



**Building
Trust in
Journalism**

- Poland

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The 'Building Trust in Journalism in CEE' project is developed by the Ethical Journalism Network in partnership with the Evens Foundation and the Fritt Ord Foundation. This report is funded by the Evens Foundation.

Composition and cover:
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April 2020, Poland

**Evens
Foundation**



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This policy report provides an overview of the challenges and opportunities that the media in Poland are currently facing. Based on a number of key stakeholder interviews that took place in Warsaw and Cracow, it explores the impact of political polarisation on the media and the growing political pressure on media independence and professional practice. The end of state socialism brought about a period of media pluralism and growth in the 90s and 2000s but that has developed into a landscape where polarised media are dominating the debate and with democracy feeling more under threat than ever. Public media continues to provide the government with a platform for party propaganda and narrative domination in an overall environment where hate speech, xenophobia, racism and the harassment of journalists is becoming more commonplace and accepted by some elites. In a society where divides are deeper by the day, journalism and professional media are also beginning to show those divisions. This report argues, however, that despite these highly challenging circumstances, there are a number of opportunities to support independent voices through innovative journalistic practices and business models.

This report draws the following conclusions:

There is an overwhelming consensus that the media environment is highly polarised and that this has become ingrained in Poland. The media are very strongly aligned to political parties and religious or ideological entities or groups and their content and narratives reflect these associations.

The challenges that the media are facing in Poland from extreme politicization are further exacerbated by some of the global issues that are affecting all media, from funding to declining public trust in media institutions.

While there is a huge diversity in the media, with a multitude of different voices and opinions, the media in Poland have seen an increase in the use of language and content that could be considered to be hate speech and the rise in hateful narratives towards minority groups, migrants (in particular from Ukraine), the LG-BTQI community and gender intolerance is palpable. Majority groups such as Catholics, priests, large families have also come under attack from different sides of the political debate.

Media legislation that governs the public media in Poland has allowed governments to take firm control of public television, TVP, and to some extent the Polish Radio (PR). This has further intensified under the current government as laws continue to be promulgated in order to give the ruling party even greater jurisdiction.

The private media sector is dominated by a number of different key players. Yet again, each has their own political agenda and as such the number of impartial platforms and independent voices remain limited and often stifled. Official use of defamation and libel laws is rife as a means of cracking down on media freedom and opposition.

Audiences of news produced for the Polish market and media consumers continue to watch and consume media with which they agree politically. Confirmation bias dictates people's media choices and as such the role of the media as information provider and facilitator of debate is contested. This is further intensified by limited media distribution and internet penetration in rural areas.

Regional media and journalists feel less exposed to political circles and therefore more able to report independently and innovatively as well as more flexible to network and support each other. However, they have less access to national government, sources and information.

METHODOLOGY

The independent evaluation of the Polish media landscape presented in this document is based on fieldwork conducted by the Ethical Journalism Network (EJN) between January and November 2019. It has been produced as a part of a project developed in partnership with the Evens Foundation (EF), and with the Fritt Ord Foundation (SFO). The 'Building Trust in Journalism' project aims to explore the condition and identify the needs of the media community in Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia in order to better define the challenges of contemporary journalism.

The report is based on desk research, which is more fully informed by a series of interviews with key stakeholders in the Polish media landscape. Forty-two journalists, editors and publishers from across 18 newspapers, broadcasters, civil society organisations (CSOs) and journalist's organisations were interviewed. The focus was on assessing the key challenges facing the media in Poland with a view to presenting a set of recommendations for ways of dealing with these issues. The EJN tried to include a broad spectrum of views and opinions from the media sector, however, members of the liberal, conservative, Catholic and independent press were the key informants. Interviews also took place with journalists from the public media which were also included in this report with a smaller representation from an ultra-conservative weekly magazine and local media in Poland.

This paper also draws upon some of the EJN's previous work in assessing ethical and professional media practice. A number of papers on hate speech, migration reporting and media governance as well as on-going work with the Reporters Sans Frontier's (RSF) Journalism Trust Initiative inform the analysis in this report.¹ Similarly, the report draws on key academic paradigms used to study the media. These include political economy, sociology of news production as well as the media culture paradigm. Questions ranged from enquiry into business models, modes of governance, newsroom structures and hierarchies as well as editorial objectives and ambitions.

This paper does not profess to be a comprehensive study of the media in Poland by any stretch. It is mainly based on the interviews that took place in between January and November 2019 with input from Polish stakeholders and experts in a peer review process that gives it some professional integrity. The EJN does not claim to be an expert on the Polish media; it aims to provide an external perception of the challenges that the Polish media are facing, based on its own journalistic background and academic vigour.

¹ All reports and further information can be found on the EJN's website, <https://ethicaljournalismnetwork.org> (Accessed June 6 2020)

INTRODUCTION

The media landscape in Poland is increasingly polarised as a result of the political divide in the country; it is reflective of the political sphere while at the same time reinforcing the political divisions. The intense polarisation in the media, combined with the impact of wider global issues affecting the media, such as the collapse of the traditional business model and technology, is exacerbating an already partisan milieu.

The government in Poland initiated an overhaul of the public broadcaster and its related media after the last election to ensure that its interests were better reflected within its structures by replacing over sixty established journalists with committed party loyalists. Political commentary is led by politically aligned media outlets and social media in a society where media controlled by political parties is affecting the public debate.² Legislative frameworks and laws are decades old with an over-reliance on penal codes rather than media legislation that might encourage more democratic practices and freedom of expression. The use of Article 212 to silence media through accusations of defamation is becoming more prolific, according to some of the key stakeholders interviewed, although there is very little available data around this issue.

Pressure on the media is much more intense due to the political climate.³ Many media organisations have very strong political allegiances and journalists – operating in an atmosphere where intimidation is rife and job security is weak – are less bound by a common professional or ethical code. Trolling against the media is as common as against politicians and a backlash against ‘foreign-funded media’ and journalists has become a beacon for hate speech. A rise in hate speech from the political and religious groups is echoed in media that are strongly affiliated with each.

As a result, audiences are choosing to consume the media that reflects their political views, with little challenging public interest journalism being produced. It was noted that audiences are less likely to share non-political content and therefore media organisations are responding accordingly.

It is clear that there is a need for media reform and initiatives that are tailored towards Polish circumstances. On an encouraging note there is a growing list of critical publications emerging and signs that a new generation on both sides is keen to begin to engage with one another. It is imperative that collaboration and coordination between media owners and producers is encouraged. There is an urgent need for a conversation around how the media can play its role in providing the public with the information they need to participate in political processes.

2 There are distinctions between the different types of control exerted on the media: direct control by PiS of the public media; indirect control and influence through ownership structures that link media with PiS include Gazeta Polska and Sieci; cases of ideological alignment to political parties without direct links include TVN and Gazeta Wyborcza for example who are highly critical of PiS and broadly supportive of the opposition but not directly or financially linked to any party.

3 Both Freedom House and Reporters Sans Frontieres’ country reports provide more detail and background the intensifying pressure on the Polish media. Available from <https://freedomhouse.org/country/poland/freedom-world/2020>, <https://rsf.org/en/poland> (Accessed on March 16 2020)

PART 1

PUBLIC MEDIA AND THE RISING INFLUENCE OF THE STATE

While the historical origins and nationalisation of the Polish public media date back to 1935, its current incarnations, the Telewizja Polska Spółka Akcyjna (TVP) and the Polskie Radio (PR), were born in 1992 and 1993, when laws were passed creating separate public television and public radio entities respectively. As with many public broadcasting services, managing the relationship and degree of influence by the state and government has always been challenging. This was an issue with post-communist governments in Poland and has become more pronounced since the late 2010s and under the current governing party. The Law and Justice Party has ratified a number of legislative reforms and administrative processes that has seen an escalation in their involvement and authority over many state institutions, including the public media. A law that was introduced in 2015 known as the 'small media law' gave government ministers the final authority in the appointment of the Director General positions at public television and radio.

Key stakeholders were deeply concerned that, since 1989, there has been an unprecedented attempt to control the political narrative in Poland via the public broadcasting service. Stakeholders across the board described the content of the public broadcaster as 'propaganda' suggesting that they were producing misleading and inaccurate content.

'It has become like Korea – its pure propaganda.' – Freelance Journalist

There was a huge concern that professional quality journalism was no longer a consideration at the outlets which were often called the 'state' media rather than the 'public' media. It was also alleged that the government news agency was going in a similar direction and fact-checking was no longer practised by its employees. According to the European Journalism Observatory, the public media's coverage of the government's handling of the Covid-19 pandemic, which has been heavily criticised, was uncritical and partisan 'revealing a distinct political bias'.⁴ The Polish government has used the Covid-19 crisis and the diverted public attention to vote on draft bills that could eventually lead to a ban on abortion and make sex education illegal. Public media have remained silent.

'The public television is dreadful. They lack any professional standards.' – Editor, conservative Catholic magazine

4 Pacula, Paulina. 2020. 'Poland: Coronavirus and the media'. *European Journalism Observatory*. Available from <https://en.ejo.ch/ethics-quality/poland-coronavirus-and-the-media> (Accessed June 5 2020)

In addition, many stakeholders cited on-going attacks and harassment of journalists and media organisations by the government via the public television service. One journalist told of continuing persecution by the public television over a period of two years based on an idea for a story that was neither written nor published. A mainstream private broadcaster recounted a number of instances where the public service media had used their main news bulletins to bring their content into disrepute.

'The government is trying to discredit us through the state media.' – Journalist, TVN24

The increased use of Article 212 from Poland's penal code, which enables journalists to be criminally charged and imprisoned for defamation and libel, is also of grave concern amongst media stakeholders. The government continues to deploy Article 212 in an attempt to crack down on freedom of the press and several attempts at repealing the law have failed. It is seen as a having a 'chilling effect' on journalism.⁵

The threat to democratic institutions was underlined by the recounting of the State's attempt to limit the media's access to parliament and cover parliamentary proceedings and political processes. Stakeholders were also keen to point out that draconian legislation was also being used to stifle freedom of the media with a press law dating back to 1984 still in use.

'They are trying to gag us in another way, to use the penal code, and to use their own media to take away our credibility.' – Journalist, writer and blogger

Similarly, there has been a noted upsurge in the government's attempts to force journalists to disclose their sources. One example, Ewa Żarska from commercial channel Polsat TV, was fined 6000 PLN for refusing to disclose the sources behind the expose of a paedophile ring. Despite receiving a commendation from the Minister of Justice and Prime Minister for her work, a court in Łódź convicted her for the protection of sources, a key principle of independent media.

5 See the following links for more specific details. Available from <https://www.osce.org/representative-on-freedom-of-media/422363> <https://cpj.org/blog/2019/01/gagging-orders-legal-action-and-communist-era-laws.php> <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?pubRef=-//EP//TEXT+WQ+E-2012-008096+0+DOC+XML+V0//EN> <https://rsf.org/en/news/poland-rsf-decries-criminal-libel-proceedings-against-polish-daily> (Accessed June 5 2020)

During the Covid-19 pandemic, RSF reported on the detention of a journalist, Włodzimierz Ciejka, for filming a small demonstration outside of the living quarters of the chairman of PiS, Jarosław Kaczyński, against the government's plan to push ahead with a planned election on the 10th May despite strict lockdown measures.

'Refusing to postpone the election amidst the coronavirus crisis, the ruling majority has passed a law on conducting the election by postal ballot, sparking fears of the opposition and civil society that constitution, democracy and oversight by media are compromised.'⁶

Government attempts at control were further echoed by a number of editors at smaller publications and media platforms, who were clearly concerned that government funding was now only going towards funding public media platforms. Poland has historically provided public grants to independent media and CSOs, which is now being slowly redirected towards the national broadcaster and to some extent radio and newspapers. Public service advertising from the government is now also confined to public media platforms as well as the advertising budgets of state-owned companies whose budgets continue to be dedicated to pro-government media. The long-term impact this will have on pluralism and diversity in the media and politics is a further issue for Poland's once healthy public sphere.

'This government would not be in power if it were not for the propaganda from the public media.' – Journalist, international media publication

A further worrying threat has been the government's repeated suggestions that it will introduce foreign ownership or de-concentration laws effectively to attack or take over private media it sees as hostile. Admittedly, this issue has not been raised by the government for a while, and it's still uncertain whether they will introduce these laws, but the threat remains ominous.

In May 2019, the Polish Association of Journalists, with support from the Batory Foundation, carried out a media monitoring exercise of the public media and their

coverage of the European Parliamentary elections.⁷ Over the period of one week, they counted at candidates PVs (picture and sound) in election related items in seconds, by political party and location; PV time in seconds for party and location; analysis of other items related to elections and examples of practice not in line with article 21.1 of the radio and television law. The report concluded that 70 per cent of the airtime devoted to statements made by individual candidates on the Wiadomości news programme came from government supporters. The time left to the opposition mainly saw rebuttals from the government side. Wherever an opposition candidate made his own point, it was answered in the commentary by the reporter in the slot or by commentators who were, as a rule, government's sympathizers, and were more often than not, the same people in successive editions. They also found that the content underlined patriotic traditions, fuelled fear of immigrants and placed Poland in a battle against the 'bureaucrats' in Brussels.

The attitude of TVP in response to election coverage is clear. In an interview with Rzeczpospolita newspaper, Jacek Kurski, the director general of TVP at the time, said: 'The level of pluralism in the media should not be assessed at the level of TVP, but should take into account all the content in the electronic media in the country.'

The government's nationalistic policies are also having a huge effect on the media landscape. These ideologies are, amongst other things, instilling a fear of foreign 'influence' on Polish institutions amongst the public. This policy has extended to include the media, from the German owned Springer publications through to the media platforms that receive grants from George Soros's Open Society Foundations (OSF).

Representatives from the public and conservative media provided a different perspective. They suggested that, prior to 2015, conservative media had been ghettoised and that the last few years had seen the evolution of a more equal playing field and a much freer media. They were also keen to point out that, more recently, the behaviours of the entire media landscape were 'forcing' them to resort to unsavoury practices and produce politicised content.

'We are accused of being pro-government...but we are in a hot political war.' – Senior manager, TVP

6 RSF, 2020. 'Repressive laws, prosecutions, attacks... Europe fails to shield its journalists against the abuse of the COVID-19 crisis'. *Reporters Sans Frontieres*. Available from <https://rsf.org/en/news/repressive-laws-prosecutions-attacks-europe-fails-shield-its-journalists-against-abuse-covid-19> (Accessed June 5 2020)

7 Further information on this report can be found in Polish on the Society of Journalists website. Available from <http://towarzystwodziennikarskie.pl> (Accessed June 5 2020)

Interestingly, public and conservative media were more likely to reference their audiences as the main drivers of their content and narratives. In some cases, they referenced the Polish public and their desire to return to more traditional values as a reason to over-ride key journalistic principles and standard newsrooms practices such as diversity of sources and impartiality. There was also a suggestion that politicised headline-grabbing content was what audiences wanted and that this was forcing the hand of journalists at the public broadcaster to produce partisan and often inflammatory content. This was seen to be driven by social and online media which was seen to be allowing for the erosion of journalistic principles.

'A neutral tv would have no audience. People want their media to take a strong position.'

–Senior manager, TVP

'We have basic principles of journalism which are being lost as a result of the internet.' – Senior journalist, TVP

This was also suggested at a meeting with the media regulator who had previously commissioned a piece of research which claimed that, of the three leading news channels, Polsat's flagship news programme was the most balanced but the least watched.

Stakeholders also pointed to the relationship between local government and local media and the challenges to media independence caused by the so-termed 'mayor newspapers'. With no legislation to regulate media ownership and financing of local media, local government parties and officials are able to publish their own media which are inevitably packed full of content promoting and publicising the action of local government officials, often mayors. Competition is stifled as money from local businesses and advertising is channelled into publications in support of local government.

'It tells people on a local level that journalism doesn't serve the people but once again those in power.' – Senior journalist, public media

PART 2

THE IMPACT OF POLARIZATION AND POLITICISATION ON THE PROFESSION OF JOURNALISM

Exasperated by state control of the public media, some of the key players in the media landscape have retaliated with an increasingly partisan approach and framing. Content often reflects the political stance of media owners and financiers, and editorial policy is shaped by allegiances. Stakeholders were keen to stress that the issue of bias in the media should take centre stage in the development of quality independent media and content as a lack of professionalism in journalism is rife.

'You don't need to buy a newspaper to know what is going to be inside it these days.'

– Journalist, independent media platform

'Classical impartiality doesn't exist in Poland. The biggest tensions in the media come because of cultural and social choices.'

– Editor, Catholic magazine

The issue of media polarisation is particularly nuanced in the case of Poland. While there are clearly two divided sides in the mainstream media, one which supports the current government and one which supports the opposition, there is also a significant number of platforms that continue to remain firmly in the middle ground, focusing on delivering information and news to their audiences. However, a lack of sustainable financing in the media and challenging political times are seeing this 'squeezed middle' struggle to maintain professionalism and independence. Many stakeholders from across the spectrum were clear that one of the main challenges of the media in Poland was financial and as a result media were becoming susceptible to influence in exchange for funding.

'Money means independence. Being dependent on money from corporations and advertising makes for corrupt journalism.' – Senior journalist, public television

The issue of 'media capture' is one that media are facing on a global level, that is the state by which media struggle to resist influence from political, commercial and, for example, one which is particularly relevant in the case of Poland, religious interests.⁸

'There is no neutral television here. The language of TVN has also become aggressive, they don't even try to be objective anymore.' – Freelance journalist

Some of the pro-government weekly magazines were also accused of a lack of professionalism and different standards of journalism, with one participant suggesting they had a different view on what the 'mission of journalism should be'. This was echoed to some extent in an interview with a senior manager at a conservative weekly magazine.

'We try to be fair to our readers and meet their expectations. For this reason, it is not that important to follow journalistic rules of sourcing and accuracy.' – Editor in Chief, Weekly Magazine conservative

This is impacting on the media's engagement with each other, again a huge issue for democracy and media diversity. One mainstream media publication described a situation where it was asked to develop a big data project by an international media network, which wanted to create a collaboration across the Polish media. They felt this would have led to a serious conflict of interest because it would have involved collaboration with publications and journalists with which they did not share the same values. The afore-mentioned project did not go ahead. Many stakeholders were firm in their belief that the line between journalism and advocacy in Poland had become very blurred.

'We have no tools to distance ourselves from the rows and quarrels that we are going through. There is much talk about living in a bubble but it's more like living on your own island and your friends live on another island and you don't know how to get across to them.' – Journalist, mainstream media

⁸ Mungiu-Pippidi, Alina. 2017. *In the Service of Power: Media Capture and the Threat to Democracy*. CIMA: Washington DC.

However, one glimmer of hope comes in the form of 'Spięcie'⁹, a recently created network of five independent media platforms and think tanks in Poland, each representing different political positions and affiliations, which has developed a system of sharing content and commentary amongst the network members. This network has been developed to tackle the issue of polarisation and there was a belief that similar experiments needed to be considered if the situation was to change. It was also suggested that there was a need to train journalists on how to cover these polarised views in a fair and professional fashion, as well develop clear guidelines for ethical journalism.

The role of the media in supporting democratic processes and diverse opinion has been further challenged by the increasing impact of social media on news provision and consumption. Social media is now the main source of online news with over 64% of the world's population now accessing breaking news from Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube or Snapchat rather than via traditional media platforms.¹⁰ As the public turn to other news sources in Poland, so too do the politicians.¹¹ Stakeholders advised that it has become more commonplace for statesmen to eschew mainstream media and interviews, relying on their own social media presence and platforms for public interaction alongside press conferences. Stakeholders also informed us of covert deals between the technology giants and the Law and Justice Party which give the current ruling party a majority share of political advertising on their platforms compared to their opponents.

'The market situation is not healthy. There is a lack of transparent agreements and kick-backs are rife.' – Senior manager, public media

'It is impossible to be an honest journalist and live well.' – Media owner, conservative weekly magazine

All of this has created an environment with little job security for journalists, in particular freelancers, and this lack of job security has led to some further issues between editors and journalists. Freelancers are often commissioned and then cancelled with little notice and zero financial reimbursement. The Polish journalist association, the SDP, is seen to be politically motivated and therefore unsupportive of individual journalists' rights. It was also advised that the current head of the association – Krzysztof Skowroński – had strong connections with the Law and Justice led government and has recently managed a press conference for the Law and Justice party. However, there are a number of independent associations that aim to represent the media and journalists in Poland, including a journalists trade body and alternative union, some of whom were interviewed for this report.

'We used to support each other in the journalistic community and this is no more.' – Senior journalist, mainstream media

'Being a journalist is becoming too stressful.' – Journalist, local media

9 https://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Projekt_Spi%C4%99cie
More about the initiative in Tina Rosenberg's article, Available from <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/29/opinion/poland-journalism.html>.

It has its space on the five media platforms participating in the project: Klub Jagielloński <https://klubjagiellonski.pl/spiecie>, "Kontakt" <https://magazynkontakt.pl/spiecie>, "Krytyka Polityczna" https://krytykapolityczna.pl/projekt-spiecie/?hide_manifest, "Kultura Liberalna" <https://kulturaliberalna.pl/2018/05/03/spiecie-projekt-redakcje-debata>, "Nowa Konfederacja" <https://nowakonfederacja.pl/projekt-spiecie>. (Accessed March 16 2020)

10 Pew Research. (2018). News Across Social Media Platforms.

11 Newman, Nic. 2020. 'Journalism, Media and Technology Trends and Predictions.' *Reuters Institute for Journalism*. Available from <http://www.digitalnewsreport.org/publications/2020/journalism-media-and-technology-trends-and-predictions-2020> (Accessed March 16 2020)

Good practice

The last time Polish journalists from across the political spectrum united was to fight plans to limit their access to Parliament, the Sejm and Senate. Although the bulk was from private news organisations, they were also supported by state radio.

The battle began in January 2016 when it emerged that the Marshall of the Sejm – Parliament is run independently of government – wanted to introduce plans to remove journalists from the Parliament to a new media centre outside the building.

In March, parliamentary reporters wrote to the Marshal of the Sejm, Marek Kuchciński, asking him not to introduce changes without consultation.

However, the following month the first restrictions were announced which involved banning recording in places where hitherto it had been allowed. In October photo-journalists were banned from taking pictures of MP's from the press gallery. A month later plans to actually remove journalists from the Parliament emerged.

On 18 November a letter of protest was sent from 28 editors-in chief, organized by Press Club Polska, to Marshal Kuchciński. It became known as the 'letter of 28' and it was a remarkable feat given the intense political battles and differences between the media since the election of 2015 and even earlier.

The opposition parties in Parliament supported that letter. However, the Marshal continued with the plans and on 14 December the Chancellery of the Sejm presented a document entitled "Change in the organisation of media work in the Sejm", which stated clearly that all the media was to be expelled from Parliament and housed in the new media centre.

The media coalition held, remaining resolutely opposed to the new regulations. On 16 December, there was a nationwide protest against the moves backed by 40 television, radio, press and Internet media outlets, which, in effect meant "a day without politicians". They were not given airtime and their photographs were not published in print or online: only stories about the attempts to limit citizens' access to information about Parliament were published.

Within two days after a meeting between the Marshal of the Senate with editors-in-chief against the moves and the board of the Press Club Polska, the proposed changes were suspended.

By 9 January 2017 Marshal Karczewski on behalf of the Law and Justice Party, announced his withdrawal of the proposals to limit the access of journalists to the Sejm. The plan was dead.

Jarosław Włodarczyk, then Chairman, of Press Club Polska, said the protest succeeded because members of the club, who tend to be very senior journalists, were able to go back to their offices and convince their editors-in-chief that such a threat to press freedom affected everyone and therefore should be resisted by everyone in a united front. He thinks that the process of polarisation has since gone further and that such across the board co-operation would now be much tougher to achieve.

List of signatories of the 'letter of 28':

1. Paweł Lisicki, Do Rzeczy
2. Krzysztof Jedlak, Dziennik Gazeta Prawna
3. Robert Feluś, Fakt
4. Krzysztof Wójcik, Forum Polska Agencja Fotografów
5. Tomasz Sakiewicz, Gazeta Polska, Gazeta Polska Codziennie
6. Jarosław Kurski, Gazeta Wyborcza
7. Bartosz Węglarczyk, Grupa Onet
8. Tomasz Machała, Grupa WP
9. Tomasz Sommer, Najwyższy Czas!
10. Tomasz Lis, Newsweek
11. Tomasz Sygut, Nowa TV
12. Jerzy Baczyński, Polityka
13. Henryk Sobierajski, Polsat News
14. Paweł Fąfara, Polska Press
15. Jarosław Włodarczyk, Press Club Polska
16. Rafał Porzeziński, Program I Polskiego Radia
17. Tomasz Siemieniec, Puls Biznesu
18. Beata Piekarska, Radio Eska
19. Jarosław Paszkowski, Radio ZET
20. Marek Balawajder, RMF FM
21. Bogusław Chrabota, Rzeczpospolita
22. Sławomir Jastrzębowski, Super Express
23. Wiktor Bater, Superstacja
24. Tomasz Terlikowski, Telewizja Republika
25. Kamila Ceran, TOK FM
26. Adam Pieczyński, TVN
27. Piotr Mucharski, Tygodnik Powszechny
28. Jacek Pochłopieć, Wprost

List of Participants of the 'day without politicians':

1. Dziennik Gazeta Prawna
2. Fakt
3. Forum Polska Agencja Fotografów
4. Gazeta Wyborcza
5. gazeta.pl
6. Grupa Onet
7. Grupa WP
8. Najwyższy Czas!
9. Newsweek
10. Nowa TV
11. Polsat News
12. Polska Press
13. Press Club Polska
14. Puls Biznesu
15. Radio Eska
16. Radio ZET
17. RMF FM
18. Rzeczpospolita
19. Super Express
20. Superstacja
21. TOK FM
22. TVN
23. Tygodnik Powszechny
24. Wprost
25. VOX FM
26. Radio Wawa
27. Radio Plus
28. Eska Rock
29. Muzo FM
30. Radio Zet Gold
31. Antyradio
32. radiozet.pl
33. East News
34. Stowarzyszenie Fotoreporterów
35. Agencja fotograficzna Reporter
36. Tygodnik Solidarność

PART 3

MEDIA CONTENT

According to a 2018 report by Article 19, occurrences of hate speech against minorities, migrants and LGBT-QI communities has grown dramatically in the last few years and is particularly seen in the mainstream and social media.¹² Much of this intolerance originates from powerful elites and those in power and therefore little is done to curb the increasing incidence of hatred spawned by the media. Press laws do not address the issue of hate speech and there is very little by way of self-regulation in the media to combat it. On July 17th 2019, a conservative weekly magazine distributed an anti-LGBTQI sticker to its entire readership. When criticized about the decision, the editor-in-chief of Gazeta Polska, Tomasz Sakiewicz, told Reuters, “We wanted to prove that censorship in this case exists and we have proved it. What is happening is the best evidence that LGBT is a totalitarian ideology.”

Some stakeholders suggested that this environment has seen some further incidents of misinformation and attacks in the media directed towards larger social groups such as Catholics and priests as a form of retaliation.

There was also some concern for the impact that politicisation of the media was having on content. The national media was seen to focus mainly on the situation and climate in Warsaw, ignoring the needs of the nation as a whole. Stakeholders also mentioned the recent overhaul of the education system and the subsequent lack of coverage explaining the history, systems, and politics of Poland to young generations.

‘The media need to cover the historical and political issues that have been damaged by the government.’ – Journalist, independent media platform

Where schools are failing, it is felt that the media need to step in and play its role of information and education provider. Again, stakeholders were concerned that the historical and political narrative was being manipulated by elites.

‘Sometimes there is real censorship in cultural programmes.’ – Editor, fact-checking organisation

One clear suggestion from many stakeholders was the need to consider what ‘public interest’ media and journalism would look like in Poland.

‘We need to wake up the spirit of serving the people.’ – Data Journalist

There was also a concern that although there has been an increase in reportage coming out of the Polish media, a lack of funding is seeing little investigative work originate from the independent platforms and local media.

There is a growing number of fact-checking projects that are launching in Poland that might eventually serve to combat the rise in disinformation and intolerant content. OKO.press has had a good reception since its inception in 2016 with its focus on verifying statements made by politicians and public figures. Demagog.org.pl have also been producing similar work checking politicians’ statements, labelling them ‘truth’, ‘lie’, ‘manipulation’ or ‘impossible to verify’ in order to allow the public to ‘consciously process information’. There is a great opportunity for the media to collaborate on these and similar projects, which protect professional and ethical values.

¹² Article 19. 2018. *Poland: Responding to Hate Speech*. Available from: <https://www.article19.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Poland-Hate-Speech.pdf> (Accessed August 14 2019)

CONCLUSION

This report aims to provide an overview of the current main challenges to independent media and freedom of press in Poland, based on a series of stakeholder interviews with a number of representatives from across the Polish media landscape. What this report demonstrates is that the political scene is dominating the media landscape and hindering its ability to fully perform its role as information provider and facilitator of debate. There is an over-riding fear amongst many stakeholders that the situation is likely to worsen in the short to medium term.

This report concludes that the governing party in Poland is continuing to clamp down on media freedoms through any means necessary. Legislative measures have been enforced in order to enable their further interference in the public narrative. The public media is seen as 'unprofessional and dangerous' by the majority of its counterparts in the private media sphere and there is little opportunity for dialogue across platforms and colleagues. This is only serving to entrench political divisions within media organisations as the media becomes a battleground within which politics can play itself out.

The impact that this environment is having on ethical practice and values is concerning. Key journalistic principles such as accuracy, independence and fairness are being seriously compromised in the face of political competition and partisanship. The lack of professionalism in the public media is unmistakable; similar practices are being exhibited by some of their competitors.

There are some interesting examples of innovation coming out of the Polish media milieu. New funding and content sharing models are being explored by some key start-ups. Fact-checking NGOs are starting to gain some traction and impact. There are a lot of both challenges and opportunities for Polish journalists.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is clear from this report that there are a number of fundamental challenges to the Polish media that will require long-term solutions and coordinated efforts to overcome. These solutions will require a greater engagement amongst the media community in Poland as well as some level of political will for change. This report also demonstrates that there is in fact little political will to support the development of a more independent media landscape in Poland.

In making recommendations, it is important to restate the specificities of the context of Poland and Central Eastern Europe in particular. It would be an oversight to merely apply principles and solutions that may be working in other countries. Any work to activate these recommendations needs to be done in close cooperation with those working on the ground in the Polish media. It would also be important to recognise that solutions must be considered on a national and local level as well as address the specific needs of its diverse publics.

With this in mind, the following recommendations will provide more immediate solutions to some of the issues that journalists and the media are currently facing. These recommendations are aimed at the policymakers, media, stakeholders, NGOs and CSOs and donor communities who are active in the support and development of freedom of press and the media.

Dialogue with official institutions: Given the concern and documentation of attempts by the government to clampdown on freedom of expression and the media and the use of increasingly severe tactics to undermine journalism, there is a need for involvement from the European Union and Parliament to put pressure on the Polish authorities to deal with the media in a fair and transparent manner. Freedom of the press is one of the core values of the European Parliament and defending media freedom and pluralism is its essence.

Legislation: Legislative work and reform to combat an over-reliance on archaic legislation to control the media is essential in the case of Poland. The current political structures may however make any attempts at legal reform a challenge in the short to medium term. More practical approaches might include working alongside legal defence NGOs and organisations in order to develop case study approaches that might be used to provide a greater protection against the use of laws to clamp down on freedom of expression. This could be supported with capacity-building workshops to provide journalists and media practitioners with a greater awareness of their rights and legal frameworks within which they are operating.

Networks and collaboration: It was clear from many of the stakeholders that attempts to forge networks of support both within Poland and throughout Europe have been successful and have provided opportunities ranging from content-sharing to learning experiences. Further work to encourage these and other areas for potential collaboration can help provide more peer-to-peer learning and shared experiences. Networks can also help when lobbying and campaigning for media freedoms at both a national and international level. Knowledge management and the sharing of best practice, as well as regular communication, can help to eliminate numerous problems and miscommunications.

There are also unexplored opportunities for cross-border collaborations via international networks such as the European Journalism Centre (EJC), the Global Investigative Journalism Network (GIJN) and the International Centre for Investigative Journalists (ICIJ). These networks can provide greater scope for large scale investigations as well as identify funding mechanisms and opportunities for independent journalism.

Capacity building: A bespoke capacity-building programme that is aimed specifically at the needs of journalists working in Poland should be developed in order to address the nuances of the Polish landscape and audiences. This programme could look at key professional and ethical skills and principles as well as emerging journalistic fields such as data journalism and artificial intelligence (AI). A focus on offering a 'Training of Trainers' model would ensure that these training skills and expertise would remain and flourish in Poland. Subsequent training could be delivered by Polish media practitioners to their colleagues and counterparts as well as to younger generations of journalists as they emerge.

Innovative business and content models: A changing media environment as well as new patterns and platforms for media consumption are driving a need to rethink how media is funded and developed. Work to identify areas of opportunity and new business models that might suit the Polish media landscape could support the development of independent media at a national but also at a local and community level.

There is also a need to consider new models for content and news consumption that are engaging for younger audiences and social media friendly. Political satire, for example, is increasingly proving to be a popular medium for dealing with difficult topics and political debates. The role that entertainment and drama programming can play in providing information and enabling audiences to make informed choices and decisions should also be acknowledged and explored.

Content-sharing is another industry development that has proven successful in Poland in the form of 'Śpięcie'. Independent media are recognising the virtues of hosting a larger stable of content which is diverse and distinct, providing their audiences with greater access to news, views and debates. Content-sharing can also provide opportunities to grow audience share and breakdown echo chambers and confirmation bias in the current polarised media landscape in Poland.

Cyber and physical harassment: Polish journalists are dealing with increasing attacks from trolls and in some cases online mercenaries whose aim is to quash freedom of expression using vicious tactics and modes of harassment. These attacks need to be documented and work should be done to identify where these attacks are coming from and how they are orchestrated. Journalists and media practitioners in Poland should also begin to identify regional and international networks of support in order to assist them in dealing with on-going harassment. A number of online tools and courses are available free of charge which should be identified and eventually made available in Polish.

Media literacy: The need for better and further education of citizens on how to engage with and understand the narratives of the media through targeted media literacy projects. A media-literate audience would encourage greater professionalism in the media community, as well allow for more innovation and the development of content that would fulfil the needs of Polish audiences. An understanding of media literacy amongst the media community will also contribute to journalists developing a greater understanding of their audiences.

Higher education, curriculum and training: While most journalists in Poland have received some access to higher education, the teaching of journalism has been largely disregarded, with very few projects focused on improving the quality of teaching media studies. Better support should be given to further and higher education institutions who wish to change the current environment for the media and improve the quality of journalism in Poland. Many academic journalism programmes focus on the theoretical and lack any proper connection with practice. There is also a need to update curricula in order to tackle the rapid social transformation seen by the industry and on-going political developments in the country. Opportunities to develop research on the media at a national as well as regional level should also be explored.

ABOUT THE ORGANISERS

Ethical Journalism Network (EJN)

The Ethical Journalism Network works to promote media ethics, good governance and the self-regulation of journalism with the aim of strengthening independent journalism and building a responsible and ethical public sphere in an age where trust in the media is at an all time low.

www.ethicaljournalismnetwork.org



Evens Foundation

The Evens Foundation aims to contribute to rethinking and building a European reality committed to the values of diversity, freedom, responsibility and solidarity. We identify and support innovative ideas and achievements through our prizes and calls, initiate experimental projects bridging the gap between research and practice, and facilitate knowledge exchange through our lectures, seminars, debates and publications.

www.evensfoundation.be

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Fritt Ord Foundation

The Fritt Ord Foundation is a private non-profit foundation that is intended to protect and promote freedom of expression, public debate, art and culture. We work internationally, concentrating on projects directly related to freedom of expression and free journalism.

www.frittord.no





The 'Building Trust in Journalism in CEE' project is developed by the Ethical Journalism Network in partnership with the Evens Foundation and the Fritt Ord Foundation. This report is funded by the Evens Foundation.

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