualitative analysis, striving to determine in particular: what attention each weekly spent on the electoral campaign, which its participants presented most often and what tone they gave to these publications. In this way, the aim was to determine how much the reader of a particular journal had a chance to come across different views, and how far these views were uniform and reflected the magazine’s program line, which would mean that they keep the reader in the specified room with echoing views or in a bubble that filters only information with a specific tone.
Results

In the analyzed issues of weeklies, there was a significant variation between the amount of space, which magazines decided to devote to the subject of the local government election campaign. Definitely the most, because almost 50,000 cm² has been devoted to this issue by the weekly „Sieci”. Only two-thirds of this space has been devoted to the second largest weekly „Newsweek” in terms of the amount of space devoted to the election campaign - slightly above 30,000 cm². Slightly less attention was devoted to the weeklies „Polityka” and „Do Rzeczy”, while the smallest number of self-government elections was devoted to the magazine „Wprost”, slightly over 20,000 cm². Detailed data can be found in the chart below.

Chart 1. Area of publication (in cm²) devoted to self-government election campaign in the examined editions of socio-political weeklies

Source: own study.

Analysis of the content of weeklies shows that the main dividing line that exists between them is the attitude towards the ruling party, i.e. Law and Justice (PiS) and its candidates in local elections. Only one of the surveyed weeklies, „Wprost” on their pages, decided to present relatively different perspectives on a relatively even basis. Other weeklies, both in terms
of the number and the overtones of materials published in magazines, remained completely one-sided.

Two of the surveyed magazines, ie „Sieci” and „Do Rzeczy”, are considered to be conservative weeklies, which are bought mainly by later voters of the Law and Justice. The analysis of these two magazines shows that the slightly stronger effect of the „echo chamber” occurs in the first of them. It should be taken into account the aforementioned dependence, that „Sieci” devoted the most space of the election campaign from all analyzed weeklies, almost twice as much as the second of the conservative magazines, ie „Do Rzeczy”.

The „Sieci” weekly did not devote almost any place to other electoral committees, except the PiS and the main competitor, ie the Citizens’ Committee (KO). The materials related to the favored PiS took up slightly more space. An analysis of the tone of materials devoted to both electoral committees allows to confirm the outlined findings. All materials regarding the KO are critical, and all materials devoted to PiS are beneficial for this party. The „Sieci” readers are undoubtedly in the described bubble, which filters the readers’ materials so that they are only in line with their expectations.

Chart 2. Area of publications devoted to particular electoral committees in the tested issues of the weekly „Sieci”

![Pie Chart]

- PiS
- KO (PO + N)
- PSL
- SLD Lewica Razem
- Razem
- Kukiz’15
- poświęcone wielu komitetom

Source: own study.
Materials published in the weekly „Do Rzeczy” remained somewhat more varied, in which apart from materials concerning the main competitors, ie PiS and KO, there were also few materials concerning the Polish People’s Party (PSL) and the SLD Lewica Razem (SLD Lewica Razem) committee. The tone of the materials remained relatively similar as in the previous magazine. Weekly „Do Rzeczy” was slightly less frequent one-dimensional. Never published a text about the PiS, which would be negative or neutral, the vast majority put the PiS in a positive light, but a few texts were considered slightly ambivalent, because it suggested that some steps could be done better during the election campaign. However, it does not change the fact that absolutely all materials concerning KO, PSL and SLD Lewica Razem were negative and critical. This is what makes the weekly „Do Rzeczy” a magazine that allows the reader only to move in a closed room with a constant echo.

Chart 3. Area of publications devoted to particular electoral committees in the surveyed issues of the weekly „Do Rzeczy”

Source: own study.

Slightly similar in terms of the distribution of materials, two weeklies remained changeless, the content of which criticized the PiS to the greatest
extent. These magazines did not encourage voting for KO, SLD Lewica Razem or Kukiz’15, but only raised the problem of the flaws and imperfections of the candidates of the ruling party.

The „Newsweek” weekly devoted the most space on its pages to the PiS, and almost all other articles devoted to many electoral committees. All PiS materials were unfavorable for this party and its candidates in the local election. In turn, materials concerning many committees had a varied overtone, an ambivalent part, and positive and negative materials. Only in relation to PiS, the weekly was constantly critical. Such an attitude in connection with the knowledge of the letter line, which is addressed mainly to former voters of the Civic Platform and builds a strong message proving that the opposition parties are not perfect, however PiS is a threat to democracy and in principle every electoral decision is correct except for voting for the ruling party, allows the conclusion that also „Newsweek” puts readers in a sealed filtering bubble.

**Chart 4.** Area of publications devoted to particular electoral committees in the tested issues of the weekly „Newsweek”

![Chart 4](chart4.png)

- PiS
- PSL
- Razem
- KO (PO + N)
- SLD Lewica Razem
- Kukiz’15
- poświęcone wielu komitetom

Source: own study.
Another of the studied weeklies, „Polityka”, the most space, of all, because he devoted 6% to SLD Lewica Razem and PSL committees. Over 60% of the area is devoted to the PiS, and 26% to materials about many electoral committees. The only materials with positive overtones concerned SLD Lewica Razem and PSL, while all materials related to the PiS and the vast majority referring to many committees had a negative connotation. „Polityka” weekly is associated with readers with left-wing views, which are critically assessed by PiS governments, but only slightly better by the governments of Donald Tusk or Ewa Kopacz. The distance to both large parties in the weekly’s program line is accompanied by the conviction that a strong leftist party, much less conservative than the ruling PiS, should be reborn. Readers of the weekly are not in principle able to take part in discussions about the possible advantages of PiS or KO or other political groups. Readers once again receive confirmation of their views on the need to rebuild the modern left.

**Chart 5.** Area of publications devoted to particular electoral committees in the tested issues of the weekly „Polityka”

Source: own study.
The „Wprost” stands out against the background of the weeklies surveyed. Almost half of the area is devoted to the ruling party, but 22% concerns KO, 17% PSL, and 3% SLD Lewica Razem. There is no doubt that the weekly is characterized by the greatest diversity, devoting its lines to all major electoral committees. The difference between „Wprost” and other weeklies, however, is primarily reflected in the overtones of the analyzed materials. In the case of almost all electoral committees, we find both favorable and unfavorable, neutral and ambivalent texts. The weekly does not advocate on any side, a strong distance allows to even speak about the depoliticisation of this magazine, which should also be connected with the fact that the problem of local elections was devoted to it in the least. The elements of discourse are present in the pages of „Wprost”, there are visible attempts to indicate positive and negative sides of programs, concepts or positions of candidates as well as the committees participating in local government elections. As the only one among the studied magazines, it cannot be accused of repeatedly repeating the same views, constituting a room with echoes still heard by the readers.

**Chart 6.** Area of publications devoted to particular electoral committees in the tested issues of the weekly „Wprost”

- PiS
- KO (PO + N)
- PSL
- SLD Lewica Razem
- Razem
- Kukiz’15
- poświęcone wielu komitetom

Source: own study.
Discussion

The results of the presented research prove that socio-political weeklies, treated as opinion-forming sources of information, but also the level of exchange and shaping of opinions, predominantly serve only to consolidate opinions and beliefs. The vast majority of them do not try to present different points of view, collide with each other sources, build polemics. It seems that opinion weeklies use this policy, like many other media, a significant part of the press, television or internet services, in the belief that readers and viewers expect from them. Thus, a question arises that it is difficult to answer in this study whether recipients even need as much impartial information as possible, where facts prevail, not opinions, and whether they want to confront their points of view with others. A negative answer to this question is an indication that before the media and journalism there are other tasks than it had until recently.

Regardless of the local character of the conducted research, their result can be related to the specificity of the Polish political scene. Strong polarization, leading to confrontation, the tendency to seek opposites, not compromises, and the lack of readiness to listen to other voices for several years have become a permanent feature of the specificity of Polish political discourse. If we assume that similar phenomena occur also in other European countries as well as in the USA, one may ask questions about the interdependence of the phenomena studied and the increasing political polarization. It should be believed that both political scientists, security specialists and the media should seek answers to these questions and doubts in their research.

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