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THE CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES
OF ENTERING THE SOCIAL MEDIA SPHERE:
A CASE STUDY OF POLISH CITIES

ABSTRACT: The social media sphere is growing in Poland as more and more people embrace the new ways of communication. Cities in Poland are also slowly catching up with the social media revolution as all 16 provincial cities are present on Facebook. Profiles are static in nature and have problems with engaging the audience in any kind of meaningful conversation. The purpose of this article is to indicate the key challenges that cities are facing while entering the social sphere. Official profiles of all provincial cities in Poland will be analysed to highlight possible ways of improving their digital image.

KEYWORDS: Marketing, social, media, city, engagement, promotion, content.

Preface

The Internet allows each user to contact anyone around the world and communicate with them using various multimedia tools like text, voice, or video. The World Wide Web is also an endless source of information on any given subject. Web page was the central point of the early stages of its development, known as Web 1.0 (West, Turner, 2008). To create content one needed to acquire complicated programming skills and pay fees in order to reserve a space on the web. Despite those barriers, many created a footprint in the new digital world, beginning an era of limitless web services including commercial sites and non-profit projects.

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Many traditional news outlets like newspapers, television, and radio broadcasters mirrored their content on their respective web pages. Additionally, many services emerged allowing users to instantly communicate with each other, provided both were using the same service (Dunkels, 2010). This introduced the issue of fragmentation, where finding people and information was no longer a problem, but finding information and people relevant to one's needs has become a challenge. Social media seem to address this need by allowing people to gather in groups connected by similar interests, professions and hobbies (Mangold, Faulds, 2009). This allows them to exchange information and ideas with each other and form a deeper bond than would otherwise be possible. Commercial bodies understood it relatively early and utilised social media to develop a deeper connection with their consumer base by providing an opportunity to get closer with their brand, product or service. Non-profit institutions also followed their footsteps. Yet cities in Poland seem to have an issue with finding their place in the social sphere. Many have tried to establish a presence, but with little results. The purpose of this article is to analyse social media profiles of all Polish voivodeship cities and scrutinise how new media are utilised to communicate with their citizens.

The social media phenomenon

Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) define social media as web-based applications allowing users to create, view and share content among each other. In essence, these are tools that allow any person capable of using any web browser to become a content creator and to publish her/his work on the Internet. Others can view the work, discuss it and share it. This allows an individual to create a personalised stream of content relevant and unique to the person in question (Patrut and Patrut, 2013). As the content is being viewed by many users with different backgrounds and previous experiences, it is being validated by them at the same time. Therefore everything valuable is being promoted, while low quality content is being dismissed. Furthermore, as users publish more high quality content, they gain prestige among others and their recommendations become valuable and trustworthy (Bakshy, Rosenn, Marlow, Adamic, 2012). It has

been well-established that people tend to follow recommendations from people they know and respect, therefore a word of mouth is considered one of the strongest marketing techniques (Kotler, 2010). This explains why commercial bodies decided to endorse social media and treat them as one of primary communication channels with their customers. On the one hand, this allows the user to contact the company directly and discuss any issues one might have. It also allows them to become a part of a community of people using a given product and share their experiences. For a company, social media present an unprecedented opportunity to gain insight into consumer's mind and habits (Chu, Kim, 2009). Both sides gain something by engaging in conversation and they can provide valuable information. However, for the exchange to occur, the company must first present interesting and entertaining content to attract the users. Simple advertising materials are not enough, there has to be something more personable that will not only be informative, but also influence one's mood and experience (Evans, 2010). According to Sotrender (2016), the two most popular fan pages on Facebook are the main page of the wireless telecom Play and the Heart and Mind owned by Orange telecom. These two brands understood that in order to attract people they needed to provide entertaining and engaging content that people can relate to. Therefore both have created fictional characters that live their lives in the social sphere. New episodes are being published regularly, depicting different situations and problems known from daily life. Solutions to those problems are marketing materials of services offered by those companies, but they are hidden inside the narrative. Therefore each user can relate to it and is more likely to accept the marketing message. The power of social media is allowing the users to get immersed in the content and treat marketing materials as an integral part of the story (Jefferson, Tenton, 2015). Otherwise people will instinctively feel they are being subjected to advertising and reject the message.

New media allow the users to take an interactive role in ongoing discussions. Plowman and Wenchel (2015) point out that Facebook, Twitter, and other platforms allow users to contact each other, as well as corporate and public bodies. This allows them to discuss their issues on equal terms – both parties have the same tools available and comfort of a known environment. Other means of communication like traditional mail or meeting in person, inherently require both parties to go out of their

normal routine. Social media allows users to publish content virtually anywhere so everyone can find the perfect environment to work. Axel Bruns (2008) argues that the convenience of the communication process is equally important as rewards it brings. By publishing valuable content or raising important points in a discussion, users can earn positive reputation and create a strong personal brand. Reynolds (2013) comments that many young people who explore potential job opportunities utilise social media for building their professional image. Therefore, it is important for any entity that wishes to exist in the social media space, to allow users to create their own content and endorse it. This can be valuable for any brand as content created by fans can strengthen its message and allow for a closer relationship between them.

Social sphere in Poland

Social media usage follows worldwide trends visible in many European countries and the USA. According to the latest research published in a 2016 Digital report (We are social media, 2016), there is around 26.7 million Internet users and 14.7 million of those use social media regularly. This means that new media are very well-established in the Polish market and Poles are eager to explore new communication tools. The same report reveals that Facebook is the dominant platform with 100% market penetration. In other words, every one of the 14.7 million social media users has a profile on the platform.

This situation can be explained by Facebook's versatility and ubiquity. It is considered a general tool where every kind of message has a place: from private pictures and diary-like posts to professional content. The medium allows users to connect with almost anyone in the world and form groups that focus on a particular issue or interest. Young Jin (2015) argues that users will instinctively search for solutions that provide maximum benefit at a lowest cost. Cost here can be defined as an effort required to set up a profile. By signing up with Facebook an individual is granted access to the largest contact database on the Internet. Therefore it is very easy to stay in touch both on the personal and professional level.

Chart 1. Top Active Social Platforms in Poland
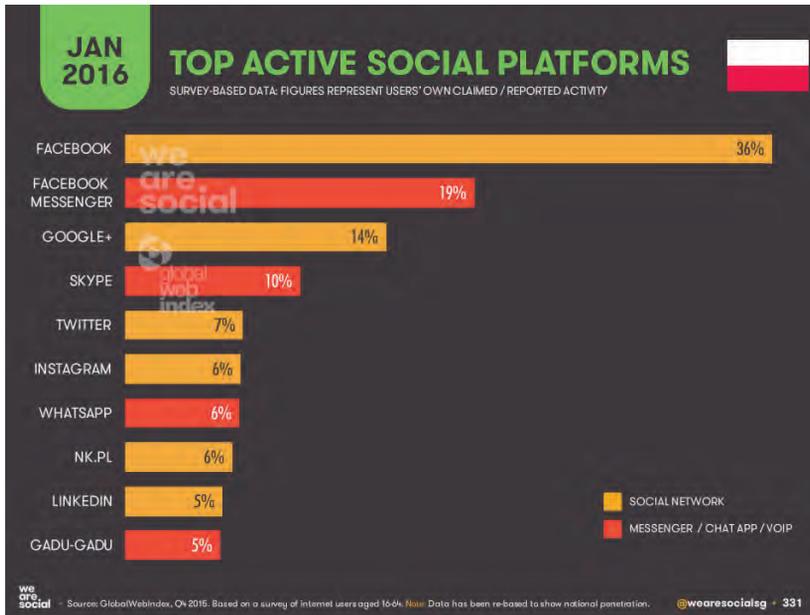
Source: Digital in 2016 Report.

The second social platform of choice in Poland is Twitter with around 3.67 million active users (Twitter Trends 03/2016). The platform is not as universal as Facebook and is often regarded as a niche medium. Many believe it is a tool reserved for politicians and journalists. Although that is not technically true, Mistewicz (2014) argues that because of its 140 character limit Twitter has a high barrier of entry and is difficult to understand for new users. Messages are mostly text-based and are displayed in a chronological order rather than threaded, therefore a conversation is difficult to follow. This makes the platform a space for experienced people that have very specific needs and interests.

Other platforms such as Instagram and Google+ (Digital in 2016, 2016) have approximately two million active users, which presents no competition to the market leader. In this article, research will focus on Facebook as the dominant platform, allowing access to the largest user base. For a new entity entering the social sphere, such as a city, this consideration is important, as it allows to reach maximum number of users with one profile and to establish a permanent presence.

City as a network of products

A city is essentially a collection of products and services offered to its users to satisfy their needs (Czornik, 2013). These products are often connected with each other forming a network of interdependencies that might be difficult to understand for an average user. Offered services can range from health care to tourist and culture attractions and study and job opportunities (Zawada, 2013). Therefore a city can compete with others to attract new users and companies by offering a more comprehensive range of products and services. However, traditional marketing has limited potential. As mentioned before, users have the knowledge required to detect marketing materials and tend to view it with scepticism. In that context, social media seem to be a solid way to build a genuine community around a given city. This would allow the users to inform and discuss matters important to them, while providing live feedback to the officials. A city profile on Facebook could serve the following (Guzowski, 2015):
   • Informing users about products and services offered by the city;
   • Informing users about current events occurring in the city;
   • Serve as a meeting hub for users interested in the city affairs;
   • Collect feedback from users regarding quality of life and services offered;
   • Build a positive relationship between users and the city.
These goals can be reached by providing users with clear guidelines what they can expect from the profile and how to provide tangible benefits. Luttrell (2016) argues those benefits can range from strictly informational (the user is well-informed about issues regarding the city) to more direct recognition by the authorities for their contribution or even discounts for products and services. There are no strict guidelines here as the presence of cities in the social media sphere is a fairly new phenomenon. The general rule is that the profile administrator, whoever it might be, should provide interesting content and allow the users to freely engage in discussions and share it among themselves (Lieb, 2011). From this perspective, the city officials should take the initiative as they have the advantage of having the knowledge and means to start a conversation. Users can start their own discussions through unofficial profiles, but this raises the risk of inaccurate information being spread. Furthermore, as people build their own communities focused on issues of a given city, it might become more difficult to utilise their potential for official initiatives like citizen participation.

City in social media

Facebook is the most popular social platform among Polish Internet users, so it is understandable that Polish cities decided to establish their presence there. Preliminary screening revealed that all of Polish provincial cities are present on Facebook and publish content regularly. However, there are no previous attempts by the Polish academic community to analyse what kind of information is being delivered. To answer the question a content analysis survey was conducted among all 18 provincial cities between the 1st of April and 30th of June 2016. Poland is divided into 16 voivodeships, however, two of those – Kujawsko-Pomorskie and Lubuskie – share administration offices among two cities, therefore the number of cities analysed is greater than the voivodeship themselves. Each city provides a link to the official Facebook profile on their main website:

Table 1. Official Facebook profiles of Polish voivodeship cities

City name	Name of the profile	Profile Address
Białystok	Rising Białystok	https://www.facebook.com/Wschodzacy.Bialystok/
Bydgoszcz	bydgoszcz.pl	https://www.facebook.com/bydgoszczpl/
Gdańsk	Gdańsk City	https://www.facebook.com/gdansk/
Gorzów	Gorzów Harbor	https://www.facebook.com/przystan
Katowice	Katowice Official City Profile	https://www.facebook.com/Katowice.eu/
Kielce	Kielce City	https://www.facebook.com/kielce.official/
Kraków	Kraków Official Profile	https://www.facebook.com/wwwKrakowPL/
Lublin	Lublin City	https://www.facebook.com/MiastoLublin/
Łódź	Łódź	https://www.facebook.com/lodzpl/
Olsztyn	Olsztyn City	https://www.facebook.com/olsztyn.eu/
Opole	Opole City	https://www.facebook.com/MiastoOpole/
Poznań	Poznań City	https://www.facebook.com/Poznan/
Rzeszów	Rzeszów Capital of Innovation	https://www.facebook.com/Rzeszow.stolica.innowacji/

Table 1. (cont.)

City name	Name of the profile	Profile Address
Szczecin	Szczecin Floating Garden	https://www.facebook.com/szczecin.eu/
Toruń	My Toruń	https://www.facebook.com/MiastoTorun/
Wrocław	Wroclaw [Wroclove]	https://www.facebook.com/wroclaw.wroclove/
Warszawa	Warszawa Capital City	https://www.facebook.com/warszawa/
Zielona Góra	Zielona Góra Official Account	https://www.facebook.com/MiastoZG/

Source: Own research.

Most cities decided to use simple names that can be easily identified with a given city, for example, Łódź or Miasto Olsztyn (Olsztyn City). However, in some cases the name does not indicate that the profile is the official one – Szczecin Floating Garden or Wschodzący Białystok (Rising Białystok). As official profiles must compete with unofficial or commercial profiles for the user's attention, it is vital to make it as easy as possible to find them. Many newspapers and websites provide specialised profiles for a given city to publish local information like news, events etc. In this scenario, the city should take care of adequate positioning of the profile in order to be the first to provide the content; otherwise, commercial entities will take its place.

In order to operationalise the research process, a list of categories has been developed to categorise the content published on the official profiles:

• City offer – services and products offered by the city, aimed at enabling access and use of available local goods to the general public (Kavaratzis, 2014);

• Ongoing communication with the users – information regarding current situation in the city;

• Promotion – information about interesting events and products offered;

• User survey – questionnaires and surveys aimed at establishing the users' views on a given subject;

• User provided content – content provided by the users;

• Participation support – content aimed at promoting and enhancing citizen participation (Effing, 2011).

The study was conducted in all cities simultaneously to ensure that posts were categorised according to the same criteria and to minimise interpretation errors.

Table 2. Total number of posts published on all profiles

Category	Number of posts	Percentage number of posts
City offer	1763	39%
Ongoing communication with the users	1203	27%
Promotion	1072	24%
User survey	0	0%
User provided content	242	5%
Participation support	238	5%
Total	**4518**	**100%**

Source: Own research.

Table 2 presents a summary of the study for all cities. The results clearly indicate that most of the content published is driven by the city itself and its administration. More than 50% of the posts focus on the city offer and promotion. On the other hand, there were no attempts made to utilise the survey capabilities of Facebook. The platform allows for the creation of different types of pools and surveys free of any charge. Users can participate in them at their convenience, while results are gathered and displayed instantly. It is obvious that such surveys would be far from representative as only a portion of citizens would take part in them, but as Ramo and Prochaska (2012) pointed out, it can be utilised for preliminary studies and formulation of hypothesis. In total, only 5% of posts were created by the users, which is contrary to the nature of social media. Most user-generated posts are photos and videos depicting the city or its landscapes. 90% of total number of posts are materials prepared by the city administration.

Table 3. Results of content analysis conducted on 18 official profiles of Polish voivodeship cities

City	City offer		Ongoing communication with the users		Promotion		User survey		Content provided by the users		Participation support		Total	
Białystok	96	34%	111	39%	51	18%	0	0%	0	0%	26	9%	284	100%
Bydgoszcz	66	23%	94	32%	44	15%	0	0%	69	24%	20	7%	293	100%
Gdańsk	87	31%	47	17%	133	47%	0	0%	2	1%	14	5%	283	100%
Gorzów W.	122	42%	125	43%	12	4%	0	0%	0	0%	34	12%	293	100%
Katowice	243	79%	39	13%	9	3%	0	0%	0	0%	16	5%	307	100%
Kielce	56	26%	82	38%	63	29%	0	0%	1	0%	14	6%	216	100%
Kraków	79	32%	65	27%	79	32%	0	0%	9	4%	13	5%	245	100%
Lublin	86	27%	88	28%	121	38%	0	0%	17	5%	7	2%	319	100%
Łódź	44	17%	51	20%	139	55%	0	0%	2	1%	16	6%	252	100%
Olsztyn	123	49%	70	28%	44	18%	0	0%	0	0%	14	6%	251	100%
Opole	73	40%	70	39%	21	12%	0	0%	14	8%	3	2%	181	100%
Poznań	111	50%	33	15%	52	23%	0	0%	24	11%	3	1%	223	100%
Rzeszów	150	54%	59	21%	49	18%	0	0%	12	4%	6	2%	276	100%
Szczecin	133	47%	31	11%	104	37%	0	0%	0	0%	15	5%	283	100%
Toruń	91	37%	61	25%	43	18%	0	0%	36	15%	12	5%	243	100%
Wrocław	69	27%	119	46%	53	21%	0	0%	15	6%	0	0%	256	100%
Warszawa	129	43%	52	18%	50	17%	0	0%	41	14%	25	8%	297	100%
Zielona Góra	5	31%	6	38%	5	31%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	16	100%

Source: Own research.

As a result, the profiles appear very static. Since most of the content is generated by professional staff, its quality is very good and appealing. Posts are always accompanied by photos or videos that illustrate the topic. Texts are well-written and rather formal in nature. In general, the profiles can be described as interactive billboards or message boards. They do convey the messages in an attractive manner, but no more than that. The obvious question is: what is the point of such communication? As all of the studied cities have webpages that replicate the content provided on Facebook, one must wonder, what is the place of social media on the communication map of the city? An argument can be made that information spreads faster through social media and it is easier to reach a wider audience. Secondly, the message is being delivered directly to the user, so there is a greater chance that he/she will actually read it. However, there is the problem of fragmentation of the published content. A city is a large entity offering and providing a wide variety of services. In all cases the Facebook profile of a given city provided information that was relevant at that time. The result was that the audience was given information about new scholarships for students and free spots in kindergartens during the same day. This approach may cause information fatigue among the audience, as many of the messages are simply of no interest to them.

The second problem is the scarcity of user-generated content. As already stated, social media give both the users and the brands an opportunity to get closer and to initiate a dialogue. Braun et al. (2008) argues that a city can also be a brand that people can be very passionate about. From that perspective, it is understandable that users search for new ways to interact with it. Seemingly, local governments are not interested in such interactions and focus on presenting their offer. While in principle utilising Facebook for promotional purposes is not a bad thing, it has to be balanced with other types of content. McLaughlin and Davenport (2010) have concluded that building an effective brand requires a strong community of supporters. As many people treat the Internet as their primary source of information, it is very important to allow and help those communities to flourish in the virtual world. The easiest way to do that is to allow the users to get creative by encouraging and publishing their works like photos, videos, or any other content. My research shows that cities tend to do the opposite. Most content is generated in-house. For example, Bydgoszcz has the largest portion of its content generated by users – 24%, while seven among the

surveyed cities had no user-generated content. This clearly shows that although cities in Poland have embraced social media as a communication medium, there are barriers that prevent them from utilising their full potential.

Potential barriers can be characterised as follows:

• Inability to understand the nature of social media – city administration may not fully understand the nature of communication using the new media, therefore they attempt to utilise traditional methods by providing the content to the user, without the need for any kind of feedback (Couldry, 2012);

• Fear of potential crisis – social media encourage fast communication and rapid spread of information, both positive and negative in nature. If a user posts a negative comment about the city or its services, others might follow. The result is a crisis situation where negative feedback is generated constantly, which, if handled incorrectly, might damage the city reputation and image (Czaplicka, 2013);

• Inability to utilise the full potential of modern social media platforms – this aspect was partially confirmed by my research. Cities do not use Facebook surveys functionally, although, in theory, it would be an ideal tool for gathering feedback and ideas from the users. This might be because the administration does not know about the tool itself or simply does not believe this kind of feedback might provide tangible value;

• Others reasons – they might include budget or staff constraints which allow only for limited presence in the social media sphere. Instant communication requires constant monitoring of the profile, which in turn demands resources. As those are limited, cities decide to establish a static presence and focus on delivering information to the users, which can be planned in advance and automated.

It is outside of the scope of this article to investigate which of the barriers mentioned above play crucial role, although it is quite probable that all of them can have a tangible impact. The result is that cities in Poland are present in the social sphere in a static, confined way. Published content is technically proficient and attractive, but it does not encourage user engagement. The information is delivered to the user on a daily basis with no expectation of feedback. This situation can be problematic for future relationships between the cities and their citizens. The euphoria surrounding social media is slowly starting to wear off and people do not subscribe to new sources so willingly.

Bright et al. (2015) and Kayaa et al. (2016) indicate that more people each year start to exhibit signs of "social media fatigue." The phenomenon is described as being overwhelmed by new content available constantly, which results in user's inability to process it. Therefore some users start to limit the number of sources and people they follow, choosing only the most valuable ones. As such, official city profiles need to present an appealing and engaging alternative to commercial profiles, otherwise users may simply unsubscribe from the profile. Bright et al. (2015) and Kayaa et al. (2016) also speculate that social media fatigue will continue to affect more users in the coming years. Users will become even more particular about people and sources they connect with. Local governments must realise that they should attract users, as many of them are still searching for new opportunities to share their passion for the city they live in.

Further research opportunities

Cities and social media are a new and unexplored territory in the Polish academic community. In this article a key problem is indicated – social media are being treated as a static medium – a way to transmit information to users. There is very little interaction between the parties involved in the communication process. City officials may lack the necessary knowledge to fully utilise the potential of Facebook, therefore they have chosen a safer and simpler approach. This statement should be explored as it might reveal the true nature of barriers that prevent cities and its citizens to communicate in a truly interactive way. To fully understand the issue, both the city hall staff and the users should be interviewed in order to discover their true perceptions of social media. One could argue that users do not expect any kind of deeper interaction with their town and providing information is sufficient.

Conclusions

The main scope of this article was to explore how voivodeship cities in Poland utilise Facebook to communicate with citizens. Social media allow its users to create and share any information in an attractive and interactive form. By choosing the right people

and sources to follow, a personalised information stream can be created, one that delivers valuable and relevant information only. Commercial bodies have already discovered that the same mechanism can be used to develop a bond with potential and current customers through engaging and entertaining content. In return, users are more willing to share their personal views and opinions, for the benefit of both sides. From that perspective, a city can be viewed as a network of products and services tied together and offered to the citizens. Therefore both the products and services can be communicated by using similar marketing techniques. Building an active community around social media is essential as it allows the users to identify with the brand and spread information among one's peers. Yet, voivodeship capital cities in Poland focus mainly on providing information about their offers and promoting a positive image among its citizens. User-generated content is treated as unimportant; some cities ignore that aspect entirely. It is unclear why local governments are reluctant to invite users to cooperate and openly discuss city matters. As it stands, the official city profiles are treated like interactive message boards that provide information in a modern, attractive way. This may not be enough to convince their users to remain subscribed to the profile.

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