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Contents

Sławomir Soczyński

🆔 https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2664-6833

@ slawomir.soczynski@upjp2.edu.pl

The Pontifical University of John Paul II in Krakow

ROR https://ror.org/0583g9182

Editorial

The diversity of ethical issues in the media cannot be reduced to a simple catalogue of individual professional dilemmas or normative transgressions. It constitutes a dynamic and internally contradictory field of tension between universal ethical values, institutional interests, and changing technological and cultural conditions, which together shape communication practices in the contemporary public sphere. For this reason, in-depth theoretical reflection is required—one that not only systematises and conceptualises these phenomena, but also reveals their hidden axiological assumptions and long-term social consequences. The search for solutions to ethical problems in the media requires going beyond ad hoc regulations or individual responsibility and moving towards the construction of a coherent normative framework capable of engaging in critical dialogue with media practice and adapting to evolving forms of communication. The latest issue of our journal once again brings together a wide variety of articles, all connected by the title and mission of our publication. Each of them deals with topics related to the ethics of social communication.

The first article, by Anita Hegedűs and Bertalan Pusztai, entitled *Mediatisation of health discourse: A focus group study in Hungary*, addresses a topic of undeniable importance, as it highlights the dangers associated with misinformation, digital inequalities, and the commercialisation of health—all of which have a tangible impact on individuals' health-related decisions and the overall effectiveness of healthcare systems. The authors explore how both traditional and digital media influence perceptions of health and patient–doctor relationships, particularly in the context of the Internet and Web 2.0 as dominant sources of health information. By analysing the mediatisation of health discourse across three generations of Szeged residents, the study examines how young, middle-aged, and older adults perceive health, engage with media, and practise self-medication. Through qualitative focus group interviews, the authors investigate generational differences in health media consumption and varying degrees of scepticism towards information sources.

In his article *Film as a medium for communicating models of fatherhood: Selected examples*, Father Michał Legan analyses how contemporary cinema presents diverse models of fatherhood—from patriarchal to emotionally engaged—illustrating their impact on the characters' identities and family relationships. The study focuses on how film, as a medium particularly sensitive to the human psyche, conveys the metaphysics of the father's absence through image, rhythm, sound, and silence. The author uses a psychological-hermeneutic

method of film analysis, combining a close reading of selected works with a cultural and phenomenological perspective to show how cinema not only tells stories about fatherhood, but also enables audiences to experience it. This topic is undoubtedly of great social and cultural significance, as it touches upon the crisis of fatherhood, its symbolic absence, and the emotional consequences of that absence in the modern world.

In her article *Fact-checking as a quasi-media institution*, Klaudia Rosińska analyses the activities of the Demagog portal during the 2023 election year. She thus addresses the important topic of the role of fact-checking organisations within the media system and their impact on the quality of public debate. The subject of her research is not only the effectiveness of these institutions in combating disinformation, but also the risks of bias, confirmation effects, and cognitive mechanisms that may weaken the reception of corrections. The author treats fact-checking not only as a journalistic tool, but also as a socio-cognitive phenomenon with an ambiguous institutional status. The study employs qualitative content analysis of 599 false information cases, classifying the topics and argumentation strategies used in their refutation.

The final article approaches ethical issues from a historical perspective. In the article *The Polish Section of Vatican Radio, 1940–1941: Ethical and security challenges*, Paweł Rytel-Adrianik analyses the activity of the Polish section of Vatican Radio during World War II, emphasising its enormous importance as the voice of the Church in the face of the Polish nation's suffering and religious persecution. The discussion focuses on the ethical dilemmas and threats associated with broadcasting under occupation, especially in the context of political pressure and decisions to restrict programmes critical of the German authorities. The author takes a historical and communication approach, revealing mechanisms of self-censorship and editorial decision-making in the tension between the pastoral mission and the safety of listeners. Analysing the content of preserved transcripts of broadcasts from 1940–1941, he identifies shifts in tone, subject matter, and communication strategies of Vatican Radio towards Poland.

Finally, I would like to draw readers' attention to Kamila Rączy's review of Professor Paweł Urbaniak's monograph entitled *System odpowiedzialności mediów w Polsce na tle innych systemów medialnych* (*Media accountability systems in Poland compared with those in other countries*). It is undoubtedly one of the most significant recent publications in the broad field of communication ethics. Its scholarly merits have been recognised by both the jury of the

dr Paweł Stąpka Award of the National Broadcasting Council and the jury of the Award of the Committee on Social Communication and Media Sciences of the Polish Academy of Sciences.

Anita Hegedűs

ⓘD https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2848-2318

@ hegedus.anita@szte.hu

University of Szeged
ROR https://ror.org/01pnej532

Bertalan Pusztai

ⓘD https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3440-827X

@ bpusztai@media.u-szeged.hu

University of Szeged
ROR· https://ror.org/01pnej532

Mediatisation of health discourse: A focus group study in Hungary

Anita Hegedűs, Bertalan Pusztai

Abstract

Mediatisation of health discourse: A focus group study in Hungary

The aim of this study was to investigate the mediatisation of health discourse from 2017 onwards. We conducted a focus group study examining participants' perceptions of health, attitudes towards health and self-medication, and media use habits related to health and health-related issues across three age groups (young, middle-aged, and elderly). A qualitative research design was employed: six focus group interviews were conducted at the Department of Communication and Media Studies of the University of Szeged, Hungary, in the winter of 2017 and the summer of 2018. The results of the interviews indicate that participants held a generally positive view of the work carried out by public healthcare employees on an individual level, while simultaneously expressing a negative and sceptical attitude towards public healthcare as a system from the outset. Among other factors, word-of-mouth communication reinforces the widespread perception that doctor — patient relationships are undermined by the sharing of experiences on the Internet.

Keywords: mediatisation of health discourse; focus group research; digital health literacy; self-medication and online information; generational differences in media use

Framework for research interpretations

At the Department of Communication and Media Studies of the University of Szeged, we conducted research on the mediatisation of health discourse from 2017 onwards. As part of this project, we carried out a focus group study examining participants' perceptions of health, attitudes towards health and self-medication, and media use habits related to health and health-related issues across three age groups (young, middle-aged, and elderly). The present study focuses on the latter aspect, presenting the phenomena and behaviours of the research participants in the context of health, healthcare, and media use.

In this research, both traditional mass media and the Internet — including newer Web 2.0 channels — are treated as media. We adopt the World Health Organization's definition of health, according to which "health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being" (WHO, 1946, n.d.).

Accordingly, health is interpreted in relation to all three dimensions: physical, mental, and social health.

The methodological limitations of the present study primarily stem from the nature of the qualitative method employed, namely focus group interviews. While this approach enables an in-depth exploration of participants' attitudes and motivations, the findings are not statistically generalisable to the entire population under study. The limited representativeness of the sample, the potential distorting effects of group dynamics, and the subjective nature of the data all require that the results be interpreted with appropriate analytical caution.

Research on the relationship between health and the media

The penetration of the Internet and the spread of smart devices in Hungary in recent decades have changed people's attitudes toward medicine. According to Eurostat data, the proportion of regular Internet users in Hungary aged 16 to 74 years increased from 48% in 2007 to 75% in 2018, in just 11 years (Eurostat, 2018). This means that three-quarters of people in this age group regularly used the Internet from week to week during the time of our research. Google commissioned Kantar TNS to conduct a statistical survey covering 40 countries, including Hungary. According to data, smartphone usage increased from 22% in 2012 to 65% in 2017. Furthermore, 62% of people used the Internet mainly on smartphones in 2017, during the times of our focus group research (Google, 2017). The use of smartphones has continued to increase by 2023, 71% of people in Hungary browsed the Internet using smartphones, while 29% used a laptop or desktop computer (NMHH, 2023a).

Despite these trends, television use in Hungary was still significant in 2017. According to the 2017 Standard Eurobarometer 88, Hungary still had 84% of regular TV viewers, of which 55% considered it reliable (European Commission, 2017). However, since the focus group research was conducted, this proportion has declined and shifted towards the Internet: by 2023, 73% of Hungarians watched TV daily (NMHH, 2023b). A 2011 study by the Hungary National Media and Infocommunications Authority (NMHH) found that 56% of Hungarians were most interested in health, but received too little coverage on television compared to the level of interest. Some of the above data suggest that people are more likely to search online for health news to

be more comfortable and more accurate, not to mention more likely to avoid unwanted content. Of course, it should also be mentioned that the survey shows that young people are more interested in sensational news, while older people are more interested in public affairs (NMHH, 2011).

Researchers have been talking about the digital society since the rise of the Internet and the emergence of Web 2.0. The most successful in a digital society is the one who gets the information he needs and/or transmits it as quickly and efficiently as possible, and digital technology plays a huge role in this. The Internet is the most important tool for achieving this. Deursen et al. have identified four increasingly complex stages in the nature of the Internet since the public availability of the Web: Web 1.0 enabled content to be read; Web 2.0 enabled content to be created, stored, and shared; Web 3.0 has seen the evolution of human-to-machine communication and thus the development of search engines and various forms and platforms for sharing information; Web 4.0 allows any user to have access to a personalized web interface anywhere, anytime. The Web denotes the main means of accessing the Internet. Deursen refers to this as the "Internet of Things" (IoT), which enables the control and transmission of smart devices and data over the Internet, which facilitates the development of things and thus the development of society (Deursen et al., 2019).

The digital divide between younger digital natives and the older TV population identifies a growing knowledge gap as a problem, as well as a difference in the nature of the devices. Television remains a source of information, but over the last decade this gap does not seem to be widening. This is because the difficulties of accessing digital tools and platforms seem to be disappearing, as illustrated by the above statistics, and the older generation is slowly being replaced by generations that have mastered the basic use of digital tools (Fehérvári, 2017). People use several sources of information at the same time. Therefore, we can no longer really talk about a digital divide but rather a digital gap. In this case, it is not so much a question of accessibility as of the ability to use ICT effectively. Those who use more efficient methods can access more knowledge more quickly. This is also why the European Union is targeting digital literacy education and why more school curricula are built around digital tools (Molnár, 2017).

The constant presence online and the high degree of personalisation have led to distrust of IoT devices. Sceptics see the importance of increasing the accessibility of these devices not in overcoming social differences, but, in

contrast, in increasing disparities (Molnár, 2017). The emergence of constantly innovating hardware seems to facilitate easier access to information, but the rapid release of new changes to the devices only complicates the learning of their use, limiting greater understanding and knowledge acquisition. Thus, the ever-changing differences in levels of access also generate new differences in the ability to master tools and access knowledge.

The personalisation of the online interface has also created scepticism towards the content you read on the Internet. People encounter tailored advertisements and content on a daily basis, which only reinforces the feeling that anyone can get intimate information about them through constant online contact (Deursen et al., 2019). Resistance is developing against companies that constantly collect data from users — and sell it — thus depriving them of privacy. Internet users are more likely to question the information they read, because it could easily be tailored to them for business reasons and/or to obtain data.

This sceptical attitude has also spread to the field of self-medication, often involving questioning the doctor. However, in most cases, it can also build a doctor-patient relationship. A qualitative study of 31 people by Joëlle Kivits from France found that a deeper relationship can be built between a well-informed person — someone who knows how to find information and what questions to ask to find it successfully — and a doctor, if the information found supports the information the doctor is telling. In other words, the doctor becomes a trusted source, becomes more credible, and the number of patients visiting the doctor will not decrease, even among those who are informed by the Internet (Kivits, 2009).

The Internet has given a huge boost to self-medication, as anyone can look up their symptoms to see what illness they have to combat and what methods can reduce the severity of symptoms and/or quickly eliminate the illness. Under the eEurope 2005 Action Plan, An Information Society for All, which has since been adapted and further developed several times, the European Union has been working since 2002 to improve access to information for EU citizens via the Internet and smart devices. This program includes e-Health, which aims to make it easier for people to access health information, thus reducing unnecessary tests and healthcare expenditures (COM, 2002).

The emergence of Web 2.0 has also contributed to the increasing spread of self-medication. As social media has grown in popularity, so has the number of lay experts. There are countless health-related forums, Facebook pages,

and thousands of YouTube videos offering advice on how to live healthily and how to heal oneself in alternative ways, even at home. However, the biggest problem with Web 2.0 is also its biggest advantage: anyone can create content on the Internet, and it is inevitable that users will come across false, unauthentic information.

Zsófia Bauer examines lay experts based on two models. According to the deficit model, the knowledge of the layperson always falls short of that of the expert, due to the knowledge gap between them. This contrasts with the constructivist model, which is based on the difference of opinion between the layperson and the expert. It also allows the layperson to express an opinion on things that they experience differently from the expert (Bauer, 2014). In the case of the Web, in the topic of self-medication, when the lay expert creates content, it can have a negative and a positive effect. Negative, since he or she is less likely to have the right information than a healthcare professional with a broad spectrum of knowledge. However, it can also have a positive effect, because anyone can gain relevant information about the field, institutional background, and health and health-related issues from the experience of other lay people.

Smartphone apps also greatly help with self-medication. Dennison et al. found that most of the people interviewed in their focus group interviews were happy to use a phone app to monitor their health. However, they were less likely to share their data with others or to want the app to engage with social media. Having an app helped participants find useful information, but did not encourage them to change to a healthier lifestyle (Dennison et al., 2013).

In recent years, influencers have appeared on social media. Influencers have built a reputation around their shared opinions on social media sites, which has led to a large following. They have become a role model for their followers, which they have translated into a business model: trying to get their own products or sponsored products to as many people as possible. Influencers are sellers, buyers, and merchandise in one. They simultaneously consume products and services in front of their audience, which they promote through the brand they have built (Adibin, 2016). Ideally, this is good for everyone, as the influencer and/or sponsor earns revenue and the consumer gets what they need. Healthy lifestyle influencers have also emerged on social media. They offer different diets to followers and fans and promote related lifestyles and products.

As early as 2003, Skinner et al. showed that the Internet is mostly used by young people, who are more likely to make informed and targeted searches on health issues. In an immersion study of 210 participants from 27 focus groups, they found that while young adults are less attentive to health risks, when they need quick information on an emerging medical condition, they use the Internet because it is faster than reaching a doctor. However, if they need reliable information, they prefer to visit their doctor because it is difficult to find relevant data in the information jungle on the Internet (Skinner et al., 2003).

Although there is scepticism about the Internet as a source, it is still considered one of the most important starting points for those seeking health-related content. Internet searchers use several criteria to determine what makes a health or health-related website credible. They are looking for official websites with professional design, where the author and owner can be verified and where there are links to other websites (Peterson et al., 2003). On the Internet, it is easy to check the credibility of information by finding the same information in several places (Eysenbach-Köhler, 2002).

Online health information seeking is strongly shaped by age, education, income, and digital skills. Younger, better-educated users with higher digital literacy are most active online, while older and less educated groups face more barriers. This supports treating mediatization as socially and generationally differentiated, not a uniform process (Jia et al., 2021). Ceccioni et al. (2025) also argue that digital health literacy is crucial for how different generations perceive health, make decisions, use digital tools, and engage in prevention. Generational differences in digital health literacy are seen as a major driver of health inequalities and vulnerability to misinformation. Based on a European survey data, Vicente and Madden's (2017) paper shows that eHealth skills vary strongly by age, education and socioeconomic status. Good Internet access alone is not sufficient; many people lack the skills to find, appraise and use online health information. This is a solid theoretical basis for your discussion of digital inequalities and the fact that all three age groups in your study use media, but in very different ways. Using a Hungarian sample, Papp-Zipernovszky et al. (2021) argue that digital health literacy declines with age, and that younger generations are more confident, more active online health information seekers and feel more health-empowered. Older generations make more use of health services but struggle more with digital tools (Papp-Zipernovszky et al., 2021).

Research methodology

We use a qualitative research method: six focus group interviews were conducted at the Department of Communication and Media Studies of the University of Szeged in the winter of 2017 and summer of 2018. We tried to select the interviewees so that they did not know each other. A total of 28 people participated in the interviews and three age groups were selected: young adults aged 20 to 35 years, middle-aged adults aged 35 to 55 years, and adults 55 years or older. Two criteria were established: subjects should live in Szeged and should not have any health work experience. The interviews were recorded with both a video camera and a voice recorder, with one main interviewer and two main assistants. Before recording the interview, the interviewees were informed of the key data and background of the research and were ensured anonymity, which is respected in this study.

The age of the interviewees ranged from 20 to 82 years, 15 men and 13 women participated in the interviews. All participants live in Szeged. The six groups were divided as follows: two interviews with the young age group were conducted, with a total of 9 participants (5 men and 4 women) aged between 20 and 35; two interviews with the middle-aged group were conducted with a total of 10 participants (5 men and 5 women) aged between 35 and 55; and two interviews with the elderly age group were conducted with a total of 9 participants (4 men and 5 women) aged 55 and over. Several of the interviewees were related to someone working in the health sector, but this did not influence the interviews in any relevant way.

The focus group research was conducted based on a semi-structured questionnaire: during the interview, we followed a predefined sequence of questions, but, where justified, we also allowed room for additional questions and minor topics related to the subject, in light of the subjects' answers and interactions. The interview questions can be grouped into the following major thematic clusters.

1. Image of a healthy lifestyle, Szeged as a suitable/not suitable city for a healthy lifestyle.
2. Definitions of health (who is a healthy person, what are the most important components of health).
3. Experiences and opinions about health, doctors, care.
4. Association questions (what fruit, animal, object, food would be health?).

5. Health promotion tools.
6. Self-medication.
7. Information about health and health care (press, television, Internet forums and websites, social media, pharmacy magazines, product launches, drug advertising).

As for the analytical procedure, at first, all the transcripts were read multiple times to identify recurrent themes related to health perceptions, self-medication, media use, and attitudes toward different media platforms. This initial immersion also allowed us to note age-specific patterns emerging across the three groups. Segments of text were coded line-by-line according to the meanings expressed by participants. Codes were generated inductively rather than imposed a priori, reflecting the exploratory nature of the study. Related codes were then grouped into broader categories that reflected thematic clusters present in the interview guide and in participants' responses. Coded categories were examined across the young, middle-aged, and elderly groups to identify how mediatization influences each cohort differently.

In this study, we focus primarily on health and health-related information, based on the interviews available to us. This is a multifaceted topic, which was also evident in the interviews. For this reason, self-medication, health promotion tools, and opinions about doctors and health care are often discussed.

Social networking sites and forums as sources of health-related information

A convincing majority and personal experience: Credibility criteria for young people

Younger people are the most exposed to the different platforms that can be connected to the Internet. Two main camps have emerged when searching for health-related content. One says that most forum users themselves and the design are more likely to judge authenticity, while the other is based on how factual the information is. In the first camp, the information shared by the author of the post is not the primary consideration. Rather, it is who responded to it. They place the wisdom of the majority above the knowledge of the individual. If the majority finds what is shared in the post to be true, then

there shouldn't be much of a problem with the site. This is complemented by the look of the page. Today, it is not so surprising that design lends a sense of credibility to a website, when in fact there is no necessary link between the credibility of the content and the design.

> — Well, by default, if you type something in, I think the first three rounds will have Frequently Asked Questions. So everyone has already done everything there, and everyone can answer everything.
> — Or if not, they will make up something.
> — Yeah. If I am scratching my throat, then there is really that call to the priest; let it go, it will go away tomorrow, you will sleep it off. So, it is all there. Then how you select is up to you. Obviously it is influential to some extent, if there are 30 coherent answers, it might be good.
> — There are good things.
> — I used to just laugh at it, but then there was one time when I actually found an answer. Then I felt ashamed there. You probably shouldn't necessarily condemn it all, but the bigger part of it is more humorous. (Focus 1, 11.12.2017)

> — [...] I don't know any other way, because some of them you look at and wow, it is professional, but it is well done! But it does not depend on how well they write the truth; it depends on how good their, I don't know, web designer was, and that is it. So, it is better to go into it like that. (Focus 2, 25.01.2018)

The other side compares the facts with their own experiences. If the described symptom complex matches what they feel, then the website is already credible. If not, it is discredited. The anatomy of different people is not that unique, according to them. If they are not unique, then the symptom complexes should be true for most people. If not, then the information read is discarded and a new source must be found. Especially in medicine, this is interesting: trying to make a non-exact science measurable, or exact. Healthcare is increasingly trying to treat people through standardisation rather than individual diagnostics. However, this approach has been adopted by non-health professionals: a healthy person is implicitly defined as someone whose body fits standardised parameters of weight, height, and vital signs.

> Well, I don't really know that much, because if I have a major problem, I am looking at that organ, or say if it is my muscle, I am looking at that or the ankle. What can happen

or what do you feel when? So, I try to find more general descriptions, so I don't usually read the comments, but rather a medical or biological approach. If […] the ligament is like this, then you feel this, so something like that […] I don't know that that is the maximum, so I usually put them next to each other, but obviously there are things that don't seem realistic, so I don't, but I try to aim for the facts. But not so often, but when I look at it this way, I usually do. (Focus 2, 25.01.2018)

Internet-sceptical middle-aged people and misleading advertising

For middle-aged people, the use of media platforms is relatively widespread. They use the Internet to search for diseases and gather health-related information. And they self-diagnose themselves on the basis of the data collected. However, only a small percentage of people consider the Internet content to be reliable. They tend to browse through comments in forum discussions but rarely take advice. They perceive that on these sites, all contributors share their personal experiences, and that those experiences may no longer be true for them. They are passive recipients and do not actively participate in the life of the forum.

> Well, when it comes to me, I wait and see if it goes away first, if it does not, I change my mind. The second step is to search the Internet for symptoms of the disease. Then the final is the doctor. If it is the child, then the doctor should be called sooner, at least a phone call. (Focus 3, 13.03.2018)

> I looked on the Internet once, but any [website] I looked at had all the symptoms. I gave up. I had everything. (Focus 3, 13.03.2018)

> Not because it is such a dead end. And there is so much contradictory stuff in it, I am really giving you a completely roundabout example, that they can put so much bullshit into a symptom complex that if you start to sit on it, in the end, even if I didn't feel so sick, I would end up with a terminal illness, I would end up dead. It is not worth it. (Focus 4, 16.04.2018)

For online health sites, reliability is reduced if there is a lot of advertising on the interface and incorrect language. They do not write in the comments section, but they read the reviews. Lay expertise is displayed. According to him, one subject already has such a wide range of knowledge that he could even replace a doctor.

I do a lot. I do a lot of research. [...] My experience is that many sites are very much the same. So, they pick each other off, and you read the same thing. [...] And then what is also striking is that if there is too much advertising, I don't find it reliable if there is too much. Well, the language. So that is another criterion that I can identify which of these [is good or bad]. Now, very often, if we are talking specifically, I tend to bring the home pharmacy, which I think is quite good for simple things like disease descriptions, to the level that an average lay user needs. So I think I read home pharmacy most of the time, but probably because it is certainly on the first few hits on Google. It is the one that the other sites tend to rank down. (Focus 3, 13.03.2018)

Silent Internet use among older people

Older people also tend to search the Internet, but do not give much credence to the information they find there. Some people use the Internet if they disagree with their doctor's prescription. They believe in writing where they see a credible source. One participant prefers old methods that he thinks have worked well, such as old books on medicine and medicine. For him, old books provide more credible information, even compared to the daily updated content on the Internet, which is less likely to provide outdated information.

Well, on the Internet. Google.
— Me too, although it is not good according to the doctors.
— I was convinced because I didn't want to accept that I had to take medicine for something, and I looked at a site that didn't tell me what kind of doctor it was and where he practiced. (Focus 5, 14.06.2018)

My mother has a large library. She is a naturopath and she also has old medical encyclopedias [...] from different eras. [...] in the 1950s and 1960s, family doctor, doctor in the family, but from life she had everything and she would look it up right away [...] and read some of the articles right away. (Focus 5, 14.06.2018)

So there are people who search online, but they don't do much research either, because they think it is a waste of time. It is informative, but they do not take it completely seriously. Many people think that doctors do not like people to search on the Internet because they think it would offend them and harm the doctor-patient relationship. As they do not dare ask the doctor directly about information obtained on the Internet, respondents did not

provide concrete evidence of this. They think this is based on social media channels rather than real experience.

> I don't have the patience to read these opinions, only if I notice a symptom, then if it matches what is written there, I believe it, but I also tend to believe it conditionally. (Focus 5, 14.06.2018)

> I never tell the doctor that I read this and that on the Internet, because I know that they are allergic to it. So I never say what I read about the disease. The most I do is that [...] the things that I have listed, these natural remedies, I ask about them because, as we know, at least it is common, if you can afford it, you can get it for everything. (Focus 5, 14.06.2018)

Following health and healthy trends on social media

Young people deliberately exclude health-related content from social networking sites. Sometimes their eyes are caught by a health-related news item, but you can decide whether or not you are interested by the title. Most follow diet-related sites and some famous people. Influencers are seen as credible, a kind of guarantee for a product. For example, Szafi or Krisztián Berki, who were mentioned. Szafi, for example, deals with nutrition and recipes, while the bodybuilding interviewee follows Rubint Réka or Krisztián Berki because he thinks that the advice they give about bodybuilding is worth following.

> I also follow you on Instagram, but [...] they don't fall into the celebrity category like that, but rather [...] they are influencers. More everyday people. I have always been used to watching Szafi and her products... Anyway, you have to watch them, it doesn't matter. And then I go in for my own sake. I mean, who is less well known is a girl and her partner, they had this raw vegan diet. And I don't think I could ever do that, just eating fruit and everything. They are depriving themselves of all the other earthly good things that we love. But it is very interesting that you describe how it affected your body. There are so many posts [about] how much better you feel spiritually since you are just eating fruit, and it makes you feel so much clearer, or I don't know. So I use her because she is so inspiring, she should [...]. Just knowing enough to read what she wrote and see if it has an effect one day. (Focus 2, 25.01.2018)

> Well, yes. Well part of being fit is nutrition, so I follow many bodybuilders who post pictures like this. I will not name them now because there are many of them. But if I had to

pick one person, it would be Krisztián Berki. He also posts a lot of stuff like this, which is about eating and healthy living. (Focus 2, 25.01.2018)

They do not find the articles on the Facebook newsfeed very interesting and do not follow health-related sites and forums, at most only recipes sites and posts. Only a few middle-aged people follow healthy lifestyle-related content and people on Facebook or other sites, but all but one are not members of groups on this topic. This interviewee is an active reader of several groups on lifestyle, exercise, and mental health.

Well it is about running for women, [...] they are live-streamed and include programmes tailored specifically for them. They have several websites, but I can hardly list them all [they are linked to well-known fitness gurus [...] so there are quite a few, quite a few ticked for me. And then it is really just to come up in the newsfeed and what is interesting to read, but I don't read them all, I am just kind of right there. There is something interesting about all of them. (Focus 3, 13.03.2018)

Another participant is a regular visitor to a website that contains information on running. She also used the information on the website to determine which vitamins she should take to keep her body in the best possible condition.

Futanet has short articles like this, if you are running this distance, what to take or what to eat. Say, two hours before a half marathon, you need to eat a proper breakfast. It cannot be that you go there with a coffee and then run. (Focus 3, 13.03.2018)

The use of social networking sites and forums is less common among older people. They also only look at Facebook to keep in touch with family, but they are not active actors. However, even if they use social networks, their attitude is different from what we have seen among young and middle-aged people. This seems to be the age group that takes health forums more seriously. They write about their problems and are happy to receive a response, preferably from a professional. However, scepticism is also evident here.

It has happened maybe twice in my life.
— I have had it once. And there was no response.
— [Interviewer] That is what I wanted to ask, was there any communication with the people there afterwards?

— I got an answer to one of them.

— [Interviewer] And was it from a doctor or from another patient?

— No. From a doctor. A doctor replied.

— And [name] didn't get one.

— No. I didn't.

— It seems to me now that I just happened to get a response. (Focus 5, 14.06.2018)

Health, health-related programmes, and their impact on immersion

Young people's participation and their defence mechanisms

The young generation is already beginning to move away from television. They rarely watch health-related series and programmes on TV. Yet, they could list quite a few series that were placed on a kind of reality-hyperreality axis. The more credible shows were considered realistic, and the less credible ones hyperrealistic.

Two groups have emerged in this respect. Here is where the typical defence mechanism for media violence in adults emerges. Some people get involved, get into the situation. Some said that they believed—with a bit of exaggeration—that it could happen to them at any time and therefore adopted the strategy of "what I don't know will not hurt me," i.e. they would rather turn it off than let it cause a potential psychological problem. Of course, this depends on many things: life situation, age, experience, etc.

— At Dr. House, it is harmful because you are sure to associate it with the fact that [...] there you have a disease that only three out of 6 billion people have. Well, not specifically for me, but I know people who I know who do. They are a bit hypochondriacs, and it is having a detrimental effect on those people, I think.

— I still maintain that I think people immediately project everything onto themselves, the illness, and everything [...].

— It is not good to watch when you are sick. I used to watch Dr. House when I was sick and then sometimes, oh my God, oh my God. I would turn it off because it doesn't feel good. And that is really how you take it personally. (Focus 1, 11.12.2017)

— Yeah, I am always diagnosing myself. Just that thing, it was just on Doctor House, and not too long ago, it was on a rerun on one of the channels, and the man had some kind of

vascular inflammation, but he had had to have his leg amputated. And I had a vascular problem and I said "Oh my God! Oh, my God! It still hurts sometimes because that is what I have." Wow, and so many times, when I was getting better on the main show, they told me many times how much nonsense they were saying on this show and everything, but then I remember that I couldn't even sleep. So I was completely out of it. Then of course the next day I realised that it was stupid, but I was really upset that there might be something to it. (Focus 2, 25.01.2018)

In the other camp, they prefer the defence of distancing themselves from what they have seen, trying to somehow disbelieve the information, and thus treat the fiction as fiction. Some have simply not allowed themselves to live with what they have seen. Of course, that doesn't mean they didn't enjoy the series.

—I didn't have that experience specifically while watching the series. I was a little distracted at times. I cannot remember watching a series or a film about a hospital when I was sick. I don't have one now.
You are aware [of] a film and a series. You don't have to take everything for granted. At least I think so... (Focus 1, 11.12.2017)

Television is credible, yet manipulative according to middle-aged people

For middle-aged people, television is more trusted when it is not an entertainment program about health issues. They watch health-related series and films for entertainment. Sometimes they self-diagnose based on what they are told in stories, but this is particularly rare in this age group. However, there was a broad consensus that news should not be watched, as it also gives false information.

You should not watch such series on TV because it doesn't look like the reality of doctors just zigzagging around. So far, it has been another eight and a half hours waiting to get to bed in the emergency room. You should not watch the movie or the news. (Focus 3, 13.03.2018)

However, we cannot talk about conscious search in relation to television. The majority do not search for health-related magazine programmes

or thematic channels, except two participants. They are casual viewers and mildly critical of the programs, but they enjoy them, nonetheless.

> — Life Network used to have these health promotions, little bits of whatever. If I happen to be there.
> — Yes, the Life network can be like that.
> — I like the ones where it's about food or something like that, fitness [stuff]. Yeah, Bob's got the burger buffet. He has eaten his way across America specifically.
> (Focus 3, 13.03.2018)

The experience of television

Because of their greater experiential knowledge of entertainment series, older people no longer believe that they deal with real illnesses and watch them mostly for the twists and turns and the excitement. They like them because they have a positive atmosphere and the patient always cures at the end. They are fully aware that these stories are fictions and not realistic in relation to reality, which is why they do not have the panic that was noticeable in young people.

> — No, that is what I just thought of, here we go, the mountain doctor. And there are always cases, and it is always possible to cure them, but it is a great struggle. So it is interesting, exciting.
> — [Interviewer] And have you ever had a disease or a sickness that you knew yourself from, and you wondered if I might have the same problem?
> — No.
> (Focus 5, 14.06.2018)

This is the age group that watches the most television, so most of them may occasionally come across a magazine programme on health, but they do not specifically look for it or regularly watch it. They may therefore be described as casual consumers.

> — I have watched Uncle Gyuri's tea stuff on Family Friend a couple of times, but only occasionally. (Focus 5, 14.06.2018)

> — Unfortunately, I miss most of the time, I just always have something to do and I cannot watch it. (Focus 5, 14.06.2018)

They are the most informed about the news, which is why they are also the most critical. They feel that the media paints a contrasting picture of the current state of health care compared to what they themselves experience. The news depicts a very positive upward phase of development. Many new hospitals are being built, modern equipment is being purchased, and efforts are being made to raise the salaries of professionals as much as possible. In contrast, the picture that has emerged in the minds of most of the respondents is negative, with much of the money invested in health care invisible draining away. In their opinion, investments are not being recouped because more money is being spent on communicated development plans than is actually being used for innovation and modernization. At the same time, some also perceive that there is still effort on the part of health workers, but their experiences are mixed. They list various articles and mention Dr. Tóth's TV program. Media consumption is generally not deliberate, but if it reaches them, they are happy to consume it. No specific investigation is conducted.

> I think what got me thinking is that such a huge hospital center is going to be built in Budapest. And there will be one in Buda and two in Pest. Somehow I feel that, on the one hand, we are scolding the health system — not for nothing — but at the same time there is an attempt and a will. For example, never before has so much money been spent on health care in the world as is now being spent in Hungary. It is now, so this hospital has never been built in Hungary. That is why they are doing a lot of things, and now it is a different question whether all this money is having an effect [...] I don't know. But in any case, they want to do something, so I am sure this will go ahead. And, for example, they have tried to sort out the salaries of doctors, they are going abroad to work, and all that, but I feel that there are a lot of events like this, which shows that health is not a peripheral issue at the current level of state management, even if it has a lot of faults. (Focus 6, 10.08.2018)

Brochures and advertising brochures: paper waste or necessary sources of information

Due to their age, the two groups of young people do not visit doctors and pharmacies very often, so they do not read brochures and magazines very often, except when they have to go to the doctor for some reason and have to wait a long time. What they put in their letterboxes, they just put in the bin.

I don't know. They are just like advertisements. It is actually dribbling on the bed [...] I wouldn't think it is that newsworthy. Because everything is obviously something that you either get from your peers or from the circle that surrounds you, that is where you get your information from, or you look it up on the Internet. They are more like advertising newspapers, just like any other. More like advertising. (Focus 1, 11.12.2017).

Health brochures are more common among the middle aged, but even they do not experience great benefit. Mostly, they only encounter such brochures in waiting rooms until they are called in, but mostly, they consider them unnecessary and rubbish.

Once or twice I have read such a Pharmacy magazine, but only because I do not really remember, perhaps because I was waiting in the pharmacy, doctor's office, or somewhere similar. (Focus 3, 13.03.2018)

The problem is that 70% of it is advertising. I think 70% is realistic, maybe more than that. That you can turn off at the drop of a hat on the Internet. Now the same content is taken home on paper as additional junk. (Focus 3, 13.03.2018)

However, in the elderly, browsing brochures and pharmacy magazines is now quite common. Pharmacy leaflets and publications are perceived to be for commercial gain rather than for the maintenance of health. A critical attitude is important. A conscious choice between literature and advertising is needed. Some subjects will use promotions if they advertise a product at a discount that they take daily so that it is financially worthwhile for them.

Sometimes I make use of them for that reason alone. (Focus 5, 14.06.2018)

that is what I was going to say, that when we take out the medicine, we always have the pharmacy leaflet in the bag without asking. We always take it out to Penguin, they always put a leaflet like that in. Well, they often have such big letters with different things that you look at them involuntarily, especially if you think it is important for you, so I look at them. And then I either take it or I don't, but the fact is that I do look at them. (Focus 5, 14.06.2018)

If you read the Pharmacy magazine, if you read it without thinking, you should buy all the medicines and eat them all, because they are all good for me. (Focus 6, 10.08.2018)

Health-related advertising and teleshopping

Most of the younger generation do not watch teleshopping. Some even condemn it, while others prefer to turn on for background noise. They also mention that young children may be more easily persuaded by these products. It is on in a time slot when it is practically only seen by children and pensioners, so pensioners are more likely to buy teleshopping products. But today, people are more resistant to such programs. They have seen these blocks so many times that they have exceeded the tolerance threshold. They are defending themselves against "dumbing-down" commercials. It may not necessarily be awareness, but rather that they are bored with the same structure and do not want to consume the same content over and over again.

> I used to watch it back in the day, when I used to go to work early, while getting ready and turning on the television. And it doesn't matter where you turn it on, they are on anyway. Then I say let him know! But about 99% of them are under the title of "rural naivety," and the other 1% I don't know. A potato peeler is a potato peeler; they cannot go wrong with that. (Focus 1, 11.12.2017)

Middle-aged people do not tend to watch tele-shopping product launches, but they can still list some products. But they are more likely to have heard of them than to be active consumers of such content.

Older people also do not watch teleshopping content, but like the younger age group, they also disapprove of such content. They see it as a scam. Young people's preconceptions were practically confirmed: They were not necessarily concerned with the usefulness of the products presented but with the structure of the programs they were watching.

> I cannot stand it. It is pure brainwashing. I get upset when I switch it off and then back on [...] but it is always on. To be told briefly several times would not annoy me so much, but it annoys me so much. (Focus 6, 10.08.2018)

Young adults could recall quite a few drug advertisements. The ones that stuck with them tended to be the ones that had a good story, were funny, had a memorable character, or were simply so annoying that they couldn't get them out of their heads. They cannot really remember the names of the drugs, so they prefer to remember the other details.

Yeah, that is how everyone responds. Because they are actually very bad, they are ridiculed, but [...] I can't think of any that were good advertisements. Or an ad for a useful medicine. (Focus 1, 11.12.2017)

The middle-aged people were more critical. They also mentioned story-centricity and characters meant to be funny, but they went beyond these. Participants feel that strong symbiosis has emerged between pharmaceutical companies and television in recent years. Pharmaceutical companies pay big money for advertising time on the various TV channels and in prime time. According to the interviewees, most of the advertising is pharmaceutical advertising. A respondent also noted that most pharmaceutical advertisements are aimed at women.

It's the money. That is where the money is. They cannot, in my opinion, advertise more obviously harmful products on TV. So it is always the pharmaceutical industry. (Focus 3, 13.03.2018)

I always get this impression from commercials in general that basically [...] 70% of the ads are about health things. I was just looking at the fact that the target area is women. I wondered whether I was mistaken or whether it was actually true. [...] So what the target area is... they are advertising to ladies 30+, 40+. (Focus 4, 16.04.2018)

Due to more experience, older people tend to conclude from advertising that the products advertised may not in reality deliver what the advertisements promise. If you are using an advertised product, you experience something different from what the advertisements say. Most of the time, they think that advertising exaggerates. Due to all the advertisements, none of them can get a concrete grip. They prefer to remember the product through the plot and the actors.

— There are drug commercials all the time. Too many. It is nail fungus and so on. Too much. The one the little kid sang fake at first, now it is not fake, now I remember [...].
— A lot of famous actors have added their names to the list, having to cancel a performance because they simply did not have a voice, etc. And they drank Salvus water. Well, he never worked such a miracle with me. (Focus 5, 14.06.2018)

Conclusions

In Hungary, the influence of television is still strong. As can be seen from the responses of the Szeged focus group respondents, it is still significantly involved in their daily lives in relation to health and health-related issues, but they are increasingly critical of what they hear and see on TV. Young people also watch television but prefer to browse the Internet for health-related topics. On television, they only watch health-related programmes that are entertaining or that they can associate with a person they follow and see as a role model. Middle-aged people tend to watch health TV channels for fun, as a kind of guilty pleasure, but do not follow the news there. They no longer believe in the ever-changing effects of television, which is still found in young people in relation to medical drama series and films. This disappears completely among the older generation, who have experienced a lot about health and can assess what is exaggerated and what is worth fearing.

The use of the Internet and social networks is common in all three age groups, although less so in the older generation. Young people are the most active users of social media. They most often refer to influencers whom they follow and are active shapers of some social platforms. Middle-aged people also follow social networking sites and forums, but they are passive, only readers and observers. Older people tend to use them only to keep in touch with their families. Forums are actively used only by some older people, who are happy to find what they consider credible information. The other two age groups also follow forums but tend to laugh or be horrified by the content. They do not really consider the answers of many contributors to be credible and, therefore, do not really consider forums to be reliable sources.

According to the findings of the interviews, the influence of the media can be attributed to the phenomenon that, while the participants had a mostly positive opinion of the work done by public employees on an empirical basis, they had a negative and sceptical view of public health care in general from the beginning. The shortcomings in the functioning of the institutional system were pointed out from several angles. In most cases, these failures were not only reported by people they knew but also reported in the news. They also received positive news, but this was not a dominant feature of the interviews. Health-related programs and programs in the media also have an impact on people who do not actively consume them or do not consume them at all, as the information is passed on to them by those around them. Among

other things, this word-of-mouth information also reinforces the common perception that doctor-patient relationships are harmed by the sharing of experiences on the Internet.

The pharmaceutical industry affects the elderly most of all, but we are all subjected to some level of exposure to drug advertising, partly because it is broadcast in such quantities by all media that we are unable to avoid it. The group of young people found the content to be the most ridiculous, while middle-aged people thought more about the purpose of the advertisement. They think the ads are aimed at middle-aged women with families and that they only see a lot of money behind them, not any desire to cure. In fact, it was suggested that ultimately the aim is to keep people sick at a certain level to achieve the most intense demand. They see a conflation of medicine and the pharmaceutical industry. These two age groups are not yet very well informed by pharmacy publications and leaflets, at most only when they must wait to see a doctor. Older people consider most advertising to be exaggerated, because if they use an advertised product, they experience that it has a different effect from what is advertised. But they make a lot of use of pharmacy publications, even though a critical attitude can be observed in most cases. However, none of these groups liked to be pushed to buy products that were supposed to be healthy. For this reason, they did not watch teleshopping or participate in any other product demonstrations, or if they did, it was only once and they regretted it.

If we have a look at the impact of mediatization on age groups, we can say that young adults experience the strongest effects of mediatization through their active and influential use of digital platforms, especially social media. They rely primarily on online sources for health information, engage with influencers, and evaluate credibility based on design and peer consensus. This age group demonstrates the highest degree of integration of mediatised health content into everyday practices. Middle-aged participants are influenced by mediatization in a more cautious and ambivalent manner. While they frequently search the Internet for health-related information, they tend to be sceptical of online content, perceive advertising as manipulative, and consume media passively. Elderly participants are least influenced by digital mediatization, relying more heavily on traditional media and printed materials. Nevertheless, they display both scepticism and trust depending on the source: they are more likely than other groups to use health forums in hopes of receiving expert responses yet simultaneously question advertising and the accuracy of online information. Their mediatization experience is

therefore limited but still meaningful in shaping perceptions of health care and the doctor—patient relationship.

The results show several ethically relevant patterns across age groups. First, misinformation risks are evident, especially among young participants who frequently rely on forums, influencers, and visually credible websites that may not provide medically verified information. As the findings indicate, young people often judge credibility by design or by majority opinion, while some middle-aged and elderly participants occasionally misinterpret symptoms based on non-expert content, which raises concerns about potential misdiagnosis or potentially harmful self-medication. Privacy concerns emerge from participants' awareness of personalised content and data collection practices. Young users can recognise that targeted advertisements and algorithmically tailored content shape what they encounter online, leading to scepticism regarding the motives of platforms that collect intimate health-related data. This observation aligns with broader concerns about the exploitation of user data in digital health environments. The findings underscore the ethical issue of commercial influence in health communication. Across age groups—though most clearly among middle-aged and elderly participants—there is a perception that pharmaceutical advertising dominates media spaces and often exaggerates product effectiveness. Participants can associate televised and printed pharmaceutical advertising with manipulation, overmedicalisation, and the blurring of boundaries between public health information and commercial interests.

Of course, these small groups cannot be representative of the wider population of Szeged. Since we are talking about six small groups, it was perhaps inevitable that some degree of cohesion would develop between group members during the discussions, which may have somewhat distorted their own opinions. It would be worthwhile to conduct further large-scale research using quantitative tools, mainly questionnaires, to obtain more representative results for both Szeged and Hungary.

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Michał Legan

(ORCID) https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3479-3702
(@) michal.legan@upjp2.edu.pl

The Pontifical University of John Paul II in Krakow
(ROR) https://ror.org/0583g9182

Film as a medium for communicating models of fatherhood: Selected examples

Michał Legan

Abstract

Film as a medium for communicating models of fatherhood: Selected examples

Cinema possesses a distinctive capacity to convey psychological depth — not merely through dialogue or narration, but more importantly through visual imagery, rhythm, sound, and silence. Film engages viewers on both emotional and subconscious levels, allowing for a deep sense of empathy with characters' inner lives and conflicts, often without the need for explicit articulation. In 2005, Сеанс, the acclaimed Russian film studies journal, published an article inviting readers to reflect on the portrayal of fathers in cinema. "Отцы и сыновья" ("Fathers and Sons"), a piece by Pavel Kuznetsov, presents 24 international films exploring the theme of fatherhood. Kuznetsov examines these works through the lens of their ties to biblical, classical Greek, and Freudian narratives, particularly those centred on tense dynamics between authoritarian fathers and rebellious sons. Similarly, in his essay "Wizerunek ojca w polskich mediach na przełomie XIX i XX wieku" ("The Image of the Father in the Polish Media at the Turn of the 20th Century"), Krzysztof Arcimowicz identifies emerging models of fatherhood such as "the partner and protector of the child" and "the birthing father," which challenge traditional archetypes such as "the breadwinner," "the head of the family," and "the strict disciplinarian." This typology can also be applied to the present selection, which offers a preliminary exploration of the theme through a curated set of 21st-century narrative films. The article presents a selected, chronological, and subjective overview of cinematic portrayals of fatherhood. It does not claim to be exhaustive, but rather aims to outline key directions and representations within a broader discourse.

Keywords: cinema, emotional communication, film communication, fatherhood, metaphysics of absence

In 2005, Сеанс [Seans], the renowned Russian film magazine, published a text encouraging reflection on how fathers are portrayed in cinema. In his article "Fathers and Sons" (Kuznetsov, 2005), Pavel Kuznetsov presents a selection of 24 international films, ranging from *Bicycle Thieves* (1948, dir. Vittorio De Sica), a masterpiece of Italian neorealism, to *East of Eden* (1955, dir. Elia Kazan), a classic Hollywood drama, and *The Barbarian Invasions* (2003, dir. Denys Arcand), a Canadian film. The author analyses these films in terms of their strong links to biblical, ancient Greek, and Freudian narratives concerning strained relationships between strict fathers and rebellious sons.

Referring to Hesiod's *Theogony*, an ancient religious poem describing the origins of the Greek gods, Kuznetsov argues that classical myths often depict struggles between male generations. Fearing the loss of power, fathers eliminate their offspring in various ways—through murder or exile—while sons retaliate violently. The author concludes that contemporary popular culture readily draws on these ancient Western patterns of patricide and infanticide, where family conflicts often culminate in violence and bloodshed.

To describe the contemporary epidemic of paternal absence, this article draws on the term of the "metaphysics of absence" (Kołacz, 2017, p. 86). Fatherhood is a timeless theme in culture, literature, and cinema—a reference point for identity, relationships, and memory. The absence of a father figure, whether physical, emotional, or symbolic, occupies a special place in this context. It is not merely a literal absence such as death, abandonment, or distance. More intriguing and significant is the so-called metaphysics of absence: the experience of absence that, despite its invisibility, profoundly influences the psyche, worldview, and everyday life. The father's absence is not just an empty armchair at the table; it is a kind of silence, an unspoken expectation, a constant confrontation with what *could* have been. In a metaphysical sense, the absent father does not cease to be present—on the contrary, he becomes a figure of excess. His absence is so acute that it assumes the role of presence. That which is not given organises reality more than that which is available. In this view, the absent father becomes someone almost absolute—an idea and a shadow that cannot be caught up with, but whose presence is felt in every decision, fear, failure, or need for recognition. It is a situation in which the absence of one person can create an entire emotional universe. This is what the metaphysics of absence is about: how absence becomes the foundation. The father's absence can take many forms. It may be a physically absent father—dead, spurned, or banished from family life. However, the emotionally unavailable father is equally powerful: closed, silent, or seemingly unemotional. For a child, and later an adult, the effects of both figures can be equally profound. They are often accompanied by self-blame, a sense of incompletion, and a need to mend something that has never been named. On the other hand, "unfulfilled fatherhood is a fundamental, though often unconscious, cause of the lack of happiness in a man's life" (Pulikowski, 2001, p. 95).

In many cultural narratives—from Sophocles to Kafka, from Ingmar Bergman's films to contemporary European cinema—the father appears as

an illegible, distant, and yet omnipresent figure. His absence does not sever the bond; rather, it tends to complicate it. In the absence of words and gestures, a particular kind of legacy is created. It may be called a legacy of emptiness—something children carry within them like an airtight testament.

> In today's culture, most men are influenced to some extent by the model of a passive, uninvolved, and absent father. Society too often underestimates the irreplaceable role of the father in the lives of his children. The father is seen merely as the one who provides his family with funds to run the household or to feed and clothe his children. Even more tragically, in some social circles he is considered unnecessary in the lives of his offspring. Two world wars, economic crises, militant feminism, easy access to contraceptives, the media, fashionable trends, and tight work deadlines—along with other social problems—have contributed to the fact that fatherhood is under threat (Augustyn, 2003, p. 22).

The notion of the metaphysics of absence implies that absence is not mere absence; rather, it is presence of a *different kind*. It is a relation to something that cannot be grasped, but which organises the inner world. From a metaphysical point of view, the relationship with the absent father is a relationship with the question: Who was he? Whom *should* he be? What was taken away from me, and what have I built on his absence?

In this sense, the absent father does not cease to shape. His nonexistence—whether emotional, physical, or symbolic—becomes the axis around which identity is formed. "In the traditional paradigm of masculinity and fatherhood, it was the man who created culture and reigned over everything" (Więcławska, 2009, p. 214). We can rebel against absence, attempt to replace it, contemplate it—but we cannot ignore it completely. Contemporary cinema and literature increasingly confront this experience. It is no longer about the myth of the all-powerful patriarch or the punishing hand of the father. Filmmakers are searching for the appropriate language to discuss the consequences of absence—about sons and daughters who try to understand their past before it becomes their future. Films such as Magdalena Piekorz's *Pręgi* (*The Welts*), Gabriele Muccino's *The Pursuit of Happyness*, or Florian Zeller's *The Father* attempt to touch on something much deeper than the psychology of family relationships. They explore a spiritual dimension of absence. It is there, in the most intimate sphere, that the metaphysics of absence meets reality. The absent father leaves behind more than just a flashback—he leaves behind

a question. However, the answers to this question are never simple. Perhaps that is why we, as a culture, keep asking it again and again.

In his article "Wizerunek ojca w polskich mediach na przełomie XIX i XX wieku" (The Image of the Father in the Polish Media at the Turn of the 20th Century) Krzysztof Arcimowicz notes that, alongside traditional types of fathers such as "the breadwinner," "the head of the family," or "the stern educator," which constitute the traditional paradigm of masculinity and fatherhood, there are also "the child's partner and protector" and "the birthing father"—new paradigms (Arcimowicz, 2008, pp. 124–141).

The aforementioned typology may be applied to this compilation, which aims to provide an initial outline of the subject matter based on a selection of 21st-century feature films representative of the theme. It is an authorial, selective, and chronological compilation that is by no means intended to exhaust the subject. The selection of films presented in the article is not meant as a comprehensive catalogue, but as an authorial, representative overview of how 21st-century cinema portrays fatherhood. Although the article does not explicitly enumerate selection criteria, several guiding principles clearly emerge from its thematic and methodological approach. First, each film places fatherhood at the centre of its narrative, whether through direct portrayals of father–child relationships or through the profound psychological effects of paternal absence. This absence—physical, emotional, or symbolic—forms the conceptual backbone of the analysis and reflects what the author calls the "metaphysics of absence." Second, the chosen works embody distinct models of fatherhood, corresponding to the traditional and emerging paradigms described by Arcimowicz. Thus, the selection includes authoritarian patriarchs, emotionally distant or broken fathers, and contemporary figures striving for engaged, empathetic relationships with their children. These contrasting models reveal the evolving cultural expectations surrounding paternal roles. Third, the films were selected for their psychological depth and cinematic expressiveness. They articulate inner states—fear, longing, guilt, hope—through image, rhythm, and silence, making them particularly suited for a psychological reading. The emphasis on internal conflict and emotional experience allows cinema to serve as both mirror and metaphor for the complexities of fatherhood. Finally, the list reflects cultural and stylistic diversity, encompassing European and American productions, intimate dramas and broader social narratives. This variety highlights the universality of paternal dilemmas while acknowledging their cultural specificity. Taken together,

these criteria shape a selection that is deliberately illustrative rather than exhaustive. It offers a cross-section of contemporary cinema's most compelling explorations of fatherhood, pointing to the enduring relevance — and the evolving meanings — of the father figure in today's cultural imagination.

The analytical method

The analytical method adopted in the article is an interpretive, psychologically oriented approach to film grounded in close reading of cinematic form. Rather than treating films as mere narratives illustrating social issues, the method examines how cinematic language, image composition, and narrative structure express the emotional and psychological dimensions of fatherhood. This allows the analysis to move beyond plot description toward an exploration of internal states, symbolic patterns, and relational dynamics. At the core of the method is a phenomenological sensitivity: the attempt to understand emotional worlds constructed by the films. This involves attending to moments of tension, rupture, and absence, especially where the father figure is concerned. By interpreting these elements not only as narrative devices but as manifestations of inner experience, the analysis uncovers the deeper meanings encoded in everyday gestures, unspoken conflicts, and visual metaphors. The method also draws on psychological and cultural frameworks, particularly contemporary theories of fatherhood and the concept of the "metaphysics of absence." These frameworks guide the interpretation without imposing rigid typologies. Instead, they provide thematic lenses that help identify recurring patterns, such as the authoritarian father, the emotionally unreachable father, or the father struggling toward renewed connection — and situate them within broader cultural transformations. This analytical method, combining close visual interpretation with psychological insight and cultural contextualisation, reveals cinema not merely as a reflector of fatherhood but as a medium uniquely capable of expressing these complexities.

The Return (2003)

In his debut film *The Return*, Andrei Zvyagintsev explores the theme of fatherhood — one of the most archetypal motifs in culture. However, this is not

a story about an all-powerful, wise, or protective paternal figure. It is a story about an absent father who returns in a sudden, mysterious, and unsettling manner. Rather than filling the void, he deepens the mystery. Zvyagintsev's film becomes less a psychological drama and more an existential treatise on the enigma of fatherhood—on presence through absence and the metaphysics of absence. The film follows two teenage boys whose father unexpectedly returns home after twelve years. The very next day, he takes them on a long journey to a deserted island. With each passing day, the purpose of the journey becomes increasingly unclear to the boys, and the time spent with their suddenly regained father turns into a test of their maturity and manhood. Conflicts arise between love and hate, ambition and personality, the need for authority and the desire for freedom. What begins as a fishing trip intended to rebuild—or even establish—close bonds quickly turns into an ordeal. Who is this man who appears out of nowhere? Why has he returned? Where has he been all these years? What secret is he hiding? The director multiplies questions and uncertainties, building an atmosphere of tension and ambiguity. The complex relationships between the characters, powerful performances, suspenseful and precisely constructed plot, as well as haunting landscapes, make the film truly unforgettable. The father in *The Return* reappears after twelve years of complete absence. It is unclear where he was, why he left, or what prompted his return. He offers no explanations, does not speak of his past, and does not reintroduce himself into the family's life. He enters it with silence and severity, evoking a figure from myth rather than everyday reality. For the two boys, Ivan and Andrei, his arrival is not a simple fulfilment of their childhood longing, but a confrontation with the unknown—the unknown that bears the name "father."

Zvyagintsev deliberately refrains from giving the viewer clear answers: Who is this man, really? Where was he? Is he truly their father? Is his return intentional? This uncertainty is heightened by the director's cool aesthetic, the characters' silence, and the evocative, almost biblical symbolism. The mystery of the father becomes the narrative axis of the film, and the ambiguity surrounding his identity is not merely a plot device, but a profound metaphor for the contemporary experience of losing role models, authority, and permanence of relationships. The father in *The Return* represents more than just a specific man—he embodies the void left by paternal absence. Throughout the film, it remains unclear who he was in the past and who he wishes to be now. The boys do not recognise their father in him—he is a stranger

they are expected to accept, though they are unsure whether they can trust him. This disjunction between biological fact and emotional rejection lies at the heart of the metaphysics of absence. The father's absence does not end with his physical return; rather, it becomes an insoluble mystery that leaves a lasting imprint on the children's identity.

The film shows that a father can be present in body, yet absent spiritually and emotionally—that he can return and still remain enigmatic. It is this ambivalence between presence and absence that makes *The Return* a deeply metaphysical film—full of silence, understatement, restrained emotion, and existential tension. Zvyagintsev deliberately constructs the story in a parable-like manner. Some critics compare *The Return* to the biblical story of Abraham and Isaac: the journey of father and son that ends in sacrifice. In *The Return*, this sacrifice is more symbolic—a sacrifice of innocence, of childhood, and of idealised notions of fatherhood. Ivan, the younger son, rebels, rejects authority, and refuses to accept violence and emotional distance, whereas Andrei, the older son, tries to conform. Their reactions reflect universal responses of children to paternal absence.

> Socially, it is a gradual loss of the ability to control the level of their aggression by young men and to direct it appropriately which is one of the most serious damages caused by the disappearance of initiation practices in the male world. Indeed, learning this control was one of the fundamental aspects of these practices. The effects of this disappearance are all too apparent (Rise, 2005, p. 60).

Moreover, *The Return* is not only a family story but also a social diagnosis. The film is set in post-communist Russia, where traditional figures of power, authority, and identity lie in ruins. Being a figure from the past, the father returns to a world that can no longer accept him — a world in which there is no place for him. His mystery is also the mystery of cultural emptiness, generational insecurity, and the absence of the foundations that once constituted paternal authority. Zvyagintsev's film is not merely the story of a family journey. It is a film about emptiness that wounds more deeply than presence. It is a film about a father who, although returned, remains unreachable. The director offers a universal tale about the mystery of fatherhood, about a lack that cannot be filled, and about love that could never be born. "A father's love for his child has its own unique qualities and is distinct from a mother's. It is not insignificant for a child. A father can offer them

something that a mother cannot" (Bullinger, 1997, p. 188). The mystery of the absent father — present only as a shadow, a flashback, or a fear — finds its most poignant cinematic form here.

Pręgi [The Welts] (2004)

"Under traditional notions of masculinity, men were not permitted to express their emotions. They were expected to rely solely on rational and quantitative thinking" (Arcimowicz, 2003, pp. 55–56). *Pręgi* (*The Welts*) tells the story of a young man named Wojciech Winkler. His traumatic childhood, marked by violence from his father, profoundly shaped his personality and behaviour. His father is portrayed as

> angry and frustrated, constantly critical and humiliating towards others. He is unaware of the harm he causes his loved ones. He believes he helps, but in reality, his family despises him, as his actions bring no good. In a sense, he vents his own failures, lack of success, and unresolved issues with his own father onto his family. Driven by frustration and anger, he continually belittles those around him" (Biddulph, 2004, p. 83–84).

The story begins in 1984. Wojciech is thirteen years old. His mother died during childbirth, and he is raised by his strict father, Andrzej. In an attempt to mould his son into a "real man" Andrzej uses violence as a method of discipline. Although Wojciech is no different from his peers, he suffers extremely harsh punishments for minor misbehaviour. Eventually, he decides to run away from home, unable to endure the abuse any longer.

Later, we see Wojciech at the age of thirty. He is ambitious and independent, yet he is emotionally distant and avoids intimacy. Raised by a violent father, he has become emotionally isolated, building an invisible wall around himself. He spends his time exploring caves and writing newspaper articles. His friends see him as tough, uncompromising, and withdrawn — a cynic. In truth, he hides his sensitivity and anxiety, constantly fleeing from them. "The disappearance of the father's role as a guide who helps his son harness and direct his strength, and initiates him into social life, signifies a break in the anthropological link between man and traditional masculine culture" (Rise, 2005, p. 57). Wojciech chooses solitude because it feels safer. He avoids emotional involvement, fearing that entering a relationship or starting

a family might lead him to repeat his father's destructive patterns. Even when he encounters love, he instinctively recoils, seeing in every face a reflection of his father's shadow. Over time, however, he begins to reflect on his life. He realises he does not want to follow the same path. He does not wish to die alone, as his father did. He yearns for change. In the second part of the film, viewers follow Wojciech in the present day. Now an adult, he lives a lonely life in a small flat. During a trip to the Tatra Mountains, he meets a woman named Tatiana. She is open and eager to build a relationship, but Wojciech is unable to commit. He still carries the burden of painful childhood memories that prevent him from moving forward.

The film addresses issues traditionally associated with masculinity, but they are presented through a woman's perspective. Magda Piekorz, the director, enters this world and adds a new dimension to the story. Although the protagonist's life lacks a female presence, Piekorz symbolically fills that role. *Pręgi* is a film for viewers who seek something deeper. Its unusual, original, and dramatic structure makes it worth revisiting. While this theme is deliberately exaggerated and somewhat relegated to the background, its impact is unmistakable. *Pręgi* is primarily a story about powerlessness and a struggle to adapt to the world.

The Pursuit of Happyness (2006)

Based on true events, the film tells the story of Chris Gardner (starring Will Smith). Chris is a salesman who struggles with homelessness while raising his young son. He makes every effort to escape this difficult situation. Although the odds are against him, Chris takes a risk and begins working as a stockbroker. He chooses to take a chance in order to secure a better future for himself and his child:

"The twilight of patriarchy has become the beginning of an era of new fatherhood" (Badinter, 1993, p. 148). *The Pursuit of Happyness* is a moving story of Gardner's effort, determination, and perseverance. It is one of the most touching films about fatherhood. Moreover, the leading roles are played by Will Smith and his real-life son, Jaden Smith. Unable to cope with financial difficulties, Gardner's wife, Linda, decides to leave their five-year-old son, Christopher, in search of a better life. Now a single father, Chris uses his sales skills and strives to improve their situation. He is offered an internship at

a prestigious brokerage firm. Although unpaid, he accepts the position, believing it will open the door to a high-paying career and a better future. Due to financial instability, Chris and his son are evicted and forced to spend their nights in shelters, bus stations, and other temporary places. Despite these hardships, Chris remains a devoted and loving father. He does everything he can to maintain his son's trust: "Every birth of a child confronts both father and mother with the fact that a whole new chapter in life opens up before them. It is both a real test of the values the parents embody and an opportunity for their own social, psychological, and moral development" (Witczak, 1987, p. 25).

The Pursuit of Happyness does not manipulate viewers' emotions; rather, it portrays an authentic relationship between the characters. The film is based on the true story of a man who invested all his money working as a door-to-door salesman. Fortunately, the filmmakers chose to tell the story in this way. Chris Gardner impresses with his strength and resilience as he fights to improve his son's life. Chris fails only once — when he does not pick up his son from the kindergarten on time. The reason, however, is that he is briefly jailed for unpaid fines. Still, the protagonist is not portrayed as a flawless hero. He struggles to build a healthy relationship with his wife and fails to understand her fears. When Linda says, "I've had enough" he simply replies, "You are weak." He also harshly dismisses his son's dream of becoming a basketball player, suggesting it is better to abandon unrealistic goals than to face disappointment. Although said calmly, his words carry emotional weight. Viewers immediately sense that this moment may leave a lasting wound and undermine Christopher's confidence. However, Chris realises his mistake. He takes a deep breath and says: "Don't ever let somebody tell you, you can't do something. Not even me."

Kret [The Mole] (2011)

Paweł (starring Borys Szyc) and his father Zygmunt (starring Marian Dziędziel) try to grow a family business, hoping for a better future for their loved ones. One day, however, everything changes. Zygmunt's reputation is damaged when a press article is published. Suddenly, Paweł loses the trust of his colleagues, and his marriage begins to fall apart. Determined to uncover the truth and clear his father's name, Paweł embarks on his own

investigation. The trail leads him to a mysterious man (starring Wojciech Pszoniak) who turns out to have been orchestrating events from behind the scenes for some time. The stranger makes an unexpected proposal. Plagued by questions, Paweł finds himself at a crossroads. Many viewers tend to overlook the film's central theme, namely the complex relationship between father and son. There is also the question of how much one can sacrifice for the sake of family. In the 1980s, Zygmunt led a miners' protest against the communist authorities. The demonstration escalated into a riot in which several people were killed. Thirty years later, some journalists uncover documents suggesting that Zygmunt collaborated with the SB (the communist secret police in Poland) during the strike. Overnight, the hero of the opposition is branded a traitor. For his son, this marks the beginning of an internal conflict: was his father's reputation deliberately destroyed, or did Zygmunt truly succumb to the regime's pressure? At this point, we witness a symbolic and emotionally devastating loss of the father: "The disappearance of a father makes the hurt caused by loss and failure really difficult or even unbearable" (Rise, 2005, p. 118). The director opts for a slower pace and avoids dramatic plot twists. Instead, he chooses careful and patient observation. He allows viewers to get closer to the characters — to understand their emotions, motivations, daily routines, and human frailties. The camera consistently focuses on facial details, making it harder to pass clear judgement at the climax. Moreover, the dialogues play a crucial role. Rarely do we encounter such authentic and fluent exchanges in Polish films. For instance, the camera discreetly peeks into the kitchen to capture a shared family meal. Viewers seem to truly penetrate someone's life — one full of small gestures and unspoken emotions. In this world, family is more than just a word. It is a web of difficult relationships that, despite everything, holds people together.

Mój rower [My Father's Bike] (2012)

One autumn morning, seventy-year-old Włodek (starring Michał Urbaniak) wakes up to find his dog demanding a walk. With difficulty, he slides his numb legs off the bed and groans in pain. Frustrated, he starts searching for his wife, who usually takes care of the dog. To his surprise, Basia (starring Anna Nehrebecka) is nowhere to be seen. Instead, he finds a letter in which she informs him that she has decided to leave. Włodek loses consciousness.

Concerned about the elderly man's deteriorating health, the neighbours contact his family. Soon, Włodek's relatives arrive in Poland. His grandson Maciek (starring Krzysztof Chodorowski) comes from England, where he lives with his mother. His son Paweł (starring Artur Żmijewski), a well-known pianist, arrives from Berlin, where he lives and performs concerts. Upon learning of his mother's disappearance, Paweł decides to search for her and persuade her to return. He is joined by Maciek and Włodek, who has recently been discharged from hospital. Their journey leads them to a picturesque lake, where they suspect Basia may be staying. However, it soon becomes clear that they are not only searching for a loved one — there is something deeper at play. As they travel from place to place, old conflicts resurface. There are unspoken grievances between Włodek and Paweł as well as tensions between Paweł and Maciek. During their journey, they attempt to confront the past, but it is also an opportunity for mutual understanding. *Mój rower* is an unusual guide to the male world, because "due to their fresh and unconventional interpretation of many phenomena, a child gives everyone who wants to understand them lots of opportunities for reflection and contemplation. As a result, it can broaden one's view of the surrounding reality and the laws that govern it" (Pospiszyl, 1986, p. 63). The film raises the following questions: Why is it that, regardless of age, men struggle to express love in words? Do differences truly outweigh similarities? Is there even a key to understanding the male point of view?

Beautiful Boy (2018)

Based on true events, the film tells the story of David (starring Steve Carell) and his son Nic (starring Timothée Chalamet). Despite having a stable and loving family, the boy becomes addicted to drugs. As his addiction worsens, the bond between father and son is put to a severe test. After a series of rehab stays, brief periods of sobriety, relapses and overdoses, David is faced with a painful decision. He must choose whether to continue supporting his son financially, thereby giving him a chance at a quiet life, or to leave him to face the consequences in the hope that the difficult circumstances will prompt change. "The widely accepted new paradigm of masculinity is that men should be fully involved in family life and share responsibilities equally. A father is criticised when he does not participate in child-rearing. Instead,

the benefits of new experiences brought about by men's involvement in family life and childcare are highlighted" (Dąbrowska-Wnuk, 2007, pp. 133–134).

The film is a moving portrayal of a parent's desperate struggle to save his child, of painful choices made for loved ones, and of addiction that tears families apart. Above all, however, it is a story about a father who, despite everything, never loses hope and never stops fighting for his son and his path to recovery. "Despite the overwhelming decay of life around us, we live in both the best and the worst of times. Although many children grow up without fathers, many fathers now prioritise their children in a new way. Fatherhood itself is a direction" (Canfield, 2007, p. 19). David, the main character, is convinced he was a good father. In frequent flashbacks, we see idyllic snapshots of the time when Nic was a child, bathed in the rays of unconditional paternal love. Unfortunately, David's affection has blinded him to his real son. He has replaced him with an idealised image. Rather than providing a sense of security, David's total and unconditional love stifles Nic, setting impossibly high standards of closeness and care — standards that are too much for a growing child to meet. This becomes especially apparent when Nic longs for independence. In such a close relationship, this desire creates a sense of guilt that he must somehow learn to cope with.

Father (2020)

This touching film portrays a man (starring Sir Anthony Hopkins) who suffers from Alzheimer's disease. He struggles to remain connected to the world around him and to his daughter. "Apart from a father's physical absence, there is also his mental absence. It is difficult to determine how often this occurs, as there are no sufficient studies on the topic. However, it can be assumed that mental absence is more frequent than physical absence. Some fathers are present in body but not in mind" (Więcławska, 2009, p. 220). The film explores both the challenges and the beauty of caring for an ageing parent, while offering a unique portrayal of mature fatherhood. It is a poignant depiction of the passage of time and enduring love. Oscar winner Olivia Colman plays Anna, who tries to care for her 80-year-old father, Anthony, as he begins to show signs of dementia. "Fatherhood has lost its importance in modern society. Naturally, this does not apply to every individual father. What is missing, however, is a proper understanding of the father's role — and

without that, it cannot be properly fulfilled" (Pulikowski, 2002, pp. 147–148). Anthony experiences both good and bad days. He can be capricious and often rejects the carers suggested by his daughter. Anna witnesses her father's gradual decline and comes to understand the true state of his health. Although Anthony sometimes feels perfectly fine, at other times he fails to recognise his daughter or her partner. As his memory loss progresses, Anna decides to hire a nurse. Initially fascinated by his new companion, the elderly man becomes increasingly confused. Disoriented and frightened by his condition, he embodies the downfall of a once strong man who is losing touch with reality due to his illness. Meanwhile, his daughter mourns the loss of a father who is still alive. Month by month, she grieves for the man he once was. The film uses time loops, subtly introduces a reversed chronology, à la Nolan's *Memento* (2000), avoids clear time markers, and deliberately misleads viewers in their perception of time. These techniques not only reflect the protagonist's subjective experience but also draw us closer to it in a striking way. Together with him, we move through deceptively similar apartment interiors with identical layouts, suspiciously observing the "intruders."

Moreover, the deliberate ambiguity of spatial changes causes interpretive confusion, prompting viewers to repeatedly reassess what they are seeing. Despite the sparse storyline, the actors form the emotional core of the film. Anthony Hopkins delivers a brilliant performance that reveals the many faces of Alzheimer's disease: the man is alternately charming and gruff, docile and threatening, sharp-witted and confused, endearing and irritating. Olivia Colman's face, without a trace of insincerity, reveals a full spectrum of emotions: love, compassion, understanding and care — but also irritation, frustration, and guilt. Behind her uneasy smile, patient tone and resigned downward glance lies a sensitive woman torn between her duty to her father and her desire to live her own life.

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The concept of the "metaphysics of absence" offers a way of understanding fatherhood not through direct presence, but through the powerful psychological and symbolic effects created by its lack. In this perspective, absence is not a void; it is an active force that shapes emotional life, identity, and relationships. The father who is missing — whether physically gone, emotionally withdrawn, or symbolically incapable of fulfilling his role — continues to exert influence precisely through this absence. His non-presence becomes

a formative experience, generating longing, fear, idealisation, confusion, or unresolved conflict. In cinematic narratives, this phenomenon often manifests through characters who orbit around an absent centre — children who define themselves in relation to a father who cannot be reached, adults who continue to negotiate the emotional consequences of paternal silence, or families whose dynamics are structured by what remains unspoken. Filmmakers capture this metaphysical quality of absence through visual and narrative strategies: empty spaces, withheld encounters, off-screen voices, or prolonged silences that signal a relational gap impossible to bridge. The "metaphysics of absence" therefore highlights a paradox: the father who is not there becomes, in psychological terms, profoundly present. His absence generates a field of tension that organizes the inner world of the characters and drives the narrative forward. By foregrounding this dynamic, contemporary cinema reveals how paternal absence is not merely a social condition but a deeply existential one — an experience that shapes the emotional architecture of a life.

Film art possesses a unique ability to convey psychological content not only through dialogue or narration, but primarily through imagery, rhythm, sound, and silence. Film affects viewers both emotionally and subliminally, enabling them to empathise with the mental states of characters and to grasp their inner conflicts without the need for verbalisation. Film art is a medium that, like no other, can penetrate the human psyche and make it the central character of the story. Film needs not address psychology directly in order to explore themes such as trauma, anxiety, identity, loneliness, or family conflicts. Thanks to its audiovisual capabilities, film can not only depict the emotional states of its characters but also *allows viewers to experience them*. It is within this empathetic power of image, sound and rhythm that film's unique ability to communicate psychological content resides. No other art form brings us as close to the human face as film does. Facial expressions, micro-expressions, body posture and gestures — all communicate more than words ever could. In realistic psychological cinema, silence often speaks louder than dialogue. In auteur or symbolic cinema, on the other hand, a character's body may become a projection of their psyche. Film frequently employs symbols to visualise internal processes: *a house, a road, a forest, rain, a mirror, water* — these elements possess their own psychological language. In Andrei Zvyagintsev's *The Return* (2003), for example, the lake and the deserted island serve as a backdrop for the unfolding of the paternal myth — imbued with mystery, austerity and understatement. The father, though physically present,

remains mentally impenetrable, and throughout the story his sons strive to understand his inner world. Through a combination of imagery, sound, narration and emotionally charged performances, film draws viewers into the heart of the psychic experience. We are not merely observers, but we become participants. This is what distinguishes film from a psychological treatise: understanding is achieved through empathy, not analysis. Film art communicates psychological content through a range of expressive means, which together create a deeply emotional and multidimensional experience. It does not merely tell a story about the psyche — it allows us to *live* it. Through the interplay of image, sound, editing and symbolism, cinema becomes not only a mirror of the human interior, but also a language that articulates what cannot be spoken.

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Klaudia Rosińska

🆔 https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0503-9823

@ klaudia.rosinska@aksim.edu.pl

Academy of Social and Media Culture in Toruń

ROR https://ror.org/04wfkgd43

Fact-checking as a quasi-media institution: Thematic and argumentative analysis of demagog publications in the 2023 election year

Klaudia Rosińska

Abstract

Fact-checking as a quasi-media institution: Thematic and argumentative analysis of demagog publications in the 2023 election year

The article examines fact-checking organizations as quasi-media institutions, focusing on the activities of the Demagog portal during the 2023 election year. Based on 599 cases of fake news, a content analysis was conducted to determine the topics of disinformation and the argumentative strategies used in corrections. The results indicate that the most frequently debunked content concerned health-related issues, and the dominant argumentative technique was original investigation using OSINT tools. At the same time, risks were noted related to referencing institutional sources or rejecting claims due to a lack of evidence, which may reinforce the confirmation and backfire effects. The analysis confirms the significance of fact-checking as a tool of editorial intervention in the public discourse.

Keywords: misinformation, disinformation journalism, Internet, politics

In times of hybrid warfare, intensified disinformation efforts, and growing political polarization, fact-checking has become one of the key tools for defending against false content in public debate. The development of fact-checking and the rising prominence of organizations engaged in content verification have grown exponentially in response to the increasing volume of disinformation. However, it must be recognized that fact-checking is a reactive measure against disinformation, and its effects in countering it are, unfortunately, not particularly spectacular, as false messages spread more quickly and on a larger scale than truthful ones (Mayer, 2018). Nevertheless, research emphasizes the role of fact-checking organizations in reducing susceptibility to disinformation and enhancing civic awareness through education (Tejedor et al., 2024).

Although global fact-checking organizations such as PolitiFact, Snopes, or FactCheck.org declare neutrality and methodological rigour, they are increasingly becoming the target of accusations of bias—from both audiences and researchers. Polish organizations such as Demagog, Pravda, or Fakenews. pl also continually face similar concerns. A key instrument for addressing these challenges is affiliation with the International Fact-Checking Network

(IFCN), established in 2015 by the Poynter Institute (IFCN, 2025). The goal of this organization is to promote best practices in fact-checking worldwide and uphold transparency and independence within fact-checking institutions. Organizations from various countries may obtain IFCN certification if they meet specific criteria. In media discourse, the IFCN is regarded as a global benchmark for quality in fact-checking. The organization's code of principles includes the following rules:

- Commitment to Nonpartisanship and Fairness — The organization must not promote political, ideological, or financial interests. It should apply consistent criteria to all sources.
- Commitment to Transparency of Sources — All sources of information used for verification must be clearly identified to allow users to verify them independently.
- Commitment to Transparency of Funding & Organization — The organization must disclose its sources of funding, organizational structure, and any potential conflicts of interest.
- Commitment to Transparency of Methodology — A description of the fact-checking methodology should be publicly available and clearly explained.
- Commitment to Open and Honest Corrections — The organization should have a clear policy for publishing corrections and acknowledging mistakes.

As can be seen, a key principle of the IFCN is transparency. While this is a significant value, it is worth noting that it is not exhaustive. The proposed solutions may indeed be transparent, but not necessarily substantive or methodologically sound — an issue that will be further elaborated later in this article. It should also be noted that the position of fact-checking organizations, with the IFCN at the forefront, within the media systems of various countries — including Poland — is not clearly defined. On the one hand, fact-checkers perform work that was initially assigned to journalistic editorial offices, along with the full ethical responsibility that entails. On the other hand, fact-checking organizations often operate as non-governmental organizations, viewing themselves as oversight institutions over politicians or journalists. The lack of precise legal or institutional regulation of fact-checking entities means they exist somewhat outside the media system, which, in practice, makes it difficult to assess the substantive value of their work or to sanction the influence they exert on public discourse.

This issue appears to be of critical importance, as evidenced by an increasing number of academic studies. Considering these conditions, it becomes necessary to adopt a more vital and multifaceted perspective on fact-checking practices — not only as a method of combating disinformation, but also as a socio-cognitive phenomenon influenced by conscious or unconscious ideological and structural factors. The literature points to systemic factors that may affect the impartiality of fact-checking. These include, among others, sources of funding, political affiliations of editorial teams, media pressure, and audience expectations. Phenomena such as "false balance" — the artificial balancing of opposing views regardless of evidence — or "funding bias" — bias resulting from sources of financial support, as known from other fields such as science and journalism (Jasanoff, 2012) — may likewise influence the practices of fact-checkers. Additionally, the fact that many fact-checking organizations operate in partnership with large technology platforms (e.g., Meta, Google) raises questions about their editorial independence and their alignment with the public interest of individual countries.

In addition to institutional factors, qualitative aspects related to the processes of perceiving reality are also significant. Several empirical analyses indicate that fact-checkers may unconsciously exhibit political leanings. For example, a study of over 10,000 PolitiFact entries found that Republican politicians were rated as lying significantly more often than Democrats (Colicchio, 2023). One way to measure the volume of disinformation disseminated by political elites — and others — is to analyze the content produced by fact-checking sites. Many existing studies examine fact-checkers' outputs across different political spectrums to estimate partisan asymmetry in the spread of false messages (Card et al., 2018). This method is reasonably practical, though it carries certain inference risks. Fact-checking platforms may not provide an objective measure of a given group's propensity to spread rumors and conspiracy theories. This is because fact-checking organizations cannot verify every claim, and therefore must choose which content to debunk (Uściński, 2015). For instance, during Donald Trump's presidency, fact-checkers concentrated their resources on correcting the unprecedented volume of false information he disseminated. This, in turn, limited their ability to monitor and debunk false claims made by other politicians. Moreover, empirical data from the United States indicate little overlap among statements verified by different fact-checking organizations, suggesting bias and potential prejudice in the selection of topics and politicians for verification (Ostermeier, 2011).

Another essential aspect is evaluating the effectiveness of the corrections proposed by fact-checkers themselves. The way these texts are constructed — the choice of sources and arguments — can be crucial for how users receive this content. Empirical research shows that users interpret fact-checking in ways consistent with their own political beliefs, leading to a "reception bias." From a cognitive psychology perspective, fact-checking processes are susceptible to the same cognitive errors as other information selection and evaluation activities. Research published in *Information Processing & Management* has shown that fact-checkers — much like scientists — may fall prey to confirmation bias, various heuristics, and time pressure, all of which influence their decisions regarding which information is deemed worthy of verification and how it is interpreted (Soprano et al., 2024).

Studies by Michael Soprano's team demonstrated that even well-trained fact-checkers may unconsciously assign greater credibility to content that aligns with their own beliefs. This phenomenon points to deeply rooted cognitive mechanisms that are difficult to eliminate, even at a high level of professionalization. Meanwhile, research published in the renowned journal *Misinformation Review* indicates that the effectiveness of fact-checking depends on the message's form — subtle differences in wording can trigger very different cognitive responses among audiences (Park et al., 2021). The article shows that bias may stem not only from fact-checkers' ideology but also from natural cognitive mechanisms among recipients — such as uncertainty avoidance, resistance to belief change, and overinterpretation of missing data as evidence of falsehood.

Therefore, a crucial aspect is the design of labels and the evidentiary structure in fact-checkers' corrections, with attention to rhetorical principles and cognitive psychology, to avoid adverse effects on the audience, such as the backfire effect. This effect refers to a situation in which some recipients, when confronted with evidence contradicting their beliefs, paradoxically reinforce those beliefs rather than change them, thereby becoming further entrenched in false views. In this context, the choice of evidence may be crucial.

The above literature review prompted the author to pose a research problem regarding the analysis of the manifestations and mechanisms of bias in the fact-checking process in Poland. The study aims to analyze publications on the Demagog portal to determine the content's thematic scope and assess the strategies used to debunk false information. Demagog is the oldest fact-checking organization in Poland, is affiliated with the IFCN, and

publishes the most corrections for fake news, making it the most appropriate case for such an analysis.

Methodology

According to the method described later in this study, the research involved a media content analysis of a sample of 601 fake news cases published on the official website of the Demagog portal in 2023 (an election year, offering broad insight into various forms of disinformation). However, 3 cases were excluded for not meeting the criteria for falsehood — two were updated by the portal itself (Demagog, 2025), and one was excluded at the author's discretion. For this reason, the final research sample comprised 599 cases of fake news.

The content analysis presented in this article was conducted to identify the themes of the generated fake news and to assess the argumentative techniques used by the portal to debunk it. Content analysis is a widely used qualitative research technique (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005), which includes three approaches: conventional, directed, and summative. These approaches differ in their coding schemes, and for this study, the traditional approach was applied to develop codes and categories. In this way, preliminary analytical categories were created and subsequently coded.

Coding procedure

After the data collection phase, each entry was subjected to a critical content analysis, which served as the basis for developing a codebook. To facilitate the coding process, a glossary of terms characteristic of each category was also created. The codebook included detailed descriptions of each category, examples, classification instructions, and a glossary of terms specific to each type or topic to assist in making classification decisions. Based on this, the first round of coding was conducted, with two expert judges independently coding the content. After compiling the complete dataset, a second round followed, involving the verification of coded data within both the thematic and argumentative categories.

The coders read all examples of fake news along with the corresponding corrections published by the Demagog portal. On this basis, they assigned

thematic categories and determined the dominant argumentative technique. For the thematic criterion, the inter-rater reliability (measured using Cohen's Kappa coefficient) was 0.84, indicating very high agreement (coders agreed on 552 cases and disagreed on 47). A different situation occurred in the category concerning the argumentative specificity of the fact-checking portal. In this area, the agreement coefficient was 0.41, indicating moderate agreement (coders agreed on 276 posts and disagreed on 323). This situation likely results from the fact that, in responding to a single fake news item, fact-checkers often employ multiple arguments, making it challenging to identify the dominant one, which is an important finding for the conclusions of the entire study. In such cases, the author had the deciding voice in classification.

Analytical categories

Content Themes. This criterion referred to the thematic area around which the fake news content was constructed. The categories are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Fake news themes

Thematic Areas	Description
War	Content related to armed conflicts, military operations, armed forces, casualties, military equipment, etc.
Health	Content related to medicine, methods of treatment, vaccines, pandemics, healthy lifestyles, diseases, or health-related threats.
Technology	Content related to new technologies, artificial intelligence, 5G, the Internet, mobile phones, etc.
Media and Journalism	Content concerning journalists, alleged censorship, message manipulation, or fake news targeting specific newsrooms or individual journalists.
Celebrities	False reports about well-known figures from show business, sports, or the Internet — e.g., concerning their private lives, alleged statements, or behaviors.
Politics	Fake news about political parties, politicians, elections, government decisions, legislative actions, or international politics.

Thematic Areas	Description
Society	Fake news related to social behaviors, social groups, mass events, social changes, everyday life, etc.
Worldview	Disinformation related to religion, morality, ideologies, cultural issues, gender identity, sexual orientation, values, etc.
Economy	False information about inflation, taxes, prices, the labor market, public finances, economic crises, etc.
Disasters	Disinformation about natural disasters or sudden events — e.g., earthquakes, floods, fires, explosions, contamination, etc.
Other	Content that does not fit into any of the above categories.

The specificity of the fact-checking portal's argumentation is a category in which the types of sources used by the portal to debunk fake news were analyzed. The categories and their descriptions are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. The specificity of the fact-checking portal's argumentation

Types of Arguments	Description
Reference to primary sources of information (e.g., laws, legal or historical documents, etc.)	Referring to original documents — such as statutes, regulations, archival materials, court records, or treaties — to verify the content.
Citing positions of institutions or public figures (e.g., statements, official remarks, articles, including those from government domains)	Quoting official communications, statements, or documents issued by institutions (e.g., ministries, WHO) or individuals holding public office.
Consulting experts from various fields	Seeking opinions from specialists in a given field (e.g., doctors, historians, lawyers) who, based on their expertise, explain why a particular piece of information is false.
Rejection due to lack of evidence	Classifying information as false or unverified because, in the organization's assessment, no reliable data support the claim presented in the analyzed content.

Types of Arguments	Description
Referring to statements of witnesses/involved individuals/subjects of disinformation	Contacting individuals directly related to a given situation (e.g., quoting a witness, a person featured in the fake news, the owner of an object, etc.).
Statistical data	Using numbers, indicators, reports, surveys, or official databases that demonstrate the discrepancy between the truth and the false information.
Quoting scientific articles	Referring to scientific papers, peer-reviewed publications, or academic studies to confirm or refute a given claim.
Referring to Polish journalistic materials	Citing analyses, articles, or investigative reports published in mainstream media as sources confirming or correcting the information.
Referring to foreign sources	Quoting foreign media outlets, institutions, experts, or databases as a point of reference in assessing the truthfulness of information.
Original investigation of the authenticity of audiovisual materials and online sources (e.g., OSINT, reverse image search, etc.)	Independent analysis of materials — e.g., video verification, Google image search, metadata analysis, geolocation — to verify the authenticity of the content.
Lack of sources/editorial opinion	Verification based solely on editorial commentary, without providing external sources — a subjective assessment without documentation.

Results

The study indicates that fake news across various thematic areas can be identified on the Demagog portal, as shown in Figure 1. The most significant number of verified items concerned Health-related topics (203 cases). More than twice as few entries were related to Politics (93 cases), followed by War-related content (69). Further down the list, false information was identified in the areas of technology (57), other topics (47), Society (45), Economy (32), Celebrities (27), Disasters (12), Worldview (11), and Media and Journalism (3).

Health-related disinformation primarily included content undermining the credibility of vaccinations (both COVID-19 and HPV vaccines) as well as recognized diagnostic methods; for example, many fake news items concerned the alleged harmfulness of mammography. A leading subtopic was alternative cancer treatments, including garlic, lemon, turmeric, and even death cap mushrooms. The dominant narrative in most of these messages revolved around discrediting doctors and medicine. Despite differences in content, the main disinformation message consistently undermined trust in medical institutions, reinforcing negative emotions and conspiratorial thinking among recipients.

It is noteworthy that health-related content ranked first, even though the analyzed year (2023) was an election year, during which a campaign was underway. The identified political content referred to specific politicians, primarily representatives of major political parties, e.g., Andrzej Duda, Donald Tusk, Jarosław Kaczyński, Sławomir Mentzen, or Krzysztof Bosak. The main goal was usually to discredit these individuals and the parties they represented in the eyes of voters.

In the category of war-related content, fake news covered both the war in Ukraine and the conflict between Israel and Hamas. In relation to Ukraine, propaganda narratives portrayed the country as the aggressor or referred to Banderism—a continuation of Russian disinformation from previous years. Meanwhile, in the context of the Israel-Hamas war, the identified fake news amplified negative sentiment toward Israel while presenting Hamas in a favorable light.

Technological disinformation was primarily associated with 5G technology. In the area of society, false stories about child abductions and anti-refugee content were predominant. In the economy category, scams impersonating major companies—such as Biedronka, Żabka, and Orlen—were the most common. Impersonation tactics aimed at deceiving users also dominated the category of celebrity-related content.

Within the domain of disasters, fake news included claims about wildfires and earthquakes around the world, allegedly caused by HAARP technology. In the worldview category, most of the disinformation concerned LGBTQ+ issues.

**Figure 1.** Topics of fake news identified by the Demagog portal in 2023
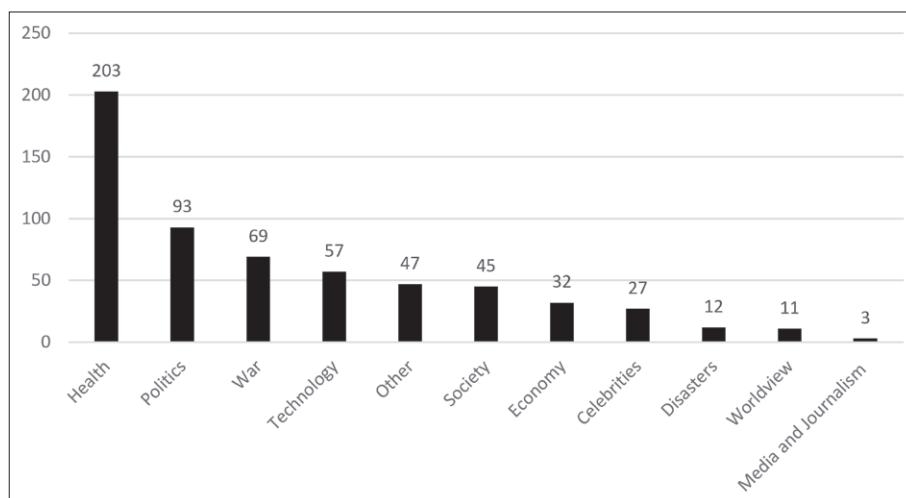
Source: Author's own research.

Equally as interesting as the content of fake news itself was the analysis of the argumentative strategies used by the Demagog portal to debunk it (Figure 2). A significant observation in this regard is that the portal often employed mixed evidence, drawing on various sources. However, the most frequently used form of argumentation was conducting original investigations, most often to verify audiovisual materials. Within this technique (176 cases), the authors of the correction published step-by-step screenshots of their investigations, such as reverse image searches or geolocation, which demonstrated the falsehood of the analyzed materials. This was mainly possible when the fake news involved AI-generated fabrications or used false images or videos.

Slightly fewer cases (148) were corrected by citing the positions of public institutions — for example, in the case of health-related disinformation, this often involved the WHO; in political topics, references were made to statements from the Chancellery of the Prime Minister or government spokespersons. Notably, this method was also used when the identified content did not constitute obvious fake news but rather conspiracy theories. In such cases, the rejection process due to a lack of evidence was also applied (54 cases).

Another argumentation technique — particularly popular in the health category — was quoting scientific articles (92 cases) that disproved specific claims found in the fake news. This method was often combined with consulting experts from various fields (45 cases). Further down the list were references to primary sources (30), mainly historical documents, as well as secondary sources such as materials from Polish (22) and foreign (18) media and other fact-checking organizations. Statistical data (11) and witness statements (3) were rarely used.

Figure 2. Specificity of the argumentation used in corrections published by the Demagog
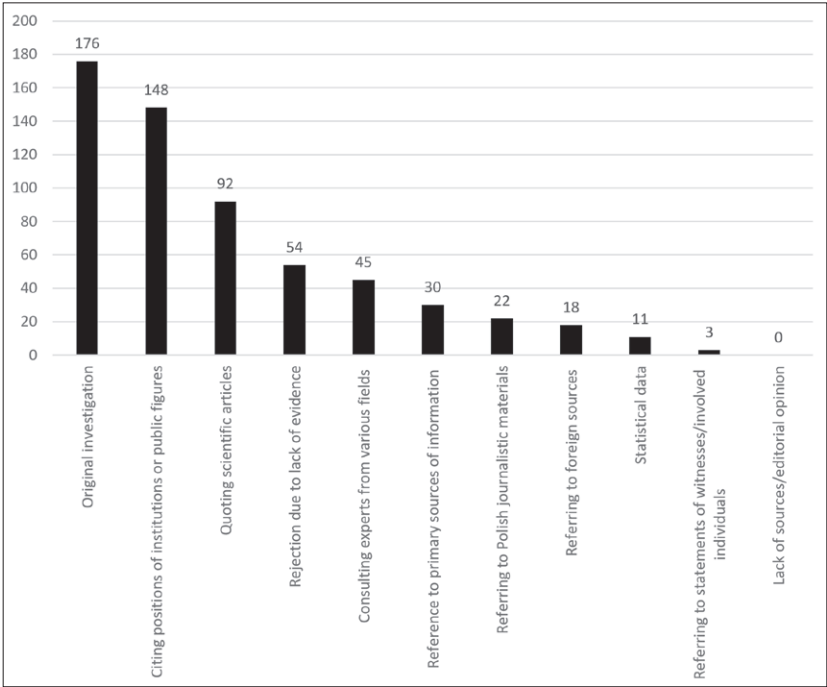
Source: Author's own research.

A comparison of the types of arguments used across specific thematic areas is presented in Table 3. The most common type of argument for each topic is highlighted in yellow. In most topics, the dominant approach was original investigative work conducted by Demagog's fact-checkers, indicating the large volume of audiovisual fake news in those categories.

Table 3. Specificity of argument types used across different thematic areas of identified fake news

	Health	Politics	War	Technology	Other	Society	Economy	Celebrities	Disasters	Worldview	Media	Total
Original investigation	8	38	43	9	4	28	14	24	2	4	2	176
Citing positions of institutions or public figures	66	30	9	18	9	4	10	–	1	–	1	148
Quoting scientific articles	70	–	1	7	10	–	–	–	2	2	–	92
Rejection due to lack of evidence	11	12	6	8	7	4	1	1	3	1	–	54
Consulting experts from various fields	20	4	4	4	5	2	2	–	3	1	–	45
Reference to primary sources of information	11	5	2	4	1	3	2	–	1	1	–	30
Referring to Polish journalistic materials	9	2	3	1	4	2	1	–	–	–	–	22
Referring to foreign sources	5	1	1	4	3	–	1	1	–	2	–	18
Statistical data	3	–	–	1	4	2	1		–	–	–	11
Referring to statements of witnesses/ involved individuals/ subjects of disinformation	0	1	–	1	–	–	–	1	–	–	–	3
Total	203	93	69	57	47	45	32	27	12	11	3	599

Source: Author's own research.

There are, however, four thematic categories that deviate from this pattern: health, technology, disasters, and other. In response to fake health news, the most frequently used argumentation was scientific, followed by references to public institutions and expert consultations from various fields. It is worth noting that 11 health-related fake news items were rejected due to insufficient evidence supporting their claims.

The rejection due to lack of evidence also occurred in a relatively high number of cases within the categories of politics (12) and technology (8), and was almost always used in response to various conspiracy theories.

Discussion

The conducted study contributes to a deeper discussion on the quality and effectiveness of fact-checking in the fight against disinformation. To date, fact-checking organizations have no clearly defined place within the media system, nor do they operate under uniform ethical standards. Meanwhile, an increasing number of studies show that the style and structure of argumentation can significantly affect the effectiveness of counter-disinformation efforts.

This perspective is supported by long-term research conducted by Adam Berinsky (2023), who found that participants across the political spectrum updated their beliefs when presented with fact-based evidence. Paradoxically, however, updating factual knowledge did not necessarily lead to a change in candidate support. It appears that recipients of fact-checks do not struggle so much with recognizing facts as true, but rather with drawing appropriate conclusions from them or with reinterpreting reality accordingly.

This is why Berinsky argues that the quality of corrections plays a fundamental role in belief updating. Corrections originating from an *"unexpected" source* generate the most significant trust because people are more likely to believe a correction if it comes from an authority that must challenge their own beliefs to debunk a falsehood. As a result, right-wing disinformation is more effectively debunked by right-wing figures, and left-wing disinformation by left-wing figures.

Although this applies primarily to political content, it does not mean that independent corrections aimed at moderate audiences are unnecessary in other domains. Thus, fact-checking organizations like Demagog can be

effective in this regard, provided they apply a strong evidentiary and methodological foundation. Individuals with extreme views — both on the left and the right — tend to be more resistant to corrections. In contrast, moderate audiences are the most susceptible to belief change, and should therefore be the primary reference point for fact-checkers.

It is also crucial that fact-checks be simple, straightforward, specific, and free from overly complex explanations. Excessive complexity may confuse and reinforce incorrect beliefs (Berinsky, 2023). The emotional dimension of corrections also matters. They should engage recipients emotionally to a similar degree as the disinformation they respond to, to cut through the noise and produce the desired effect at the level of deeper convictions.

In this context, the study provides several reflections on the work of the oldest fact-checking organization in Poland. In its methodological statement, Demagog notes:

> The sources we most frequently rely on include: national, international, and foreign legal acts; reports from international organizations (e.g., the World Bank, OECD, WHO, ECDC); data from statistical offices (GUS, Eurostat); reports from state control institutions (NIK); reports from public opinion research institutes (CBOS); peer-reviewed scientific studies published in reputable journals (e.g., *Science*, *The Lancet*).

The organization also emphasizes that pre-existing sources take precedence over the opinions of individual scientists.

However, the analysis of fake news identified by Demagog in 2023 reveals certain pitfalls in the verification process, including potential bias. Although the website provides no information on any health-related grants (apart from a note on cooperation on child abduction issues, which aligns with some social fake news content), the high volume of health-related verifications, especially during an election campaign, is noteworthy.

This may be explained by the fact that Demagog publishes political fact-checks separately — in the form of evaluations of individual politicians' statements — and that is likely where most of the political misinformation was addressed. Therefore, we should be cautious in interpreting health as the most prominent area of disinformation, even if it appears to be the most frequently fact-checked.

What is evident, however, is that Demagog regularly debunks various conspiracy theories and alternative medicine claims, including those related to

herbal remedies — often labeling them as false. This does not appear to be intentional bias but rather the result of thematic habits. The analysis shows that many of the debunked contents originated from accounts that promote alternative medicine. These sources are likely regularly monitored by the Demagog team. As a result, individual fact-checkers may more frequently select this type of content — a dynamic that can be explained by the availability heuristic. It is important to note that this is a highly specialized field where scientific consensus does not always exist. The effectiveness of a correction in such a domain is crucial, and overreliance on scientific authority in the absence of consensus may backfire. It can even undermine trust in science itself, which is clearly the goal of disinformation actors, not of fact-checkers.

A crucial issue appears to be the selection of arguments in response to specific forms of disinformation or the domains they concern. In Demagog's corrections, there is a noticeable tendency to debunk conspiracy theories by citing scientific research or official documents from public institutions. The problem, however, lies in the very nature of conspiracy theories — they inherently assume that such sources are untrustworthy. This raises the question of whether invoking these sources might paradoxically trigger a confirmation effect among individuals already invested in believing those theories.

This concern is partially supported by the findings of Das, Mehta, and Lease (2019), who studied the influence of user ideology on the reception of fact-checking content. Their results confirmed a bias toward confirmation: individuals with firm ideological commitments were more skeptical of facts that contradicted their views, regardless of the source's credibility. Similarly, Anthony Washburn and Linda Skitka (2018) demonstrated that both liberals and conservatives were less likely to accurately interpret scientific research findings when those findings conflicted with their prior beliefs. This phenomenon may occur not only in the political domain, but also in other areas such as health.

Another observed tendency that raises concerns, considering current scientific knowledge, is the use of "negation due to lack of evidence" as an argument. For instance, if no scientific studies confirm the effectiveness or impact of a given product — such as a particular herb — on health, Demagog would classify such information as fake news under this justification. However, this approach may be perceived as overstepping the boundaries of discourse, potentially leading audiences to believe there is unofficial censorship of thought. This concern is often raised, especially in relation to ideological, worldview-related, or health-related topics.

It is also well established that individuals across the political spectrum are motivated to reject information that contradicts their beliefs and to accept information that confirms them (Kahan, 2013). Therefore, corrections based on negation may be more likely to be dismissed by the audience, since the mere absence of evidence is not necessarily proof of falsehood and certainly not for those who already subscribe to a given belief.

That said, it is worth acknowledging that Demagog typically supplemented this type of reasoning with additional forms of justification, which helped mitigate its potential negative impact. This only reinforces the view that using "lack of evidence" as a standalone argument may be unnecessary, and that, in some cases, withholding judgment may be more appropriate than issuing premature negations.

For neutral individuals who do not hold strong beliefs in a particular area and should be considered the primary target audience for fact-checking, one notable difficulty may lie in the length and complexity of the corrections published by Demagog. These fact-checks often cite scientific articles, official documents, and expert commentary, which can make them appear inaccessible and difficult to understand, especially when contrasted with the simple, clear message of the original fake news they aim to debunk. Although Demagog typically includes a summary at the beginning of each article, which may help structure the reader's understanding, this may still be insufficient. The overload of arguments can create informational noise and overwhelm the audience, potentially leading to rejection of the correction itself.

Moreover, contrary to Berinsky's recommendations, Demagog does not create an emotional context for its fact-checks. Their corrections often resemble formal reports and rarely address the emotions provoked by disinformation. This appears to be an area requiring improvement both psychologically and rhetorically. Emotions play a crucial role in shaping attitudes and beliefs, and without addressing or soothing those emotions, it may be challenging to achieve the desired effect of effectively countering false claims and influencing the audience.

Undoubtedly, the strongest aspect of Demagog's fact-checking work lies in its original investigations. These are typically short texts that present the step-by-step process for verifying images or other media content. The evidence of falsehood in such investigations is usually straightforward and unambiguous, and the transparent verification process serves an educational purpose as well.

This type of activity appears to be a key strength of fact-checking organizations, functioning as a valuable complement to the work of traditional journalistic editorial teams. While journalists are obligated to verify information before publication, the audience does not have access to that process, only to its result (which may not always be satisfactory). In contrast, fact-checkers, through such transparent investigations, provide insight into the evaluation of audiovisual content, effectively extending the process of information verification within the media ecosystem. In this way, fact-checking organizations may also serve as quality-control agents for journalistic content, a relatively rare but potentially equally necessary function alongside the verification of political statements.

The conducted analysis demonstrates that the Demagog portal serves as a quasi-media institution within the Polish media system, combining elements of journalistic content verification with the role of a non-governmental organization overseeing politicians' statements. On the one hand, this activity helps counter disinformation and plays an essential educational role; on the other hand, it reveals mechanisms of topic selection and argumentative strategies that may create the impression of bias or excessive complexity in communication. At times, it even leads to the erroneous classification of content as fake news.

Moreover, excessive reliance on public or institutional sources, or the use of argumentation based on insufficient evidence, poses a risk of triggering confirmation bias or backfire effects among audiences, ultimately reinforcing rather than weakening the spread of disinformation. Therefore, the analysis of Demagog's publications during the 2023 election year provides a valuable insight into both the potential and limitations of fact-checking as a tool for combating disinformation in Poland. It is worth noting that although the organization plays a significant role in public discourse, it is not subject to institutional oversight of the ethical or substantive quality of its content beyond the general IFCN standards, which still leave many issues ambiguous.

A similar situation applies to other fact-checking organizations operating in Poland. Their status remains unclear, and as such, it seems necessary to initiate a broader public and academic discussion on the role of fact-checkers in the media system. In the author's view, a key step toward the effective development of the fact-checking ecosystem would be the establishment of unified ethical standards, criteria for the effectiveness of corrections, and their implementation within the Polish media framework — alongside institutional mechanisms for evaluating and sanctioning the quality of fact-checking activities.

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Paweł Andrianik

ⓘ https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0227-3462
@ pawel.rytel-andrianik@kul.pl

The John Paul II Catholic University in Lublin
ROR https://ror.org/04qyefj88

The Polish Section of Vatican Radio, 1940–1941: Ethical and security challenges

Abstract

The Polish Section of Vatican Radio, 1940–1941: Ethical and security challenges

The goal of this article is to present the communication of the Polish Section of Vatican Radio during the Second World War, based on preserved broadcast transcripts (13 January 1940–30 December 1941). It was seen that, in addition to reporting on the activities of the Pope and the Holy See, the broadcasts informed listeners about the unlawful and brutal actions of the occupiers and "the agony of the Polish nation." They also documented "the consequences of godless atheism, whether brown or red." The Polish Section of Vatican Radio also firmly denounced the actions of the occupiers in other countries. It also reported on the unlawful measures undertaken by the Germans against their own citizens. In April 1941, a radical change occurred in the way the Polish Section of Vatican Radio communicated. Such uncompromising reporting on the situation in Poland and other countries provoked sharp protests from the occupying authorities. It was observed that, alongside the criticisms aired by Vatican Radio, acts of terror against the populations of occupied countries intensified. In this context, Pope Pius XII, through the Secretary of State, Cardinal Luigi Maglione, issued a letter dated 28 April 1941 ordering a temporary suspension of broadcasts on anti-German topics. From that moment on, the programs avoided current wartime issues in Poland and other nations, focusing instead on the activities of the Pope, the Holy See, and the life of the Church in various countries. The adoption of this change was motivated by ethical concerns regarding listeners' safety.

Keywords: Vatican Radio, Pius XII, Vatican, Second World War, Poland, Germany

Vatican Radio was founded by Guglielmo Marconi, the inventor of radio, at the request of Pope Pius XI. The first broadcast took place on 12 February 1931, during which Pius XI delivered his inaugural radio address and imparted the *Urbi et Orbi* blessing to the listeners. This was a historic event: the Church had begun to make use of the most modern means of communication available at the time (Bea & De Carolis, 2011; Adamowski, 2021).

On 20 March 1931, Vatican Radio aired a message from Pius XI on the occasion of the 40th anniversary of Leo XIII's encyclical *Rerum novarum* in several languages. The Polish version was read by Rev. Tadeusz Zakrzewski,

then Rector of the Polish Pontifical Ecclesiastical Institute in Rome. This marked the first appearance of the Polish language on the papal broadcaster's airwaves.[1]

The Pope entrusted the management of Vatican Radio to the Jesuits. At that time, the Superior General of the Society of Jesus, Fr. Włodzimierz Ledóchowski, worked to ensure that Polish was broadcast on Vatican Radio. On 24 November 1938, Fr. Feliks Lasoń celebrated Holy Mass in Polish and delivered the first broadcast addressed to listeners in Poland. From that moment onward, Polish-language programs began to be transmitted regularly on Vatican Radio. As it later turned out, the significance of Vatican Radio increased even further — particularly for Poland and the Polish people — during the approaching war.

During the Second World War, the Polish Section of Vatican Radio provided ongoing reports on the activities of the Pope and the Holy See, as well as on the life of the Universal Church, with particular attention to Poland. As Vatican Radio was perceived as "the voice of the Pope and the Church," the editorial team faced numerous challenges, especially during the wartime period. This is evident from the surviving broadcast transcripts, which date from 13 January 1940 to 30 December 1941. The excerpts presented below offer direct insight into the content of these broadcasts and the characteristic language and narrative style of the Polish Section of Vatican Radio.

Reporting on the situation during the war

In the first broadcast, dated 13 January 1940 and titled *The Situation of the Catholic Church in Poland under German Occupation,* the situation in the homeland was presented, describing the incorporation of Polish territories into the Reich. It was noted that "the use of the Polish language has already been prohibited in offices and schools." All Poles who refused to undergo Germanization were to be deported to the General Government, where "space is to be made by removing the Jews." The broadcast continued: "Everything Polish is to be eradicated from the areas as mentioned earlier, root and branch. And

1   About the reform of the Vatican Media: Hejmo, 1982; Matelski, 1995; Dobrowolski, 1996; 1998; Dobrowolski, & Majewski, 2001; Rędzioch; 2008; 2018; Radio Vaticana Programmes, 2008; Woźny, 2009; 2011; Gęsiak, 2017.

since what is Polish has for centuries also been Catholic, one can imagine what terrible consequences this extermination of the Polish element will have for the Catholic Church." At this point, the typewritten record of the broadcast ends, and the editor added by hand: "carried out by Germany." The editorial commentary that followed reflected on these events in Poland: "But let us trust! The greater the suffering of the Polish nation, the greater the injustice inflicted upon Christ's Church and His innocent faithful, the closer is deliverance. God is near—God of mercy and God of justice!"

Immediately after these words, a second report, entitled *The Struggle Against the Catholic Church in Eastern Poland*, appeared. It was announced that Khrushchev, then the Communist Party Secretary in Kyiv, had undertaken a "lengthy informational journey" to the territories of Poland forcibly incorporated into the Soviet Union. According to Vatican Radio, upon his return, Khrushchev declared that "the Polish population in the annexed provinces is deeply religious. The campaign against religion in Poland must be prepared with exceptional care and carried out intensively with the assistance of all propagandists." As Vatican Radio reported, Khrushchev was convinced that "the Soviet league of the militant godless must send to Eastern Poland at least 25,000 trained propagandists." After presenting this news, the editorial commentary responded: "We may calmly assure him that his efforts, and those of all Bolshevism, will be in vain. They left the battlefield of Catholic Spain in disgrace; with the same disgrace, they will stealthily withdraw from Polish soil." It was further noted that through such actions, the Communists would merely provide an opportunity for the revival of the heroic traditions of the Podlasie Uniates. "The Polish nation will not allow the faith of its fathers to be taken away. So help us God!" the broadcast concluded. The next segment of the program featured a reading of Pope Pius XII's encyclical *Summi Pontificatus*. The broadcast of 13 January 1940 thus encapsulated, as if in a lens, the editorial line of the Polish Section of Vatican Radio. Subsequent broadcasts continued to address current issues, with particular emphasis on matters concerning Poland.

Vatican Radio consistently and resolutely monitored and denounced the actions of the occupying forces. On 27 January 1940, it reported on the forced deportations from Pomerania, Greater Poland, and Silesia to Central Poland. These expulsions particularly affected children left without parents and parents deprived of their children, as well as the healthy and the sick, the elderly, and the paralyzed—people exposed to freezing temperatures, without drink or food. "And to think," the broadcast stated, "that such a fate is to befall

eight million Poles who have inhabited their native Polish lands for centuries" (*Broadcast*, 1940a, January 27).

The Polish Editorial Office also reported on developments in Poland's eastern territories. Citing *L'Osservatore Romano*, which in turn referred to the Swiss press, it was announced on 4 April 1940 that

> the People's Commissariat for Posts and Telegraphs has ordered that the heads of post and telegraph offices in the territories of Poland occupied by the Soviets are not to accept any postal or telegraphic correspondence originating from the Vatican State, because — as stated in the circular of the Soviet Commissariat — the Vatican does not exist either as a state or as a city (*Broadcast*, 1940d, April 4).

In the same broadcast, information was also given about the significant human and financial resources devoted to Soviet propaganda, which had organized 15,000 meetings aimed at indoctrinating the Polish population. Attention was likewise drawn to media activity:

> *"Bezbożnik"* ["the Godless"], the organ of the Moscow atheists, writes that repressive measures against religion can no longer be postponed, since the recent riots that broke out throughout the occupied territories of Poland are the work of "religious elements." The same publication, as well as other newspapers, expresses admiration for the German authorities' achievements in persecuting the Catholic religion and publicly thanks Dr. Frank, the General Governor of the Polish territories, for what he has already done in this respect, announcing the first measures he has undertaken against the Church and religion in Poland (*Broadcast*, 1940d, April 4).

As the examples above demonstrate, the vocabulary reflects the direct, uncompromising style of communication adopted when reporting on Poland's situation at that time.

The Polish Section of Vatican Radio also reported on how Poland's situation was perceived abroad. For example, it was noted that the Japanese press devoted considerable attention to Poland: "All newspapers express a lively sympathy for the Polish nation, to which the Japanese wish a better future" (*Broadcast*, 1940e, May 2). It was further reported that a fundraising campaign had been organized in Tokyo for the Red Cross.

The editorial office also covered the activities and appeals of Cardinal August Hlond. In the broadcast of 2 May 1940, it was reported that the Primate

of Poland had written to the Primate of Ireland, Cardinal Joseph MacRory, stating that the current "persecution of the faith is far more cruel and threatening than ever before (…) atheism is flooding Europe and encounters only weak resistance" (*Broadcast*, 1940e, May 2)[2].

Listeners were also informed that in Germany, there was on sale a "German Bible, cleansed of all Jewish influences." It was explained that this publication was a compilation of New Testament fragments accompanied by commentary. "All references to Bethlehem have been removed. Jesus is said to have been born in Galilee, where various races lived, and therefore He could have been 'of pure Aryan blood,'" the broadcast of 9 June 1940 recorded (*Broadcast*, 1940f, May 9).

At the same time, close attention was paid to developments in the eastern part of occupied Poland. The broadcast of 25 June 1940 reported that Polish children from Lviv were being deported *en masse* to an unknown destination. They were taken from schools in trucks, transported to the nearest railway station, and from there sent into the unknown—all without their parents' knowledge. "Some mothers, however, managed to find their children on the road from the school to the station; yet they were unable to save them from deportation and achieved only this—that they could leave together with them," the transcript reads (*Broadcast*, 1940g, May 25).

The plight of the Polish people in the occupied territories was reported so frequently and emphatically that, on 27 January 1940, an explanation was provided for why this was necessary. It was noted: "It may seem to some that it is superfluous to speak to Poles about the persecution of the Catholic Church in Poland. After all, they are well aware of it—indeed, they know better than those living abroad, for they themselves are experiencing this cruel persecution" (*Broadcast*, 1940a, January 27).

The broadcasts provided several arguments justifying their focus on Poland. First, it was emphasized that the intention was "to make the tormented nation aware that the world knows of its suffering, that it thinks of them, sympathizes with them, and prays for them to the merciful God" (*Broadcast*, 1940a, January 27). In addition, they spoke of "the agony of the Polish nation, to document for the world the consequences of godless atheism, whether brown or red." A third reason was "to demonstrate, through this painful

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2   In citing this statement, reference was made to Tygodnik Polski from 1940 (no. 14/4).

example, that peace and concord can prevail if all nations put the Gospel into practice."

Corrections to the broadcasts, made by the superiors, were very rare. One such correction is evident in the broadcast of 15 February 1940. The original version contained the following statement:

> Dear listeners, the Polish nation, until recently free, has been delivered to the hands of two mortal enemies, who respect neither divine nor human law. Through unjust military aggression, the Polish state organism has been overthrown, and the current bloody rule seeks the radical extermination of the Polish nation itself and its sacred faith (*Broadcast*, 1940b, February 15).

The editor noted that the original statement was essentially true, but it was advisable to revise it to avoid being "troppo generale e ostile" (too general and hostile). The revised version read:

> Poland, until recently free, has suddenly come under the administration of the allied atheisms of nationalist and Bolshevik orientation. These regimes, through unjust military aggression, have overthrown the Polish state organism, and under their current rule seek to consolidate their domination over Polish territories, employing methods whose severe and just assessment will one day be made by history.

This example illustrates the nature of the editorial corrections.

Pope Pius XII's Attitude Toward Poland and the Polish People

Vatican Radio provided ongoing reports on Pope Pius XII's peace initiatives as well as his assistance to the Polish people.[3] One broadcast summarized the situation and the motives of certain hostile groups:

> Hostile individuals, taking advantage of the tragic plight of the Polish people, seek to instill in their hearts distrust and animosity toward the Holy See and the Holy Father, and

....

3   The issue of Pius XII's attitude toward Poland has recently been presented, among others, in Szpotański, 2025.

consequently to undermine their faith, which has always been the strongest foundation of the moral strength and patriotism of the Polish nation (*Broadcast*, 1940i, October 1).

Various broadcasts also highlighted specific examples of Pope Pius XII's engagement in aid and support for Poland and the Polish people.

The broadcast of 14 March 1940 reported that Pope Pius XII had made every possible effort to prevent the outbreak of war. On the afternoon of 31 August 1939, at the Pope's request, the ambassadors of Germany, Poland, France, Italy, and Great Britain were summoned to the Secretariat of State. Cardinal Luigi Maglione, the Secretary of State, handed them a letter from Pope Pius XII, which read:

> Vatican City, 31 August 1939. The Holy Father does not lose hope that the ongoing negotiations may lead to a just and peaceful resolution of the dispute, for which the whole world continues to pray. His Holiness therefore implores, in the name of God, the governments of Germany and Poland to do everything in their power to avoid any incident and to refrain from taking any action that might worsen the present tension. He further appeals to the governments of England, France, and Italy to support this initiative (*Broadcast*, 1940c, March 14).

The same broadcast also reported on the Pope's assistance to Polish refugees who had arrived in Romania. It was stated that "the Holy Father, concerned for their fate, sent a substantial sum of money to provide them with aid" (*Broadcast*, 1940c, March 14).

The same broadcast also mentioned Pope Pius XII's encyclical *Summi Pontificatus*, in which he wrote about Poland, "where countless families have been overtaken by death, abandonment, mourning, and destitution." Poland, he emphasized, "rightly demands from all people human and fraternal compassion" (Pius XII, *Summi Pontificatus*, trans. Radio Watykańskie).

In the broadcast of 25 July 1940, it was reported that "the Holy Father has granted greater material assistance to Poles in Rome who have been left without means of subsistence, and another equally large sum has been allocated for Polish refugees residing in Portugal." It was also added that "the Holy Father shows no less solicitude for refugees afflicted by the war in other countries" (*Broadcast*, 1940h, July 25).

In December 1940, extensive reports were broadcast on "the care of the Holy See for Polish refugees." Pope Pius XII was referred to as the "merciful

Samaritan" because of his immense material and spiritual assistance to Poles in exile. "Thanks to the great generosity of the Holy Father, a special Aid Office for Polish Refugees has been operating for six months at the Apostolic Nunciature in Rome" (*Broadcast*, 1940j, December 17).

It is noteworthy that, according to Vatican Radio transcripts, the Pope himself was aware that the image many Poles had of him did not reflect reality. A broadcast on 10 June 1941, granting an audience to Mother Laureta Lubowidzka, Superior General of the Sisters of the Holy Family of Nazareth, was reported. As stated in the program, she conveyed to the Holy Father a question from the Sisters about his health, to which he replied: "Tell them and write to them that the Vicar of Christ loves them all and loves all of Poland, that he carries them in his heart; tell them not to believe those who say otherwise." Then the Holy Father asked whether Poles believed what they heard from their enemies. When he was told that some deceived people did believe it, he emphatically repeated: "Write to them and tell them not to believe it, because the Pope loves Poland very much — and that is the truth, that is the truth, that is the truth" (*Broadcast*, 1941, June 10). Moreover, as reported in the broadcast, Pius XII several times said, "I love Poland, I love the Polish people, and I wish them all good." The Pope authorized the Sisters of the Holy Family of Nazareth "to repeat this declaration, both orally and in writing, to whomever they wish" (*Broadcast*, 1941j, June 10).

Persecution of the Church in Other Countries

On the air, the Polish Section of Vatican Radio also reported on the tragic situation of the Church and society in other countries during the Second World War.

Almost the entire broadcast of 4 April 1940 was devoted to the issue of the persecution of the Catholic Church in Austria. It reported on the forced expulsion of monks and nuns, the closure of five churches and twenty-four chapels, the imprisonment of priests in concentration camps, and the fact that "about one hundred priests were not granted permission to teach religion in schools." The program also mentioned the dissolution of Catholic organizations, including *Caritas*, and noted that "150 Catholic parish and association libraries were abolished. Eight religious magazines, with a total

circulation of over 100,000 copies, can no longer be published." The editorial commentary that followed stated:

> Here is an overview of the anti-religious and anti-Church activities of National Social-ism observed in a small area of the country. Considering all this, one cannot resist the conclusion that National Socialism is an enemy and persecutor not only of religion and the Catholic Church, but also an enemy and persecutor of its own nation, just like com-munism (*Broadcast*, 1940d, April 4).

Reports on the crimes of the occupiers and the persecution of the Catholic Church in Poland and around the world were broadcast regularly. On 8 April 1941, a program was primarily devoted to the suffering of the Church in several European countries. "Archbishop Gröber of Freiburg is right when he says that the Catholic Church in Germany is enduring persecution and restrictions without precedent. These restrictions extend to almost every aspect of life" (*Broadcast*, 1940d, April 4). A few days earlier, Vatican Radio had quoted *L'Osservatore Romano*, which published a letter from Archbishop Konrad Gröber that strongly denounced the actions of the National Socialists. He rejected accusations that "the German people, because of Christianity, had undergone a flawed development," and noted that Christians were regarded as those who "like an old wall or a pile of rubble, obstruct the victorious ideological march of hitlerism" (*Broadcast*, 1941d, April 4). As Vatican Radio reported, Archbishop Gröber wrote that "the truths of the Christian faith correspond to the German soul" (*Broadcast*, 1941d, April 4).

In April 1941, Vatican Radio broadcast the speech of General Władysław Sikorski, Commander-in-Chief of the Polish Armed Forces, which had previously been published in *L'Osservatore Romano*. In his address, he informed the public about the continual violation of international law by the Germans.

> German law within Germany is synonymous with violence — when it seizes citizens' property, their freedom, their civil rights; when it deprives them of life without any guilt on their part and without any trial; when it abolishes all civic liberties. In international relations, German law is synonymous with the violence inflicted upon the norms of the law of nations (*Broadcast*, 1941d, April 4).

Furthermore, General Sikorski emphasized that this law serves the Germans

to shoot defenseless women and children; to incorporate Polish lands; to execute tens of thousands of Polish citizens for their loyalty to the Polish State before the war and to the principles natural and dear to every civilized nation; to carry out mass deportations of Poles from their homeland; to remove the monuments of their civilization (*Broadcast*, 1941d, April 4).

Vatican Radio also reported on German propaganda, which claimed that "the development of the Catholic Church in Poland is proceeding in a more than satisfactory manner" (*Broadcast*, 1941d, April 4). Meanwhile, the Papal broadcast station provided up-to-date information on the atrocities committed by the German Nazis in the territories of Poland under their occupation.

At the same time, Vatican Radio reported on initiatives for prayer for peace during a time when war "torments and tears at human souls" (*Broadcast*, 1941c, April 25). Attention was also given to Poles under Soviet occupation. An example of this was the reading of a poignant letter from a listener in Lviv, who, using her own words, described the hell of exile to Siberia, where, as she wrote, "Grandmother, three children, and I" were sent. The letter recounted stories of immense suffering endured by the children and all the exiled, who prayed for a "wise order of death" (*Broadcast*, 1941c, April 25).[4]

Change in Vatican Radio's communication

A turning point in the communication of the Polish Section of Vatican Radio occurred at the end of April 1941. Fr. Ludwik Grzebień, SJ, emphasizes in his monograph that such uncompromising reporting on the wartime situation in Poland and other countries provoked a sharp reaction from the occupying authorities (*Polish Section of the Vatican Radio*, 1990, 63). However, the most important consideration was ethical. Based on reports from occupied countries, the Secretariat of State observed that, alongside criticisms of the occupiers on Vatican Radio, acts of terror against the population in these countries were intensifying. In response, Pope Pius XII, through the Secretary of State, Cardinal Luigi Maglione, issued a letter dated 28 April 1941

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4   This program, including a letter from a listener in Lviv, was rebroadcast on the North American transmission on May 2, 1941. See: DPC, Polish Section, Broadcast of May 2, 1941.

ordering a temporary suspension of broadcasts on anti-German topics (*Polish Section of the Vatican Radio*, 1990, 63). In reply, Fr. Włodzimierz Ledóchowski, the Superior General of the Jesuits, informed by letter on 30 April 1941 that these restrictions would be implemented. From that moment, the broadcasts were subjected to even greater internal censorship. The programs' transcripts were reviewed by Fr. Ortiz de Urbina, SJ, before transmission, with explanations provided by the Jesuit brother Eugeniusz Otrębski (*Polish Section of the Vatican Radio*, 1990, 63).

From that moment on, the situation in Poland during the war was hardly addressed. When it was mentioned, it primarily consisted of quotations from *L'Osservatore Romano* or from the Jesuit publication *Civiltà Cattolica*, which the Secretariat of State had previously reviewed.

On the airwaves on 20 May, the broadcast covered the index of banned books, Fr. Fulton Sheen's radio address, and actions in Buenos Aires against immoral books. It also reported on pastoral care for French and Polish prisoners in Bern and quoted the "golden thoughts of Kraszewski" (*Broadcast*, 1941e, May 20). A week later, the program focused on religious orders, providing statistical information, updates on the College of Cardinals, and a quotation from Cyprian Norwid's prayer to the Queen of Angels, "On the Resurrection." Three days later, the broadcast highlighted the recognition of the Catholic Church by Japan, discussed the essence of law, Japanese Catholics and legal matters, as well as spiritual care for soldiers in the United States, and announced an upcoming radio address by Pope Pius XII (*Broadcast*, 1941g, May 30). In the following days, summaries were provided of the papal speech delivered on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of Leo XIII's encyclical *Rerum Novarum* (*Broadcast*, 1941h, June 3; *Broadcast*, 1941i, June 6). These topics illustrate the fundamental change in communication within the Polish Section of Vatican Radio.

The situation in wartime Poland was mentioned only exceptionally and either on explicit instructions or from a theological perspective. On 10 June, a broadcast quoted a prayer for the reign of Christ over Poland, published in the *Messenger of the Sacred Heart* in London. In the same program, the previously mentioned audience of the Superior General of the Sisters of the Holy Family of Nazareth with Pope Pius XII was recounted, during which the Pope assured her that he loves the Polish people and Poland. At the same time, he authorized the Sisters of Nazareth to convey this message "both orally and in writing."

In subsequent broadcasts, quotations from *L'Osservatore Romano* (cf. *Broadcast*, 1941k, June 13; *Broadcast*, 1941n, June 26; *Broadcast*, 1941p, July 11) and *La Civiltà Cattolica* (*Broadcast*, 1941q, July 15) were used, or the focus was on the Universal Church — for example, the situation of the Church in the United States (*Broadcast*, 1941l, June 17), Bolivia (*Broadcast*, 1941m, June 20), Canada (*Broadcast*, 1941m, June 20), France (*Broadcast*, 1941m, June 20; *Broadcast*, 1941q, July 15), Portugal (*Broadcast*, 1941p, July 11), Syria (*Broadcast*, 1941q, July 15), Switzerland (*Broadcast*, 1941r, July 22), Finland (*Broadcast*, 1941s, July 25), Venezuela (*Broadcast*, 1941s, July 25), Mexico (*Broadcast*, 1941s, July 25), and other countries. Ongoing reports covered the activities of the Pope and the Holy See. Regarding the war, the broadcasts highlighted the charitable assistance provided by Pope Pius XII and the Vatican, including aid to Poland and the Polish people (*Broadcast*, 1941o, July 8).

The extent to which communication changed following Cardinal Maglione's letter to the Jesuit Superior General on 28 April is also evident in internal censorship practices. As seen from the previously cited broadcast transcripts, Vatican Radio in Polish had spoken directly about the unlawful and brutal actions of the Germans and Soviets. However, in the broadcast of 22 July 1941, a poem by Juliusz Słowacki, titled *In Tears, O Lord*, was subjected to censorship. In the margin next to the lines, "Remember what we suffered under the scourge of these powers, yet we did not give up our spirit," the censor noted regarding the remainder of the poem: "I fear that this second part may give cause for complaints, and at the present moment it is better to follow the safer course (*sequi tutiorem partem*)."

Another instance of editorial intervention occurred in the broadcast of 28 October 1941. The program reported on the construction of churches in Argentina. It included an allusion to the situation in Poland, accompanied by the following commentary: "May God grant that Polish bishops and priests, too, may soon be able to gather freely and deliberate on the reconstruction of Polish churches and on the building of God's Kingdom in the hearts of their faithful" (*Broadcast*, 1941t, October 28). The censor deleted this passage.

At times, the corrections involved deleting part of a sentence. During the 18 November 1941 broadcast, information was given about the death of Bishop Zygmunt Waitz of Salzburg. As a commentary on his biography, the following words were included: "At the end of his life, he had to witness the decline of more than one ecclesiastical institution, destroyed by a hand hostile to

the Catholic religion." The section following the comma was removed at the censor's order.

It should be noted that instances of censorship were relatively rare, as efforts were generally made in the broadcasts to respect the directive expressed in Cardinal Maglione's letter of 28 April 1941, which was of key importance for the Polish Section of Vatican Radio. It would be significant to compare the transcripts of these broadcasts with those of other sections. A preliminary verification conducted in the Archives of the Dicastery for Communication revealed that the records of broadcasts from other sections have not been preserved. However, some programs from the French Section were transcribed by the French Resistance and delivered to the editorial office. Naturally, these transcriptions do not reflect editorial work or censorship activities but only what was actually broadcast on air. In this context, the transcripts of the Polish Section of Vatican Radio constitute a unique source material of particular value both for Poland and for the history of Vatican Radio as a whole.

Conclusions

The transcripts of broadcasts from the Polish Section of Vatican Radio from 1940–1941 show that listeners were regularly informed about "the ordeal of the Polish nation, so as to document before the world where godless atheism — whether brown or red — leads." Vatican Radio consistently monitored and denounced the actions of the occupying forces, both in Poland and in other countries. It also reported on unlawful actions by the Germans against their own citizens. At the same time, the broadcasts conveyed information about the Pope's and the Holy See's activities and documents, including examples of Pope Pius XII's assistance to Poland and the Polish people.

At the end of April 1941, a radical shift occurred in the communication strategy of the Polish Section of Vatican Radio, prompted by ethical considerations and concerns for listeners' safety. It became evident that the uncompromising dissemination of information about the situation in Poland and other countries had provoked strong protests from the occupying authorities. It was observed that as criticism intensified on Vatican Radio's airwaves, acts of terror against the populations of occupied countries also increased. In this context, through the Secretary of State, Cardinal Luigi Maglione, Pope Pius

XII issued a letter dated 28 April 1941 instructing the temporary suspension of anti-German topics. In response, Father Włodzimierz Ledóchowski, Superior General of the Jesuits, confirmed in a letter dated 30 April 1941 that these restrictions would be implemented. From that point on, the broadcasts avoided current wartime issues in Poland and elsewhere, focusing instead on presenting the activities of the Pope and the Holy See, as well as the life of the Church in other countries.

The surviving transcripts indicate that superiors' censorship occurred occasionally; however, in general, the editors adhered faithfully to their superiors' directives.

Research into the Polish Section of Vatican Radio sheds significant light on Vatican communications during the Second World War.

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Kamila Rączy

 https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0070-1715

@ kamila.raczy@upjp2.edu.pl

The Pontifical University of John Paul II in Krakow

 https://ror.org/0583g9182

Media accountability systems in Poland

Review of the monograph: Urbaniak, P. (2024). *Systemy odpowiedzialności mediów w Polsce na tle systemów w innych krajach* [*Media accountability systems in Poland compared with those in other countries*]. University of Wrocław Press.

Contemporary media systems operate under dynamic conditions characterised by intensifying technological, political, and social change, which significantly reshapes both the scope and the nature of media responsibility. The gradual progress of digitalisation and technological development has brought about far-reaching changes, essentially transforming almost every area of life, including the ways in which information is transmitted and processed (Soczyński, 2018). In this context, publications that examine existing models of media responsibility by comparing them with regulations and practices adopted in other countries are particularly valuable for their cognitive contribution. Paweł Urbaniak's book *System odpowiedzialności mediów w Polsce na tle systemów w innych krajach* (*Media accountability systems in Poland compared with those in other countries*) fits within this research trend, offering a multifaceted comparative study based on rigorous scholarly apparatus and extensive source material. It is therefore worth emphasising that the Polish publishing market has been enriched by a highly valuable contribution to broadly understood media studies, one that also has an axiological dimension: it significantly advances reflection on the norms, values, and ethical aspects of media activity. Published in 2024 by the University of Wrocław Press, the monograph takes an interdisciplinary approach to the concept of the "media accountability system", integrating sociological, media-studies, and legal-institutional perspectives. The author raises questions that are central to contemporary media studies, including the scope of regulation, ethical standards, mechanisms of social control, and the practical consequences of existing norms. As a peer-reviewed study, it constitutes an important contribution to debate on the condition and future of media accountability systems, both in Poland and internationally.

The book's primary aim is to systematise and characterise knowledge about the media accountability system in Poland and to determine the extent of its impact on the national journalistic community. This holistic approach is especially valuable, as the issue has not yet been widely explored in Polish scholarship. The monograph reflects many years of study, reflection, and research, which gives it substantial scholarly value. Its structure combines a theoretical part (definitions, conceptual framework, and literature review), an empirical part (qualitative analysis), and synthetic conclusions concerning editorial practice and journalistic culture. Urbaniak begins by discussing the concept of media accountability and notes that scholars analysing various media systems and journalistic cultures have long pointed to the

unsatisfactory quality and ethics of contemporary media. He also considers the media-policy goals of democratic states, drawing on relevant scholarly positions. The author sets out to describe and organise the elements that constitute the media accountability system (including mechanisms of self-regulation, co-regulation, and formal regulation), with an emphasis on Poland and comparisons with solutions adopted elsewhere.

Urbaniak traces the historical development of media self-regulation tools in Europe, discussing the emergence of journalism education and the origins of self-regulatory arrangements in the international arena. He also mentions early attempts by the Polish journalistic community to define professional standards, including debates about licensed access to the journalism profession. In Chapter 3, the author focuses on the instruments of media accountability systems, providing a detailed classification of media self-regulation tools. He first examines preventive documents, considering journalistic codes of ethics in Poland and selected European countries, and discusses the effectiveness of ethical codes. He then analyses internal editorial documents, institutional prevention mechanisms, and entities established to provide criticism. In addition, he addresses internal editorial accountability, long-term prevention, permanent criticism, and ad hoc editorial measures. This analytical path reveals the diversity of solutions intended to safeguard ethical standards in the media, while also acknowledging the shortcomings as well as the strengths of particular approaches.

A crucial part of the monograph is Chapter 4, which presents extensive research results on media accountability systems. The research objectives are formulated as follows: (a) assessing the state of Polish journalism and Polish journalists; (b) assessing the strength of the influence of various regulatory and self-regulatory factors on journalists' behaviour in Poland; and (c) assessing the degree of institutionalisation of the Polish media accountability system and its specific elements at the community-wide and editorial levels (Urbaniak, 2024, p. 251).

Urbaniak writes: "The aim of the study was to assess the degree of institutionalisation of media self-regulation in Polish journalistic culture. The study aimed to gain knowledge about the extent to which self-regulatory tools are widespread in the Polish journalistic community and the impact of individual self-regulatory solutions. The study also sought to find answers to the question of the low effectiveness of both individual tools and media self-regulation in general" (Urbaniak, 2024, p. 251). The author defines his research aim

clearly, focusing on the degree of institutionalisation of media self-regulation in Polish journalistic culture. Notably, the study examines not only the prevalence of self-regulatory tools but also their real impact, and it attempts to explain why the system as a whole often proves ineffective. As a result, the publication offers a valuable diagnostic account of self-regulatory mechanisms in the Polish media.

The empirical material is based on an in-depth structured interview with questionnaire-like elements, entitled "Institutionalisation of media self-regulation tools in the opinion of Polish media employees". The study was conducted from June 2022 to September 2023 and comprised 110 interviews with Polish media employees (journalists, editors, and managers). This sampling strategy and the use of in-depth interviews provide robust qualitative material for analysing practices, attitudes, and perceptions related to accountability tools (e.g., codes of ethics, ethics councils, and legal regulations).

In this way, the book offers a rich picture of the subjective experiences of media actors, which usefully complements quantitative research in the field. At the same time, the monograph would benefit from a clearer description of sample selection procedures and the method used to analyse interview coding, which limits assessment of the representativeness and replicability of the results. The findings are presented transparently and address issues such as professionalism, journalistic ethics, media politicisation, the pauperisation of the journalistic community, economic pressures on editorial offices and journalists, as well as other challenges facing contemporary journalism in Poland. The author also discusses factors influencing journalists' behaviour, assesses the effectiveness of regulation and self-regulation, and describes forms of self-regulation within editorial offices. He notes additional internal editorial methods for improving the ethical quality of journalistic materials and strengthening journalists' accountability to various stakeholders. Urbaniak cites interesting—sometimes surprising, yet credible—assessments by journalism professionals. This authenticity is among the monograph's key cognitive strengths: it encourages further reflection and provides a useful reference point for subsequent media-studies research.

The question posed in the research—concerning the determinants of effective self-regulation in journalism—can be regarded as the core of the book's reflections. It is a question raised not only by journalists, but also by media scholars and media users more broadly. Urbaniak approaches it from multiple perspectives. He first reviews Polish self-regulation models and then

compares them with arrangements operating in other countries, including Italy, the Netherlands, Germany, and the United Kingdom. Particularly noteworthy is his own classification of self-regulatory tools and media accountability mechanisms across press, radio, television, and the internet, which enables a comparative view of complementary regulatory instruments. He also presents the social contexts of media self-regulation, combining a contemporary perspective with historical background. As he writes, "The description of self-regulatory solutions used in individual systems was intended, firstly, to demonstrate the wide range of possibilities available to journalistic communities creating their own media accountability systems and, secondly, to attempt to identify certain models—distinct ways of shaping media self-regulation in individual media systems" (Urbaniak, 2024, p. 251). The selected contexts are carefully justified and demonstrate the author's extensive expertise.

This peer-reviewed monograph may be regarded as a compendium in media studies, as it brings together current scholarly achievements related to media responsibility and supplements them with empirical research. Drawing on a broad range of sources, the author analyses the concept of media responsibility and engages with positions expressed by thinkers in media and journalism studies. In doing so, he examines types of media responsibility systems as well as key determinants of journalistic professionalism. The reader receives a publication that reflects careful and well-considered work, including a judicious selection of central issues and a clear synthesis of findings.

The author's language also deserves attention. Despite the importance and complexity of the subject, the text remains accessible and thus reads smoothly. The monograph offers three key contributions: (a) it integrates comparative discussion of media regulation with extensive empirical material from Poland; (b) it proposes an original typology of regulatory tools that may support further comparative research; and (c) it foregrounds the voices of media practitioners, which is less common in studies focused primarily on legal acts or regulatory theories.

Paweł Urbaniak's *System odpowiedzialności mediów w Polsce na tle systemów w innych krajach* [*Media accountability systems in Poland compared with those in other countries*] is a timely and valuable publication offering a systematic and empirically grounded overview of media accountability issues in Poland. The work's strengths include its empirical character (grounded in numerous interviews with practitioners), its comparative perspective (which situates the

Polish case within a broader international context), and its ethical dimension, emphasising the need for media responsibility towards society — an aspect of particular importance in the era of disinformation. The book will be of interest to media-studies scholars, sociologists, political scientists, ethicists, students of media studies, and journalists concerned with media regulation and ethics. It is well worth reading, as it provides a nuanced, evidence-based account of how Polish media operate in the context of responsibility and regulation, while also comparing these arrangements with models implemented elsewhere — an approach that may inspire reform or further reflection.

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