

Poland and its neighbours – in the context of online media narrative

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Abstract: The purpose of the article is a quantitative and qualitative analysis of media reports on the subject of the relations of the Polish state with its neighbours, drawn from two prestigious Internet websites (Wyborcza.pl and Rp.pl). The authors confirmed that when reporting on the relations of Poland with its neighbouring countries, online media are subject to the phenomenon of politicization of media, and mediatization of politics. This thesis itself is the main subject of interest to the analyzed media coverage. Taking into consideration the tone of expression, it can be assumed that some websites, mostly Wyborcza.pl, may become emotional and hence recede from equal presentation of all parties' statements. This in turn may indicate that nowadays we are all exposed to a large extent to significant (Wyborcza.pl) or moderate (Rp.pl in certain themes, such as the image of Poland) politicization of media.

Keywords: Poland; foreign policy; online media; mediated politics; mediatization; press politics; journalism.

Introduction

As a result of the parliamentary elections in October 2015, the Polish foreign policy has changed. The Prawo i Sprawiedliwość party (Law and Justice – PiS), which obtained independent executive power in the country, from the beginning of their term opted for a

change in the relationships with Poland's neighbours as well as with all of the European Union. Still, at present the ruling party politicians demand a greater role for Poland within the EU stating that for instance "We do not want a "decorative" membership, but a real EU membership" [1], as Karol Szymański, the Secretary of state for European Affairs in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs once said. The European Commission got involved in the Polish internal affairs and at present there exists a real conflict between the Polish authorities and the Commission. Such words and activities are strongly criticised by the opposition as they claim that the ruling party isolates Poland from the international stage, or even aims at seeing Poland leave the European Union.

The consequence of the current Polish foreign policy is more tension than cooperation between Poland and its neighbours. It appears that the wave of tension is only growing as the isolation of Poland within the European community.

Such dynamically changing international relations are reflected in the media that report both the Polish stand on its neighbours and events and commentaries aimed at our country. Hence, it seems important to ask how the media shape the knowledge of its recipients with regards to the relations between Poland and its neighbours.

The main purpose of this article is a quantitative and qualitative analysis of media reports on the subject of the relations of the Polish state with its neighbours, drawn from two prestigious Internet websites that are at the same time closely related to the two biggest newspapers in Poland. The authors have posed the following research questions: 1) In what way are Poland's relations with its neighbours presented? 2) What type of press photography is chosen by the editors, what is the function of the visual forms?

As a consequence to the above questions, the following argument needs to be verified: *when reporting on the relations of Poland with its neighbouring countries, online media are subject to the phenomenon of politicization of media, and mediatization of politics.*

The mediatization of politics, politicization of media – theoretical grounds

Media and politics have an impact on one another, while at the same time they co-create the image of the world of today. Zbigniew Oniszczyk points out three basic relations between media and politics. Among those are: symbiotic relations, mediatization of politics and politicization of media [2]. In the context of this article, the last two of the mentioned phenomena appear to be crucial. They are in a constant and inseparable deadlock, which makes it impossible to talk about one without mentioning the other.

When it comes to the mediatization of politics media centres are the key as they play the overriding role. They are treated as a “competitive centre of power” [3] or an influential and important element of political processes [4]. Thus, their aim is to dominate the political system and impose their own action logic. Gianpietro Mazzoleni and Wienfried Schulz clearly state that mediatized politics “lost its autonomy, became dependent on mass media in its core functions, and is constantly shaped by its interaction with mass media” [5].

And then there is the other phenomenon, important for the purpose of this article: politicization of media. It is defined as “the attempts to dominate media by politics and use them to complete their own, often strictly party-related purposes” [6]. In other words, in this approach media not so much dominates as they are dominated by politics as well as political organizations and actors. This on the one hand results in media’s increased interest in politics as such, on the other makes media more and more party-dependent [7]. The goal of such actions is f.e. obtaining the most media coverage possible that would present a certain party’s achievements (or purposefully ignore them), playing a vital role in creating the party’s image. Among media politicization tools especially worth mentioning are: implementation of symbolic policy (using emotional arguments, making events look or sound more dramatic, putting the leaders on display) and personal policy (placing the party’s supporters in media management); pressuring mass media and focusing their attention on events that are considered important to a given political strategy [8] (organising political PR events [9]). The media texts analyzed in this article fit into the specifics of both discussed phenomena. On the one hand, they point to mediatization of politics, as they not only comment or criticize but at times go as far as to arbitrarily settle any potential moral doubts. This type of media coverage serves as an attractive quote to other media (including foreign ones), which reinforces their image of opinion-forming and expert craft. On the other hand, the analyzed texts reveal the politicization of media. This can be easily observed in the excessive interest of both these websites in what is not essential (as compared to the country’s actual problems).

Research methodology

The research, whose results are presented in this article, has been conducted within the scope of an international project called LEMEL (*L'Europe dans les médias en ligne*). This programme was initiated by Cergy-Pontoise University, and is now held annually. Many European countries are invited to take part in it (scientists from France, Germany, Italy, Poland and Romania are its permanent members). The aim of the project is synchronous and

diachronic comparative analysis of the content presented in their respective national online media. The analysis focuses on the way Europe and its problems are presented in the above mentioned media content. It is always completed within the same scope of time (from the 23rd October to the 19th November 2016 in the last but one edition of the project) so that all the participating countries may compare their respective results. The Polish research group selected two Internet websites that are regarded as opinion-forming, namely Wyborcza.pl and Rp.pl. The applied criteria were their impact on public opinion and citation rate [10] (This is mostly about the impact on the public opinion with regards to the politics. The authors mean the two-step information flow by Paul Lazarsfeld.).

Wyborcza.pl is the electronic edition of “Gazeta Wyborcza”, a printed opinion-forming newspaper with the largest circulation in its segment [11]. The analysis of the two websites’ content shows many discrepancies resulting from different preferences of their respective recipients. Wyborcza.pl is targeted at a well-educated reader, which can be best illustrated by the addressed themes, the length of articles, a variety of genres and authors of published texts (outstanding publicists, experts, award-winning journalists [12]).

Rp.pl is the online edition of one of the most prestigious nationwide newspapers in Poland, namely of “Rzeczpospolita”. The newspaper is regarded as highly trustworthy by its well-educated readers due to its balanced political views (there are commentaries published on the website written by publicist with various political sympathies) as well as its expert approach to many different areas (such as economy or law). However, a more in-depth reading reveals more content that is critical of the government. And unlike in Wyborcza.pl, this content is part of commentaries and opinions [13].

It is important to point out that for the purpose of this article the applied research methodology is content analysis understood as a technique aiming at objective, systematic, and quantitative description of the overt communication content [14]. The conducted analysis was both qualitative and quantitative. Having defined the research issues, research aims and a hypothesis have been formed. The latter concerns the extent to which media discourse regarding the relations of Poland with its neighbours is politicized. Next, the authors created the categorical key according to the criteria proposed by Walery Pisarek and based on Bernard Berelson’s research methodology [15].

Content analysis

The authors conducted their analysis on selected content (30 articles gained from LEMEL Polish data which refer to Poland's relations with its neighbours). The collected data served as the basis for conclusions in the following categories:

1. Quantitative.
2. Qualitative:
 - a) in a general approach – the articles' subject, their tone of expression, the way of presenting cited opinions;
 - b) in a detailed textual approach – the type of relations with the neighbours;
 - c) in a detailed visual approach – typology and functions of photographs.

Quantitative analysis

Over two thirds of the analyzed content were published on Rp.pl. Foreign policy is not present to a large extent in the Polish media. As the research shows, Rp.pl is more involved in electronic diplomacy, a phenomenon Justyna Arendarska mentioned in the context of new communication tools [16]. The fact that the tactics is present in the media proves that readers are interested in the subject itself. Hence, one can anticipate that this division is not so much the result of media politicization, as it is the result of the readers' preferences (and those in turn may be related to their profession).

Qualitative analysis in a general approach – articles' subjects

The dominating subject of the articles describing Poland's relations with its neighbours is politics (fig. 1). This is related to the change of the party in power that occurred in 2015. The new government introduced a new line of foreign policy that resulted in a significant cooling down of relations with many countries (such as Germany and France), as well as with all of the European Union. Amongst others, it was migration policy that became the flashpoint. PiS refused to accept a small number of immigrants, thanks to which it gained popularity in Poland due to a general fear of the refugees [17]. This division of themes should not be seen as unusual in the context of media politicization. However, one needs to bear in mind that in the Polish media system the relations between politics and media have always been strong, especially when it comes to newspapers, where such themes are imposed *a priori*.

Articles regarding economy and military issues can be found amongst the analyzed content. Both these themes prevailed in Poland's relations with Russia. After the plane crash in Smoleńsk and annexation of Crimea certain political groups closely related to PiS took up the matter of Poland's safety and Russia as the source of possible danger.

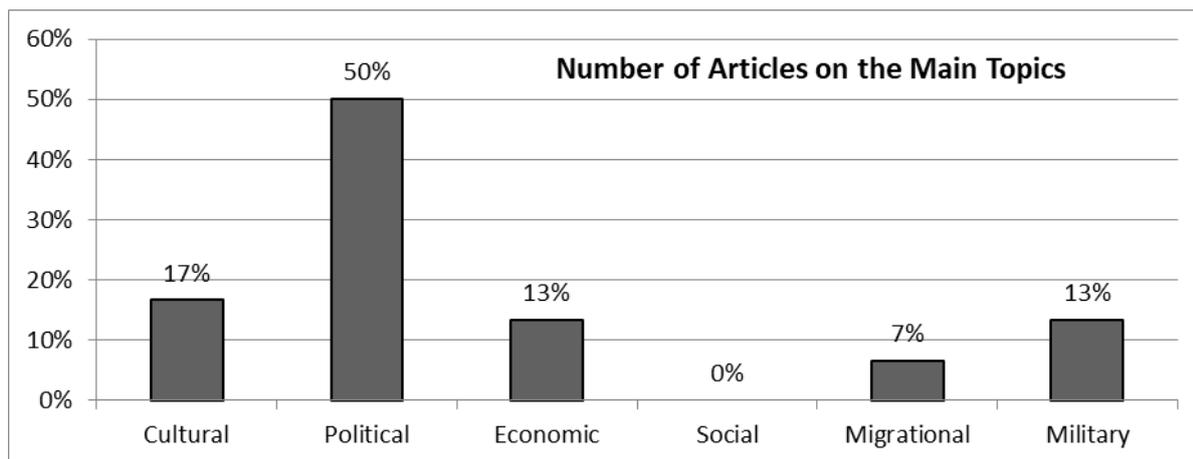


Figure 1 Number of articles on given themes on each website

Source: own work

Qualitative analysis in a general approach – the articles’ tone of expression

The next element of content analysis was determining the general tone of expression for three subjects of analysis: Poland, the ruling party, and opposition parties (another category - “no reference” - was introduced) The results are presented in figure 2 (At the same time it is important to remark that the authors also examined the relations of Poland with its neighbours (under a negative tone of expression they understood such traits as warning and threat, as positive – cooperation, and as neutral – indifferent), which for the clarity of the analysis is presented with a separate figure.). The first finding is quite obvious and is related to the number of published articles.

As it may be observed, Wyborcza.pl does not write about Poland’s relations with its neighbours very often. Hence, it stands lower than Rp.pl in terms of quantity. Nevertheless, the scale of negativity is comparable to what the website of “Rzeczpospolita” presents. There were six articles published on Wyborcza.pl criticising the image of Poland, and six criticising the ruling party (on Rp.pl six and four respectively). What is more, Agora SA’s medium did not introduce any positive tone of expression. Unlike Rp.pl, where it appears twelve times in total (regarding mostly Poland’s relations with Ukraine and Belarus, especially political and economic cooperation as well as social relations). It needs to be stressed that Gremi Media SA’s website more often remained neutral towards the discussed subjects, especially when the subject was Poland.

No indications as to the tone of expression is an interesting case in itself. The key to understanding them is the analysis of the results in the context of the subjects of analysis. As it has already been mentioned, Poland as subject of articles is usually accompanied by an

easily identifiable tone of expression; and while Rp.pl uses different tones, Wyborcza.pl focuses on the negative one. On Rp.pl in turn, the ruling party and its representatives are presented from many different angles; it is also important to remember that quite a number of articles do not speak of Prawo i Sprawiedliwość, therefore it is difficult to determine their tone of expression. Wyborcza.pl uses a negative tone of expression where the authorities are concerned and, as it has been mentioned before, it does not present the themes in any other way where PiS is concerned. Both websites have one trait in common – they very seldom refer to the opposition, which makes their tone of expression undefined when it comes to the other side of the political stage (with the exception of a small number of cases presented on Rp.pl).

Firstly, it is worth noting that the articles are emotional, especially when mentioning those aspects that get the most media coverage (Poland and its ruling party). Secondly, Wyborcza.pl's attitude can be described as rather pejorative (this can be related to politicization of media), while Rp.pl's attitude is more diversified: from neutral to negative and positive.

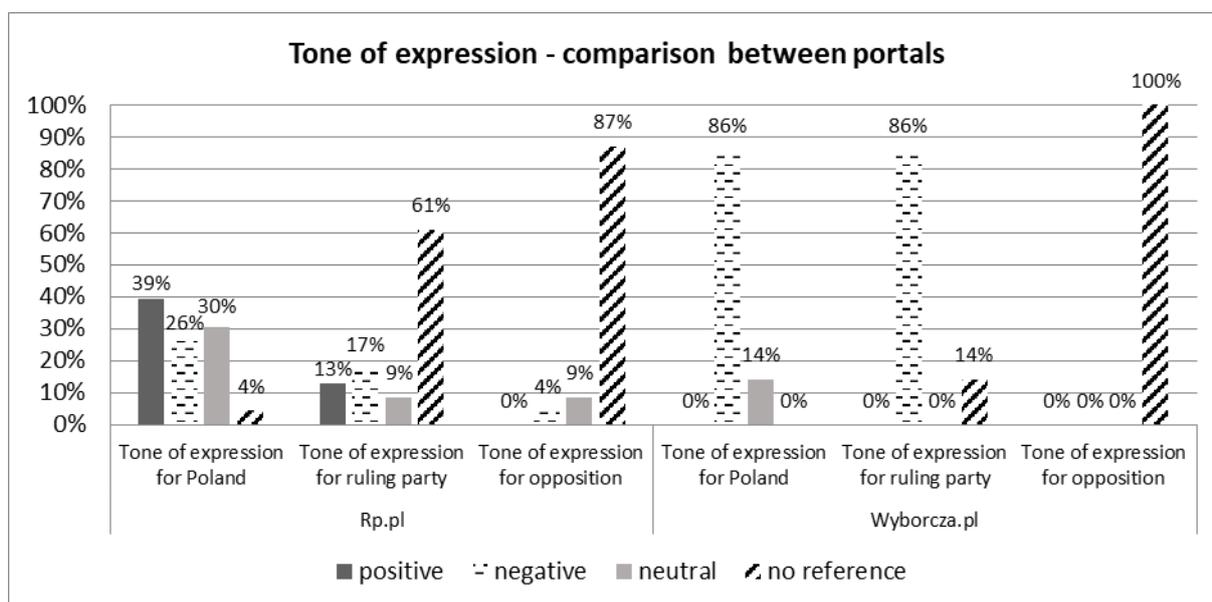


Figure 2 Tone of expression - comparison between portals

Source: own work

Qualitative analysis in a general approach – presentation of opinions

The next field of analysis assumed by the authors of this paper was the analysis of the character of presentation of opinions. Two categories have been distinguished here: multilateralism (presenting in the text – in the form of a quote or indirect speech – statements

or opinions of the sides the text refers to) or unilateralism (presenting one side's opinions exclusively). The results of the analysis are presented in figure 3. In the case of Rp.pl, the division of opinions is almost identical. It must be stated here that four out of twelve articles defined as unilateral are in fact the author's own expression of opinions, which may be characterized by a high degree of subjectivation by nature. Therefore, when taking into account only articles that are not columns, the results would change and Rp.pl would be described as often presenting a multitude of opinions on the same subject. Very much like Wyborcza.pl that usually uses various sources and citations in its texts (as a result, however, the tone of expression of its media content remains negative).

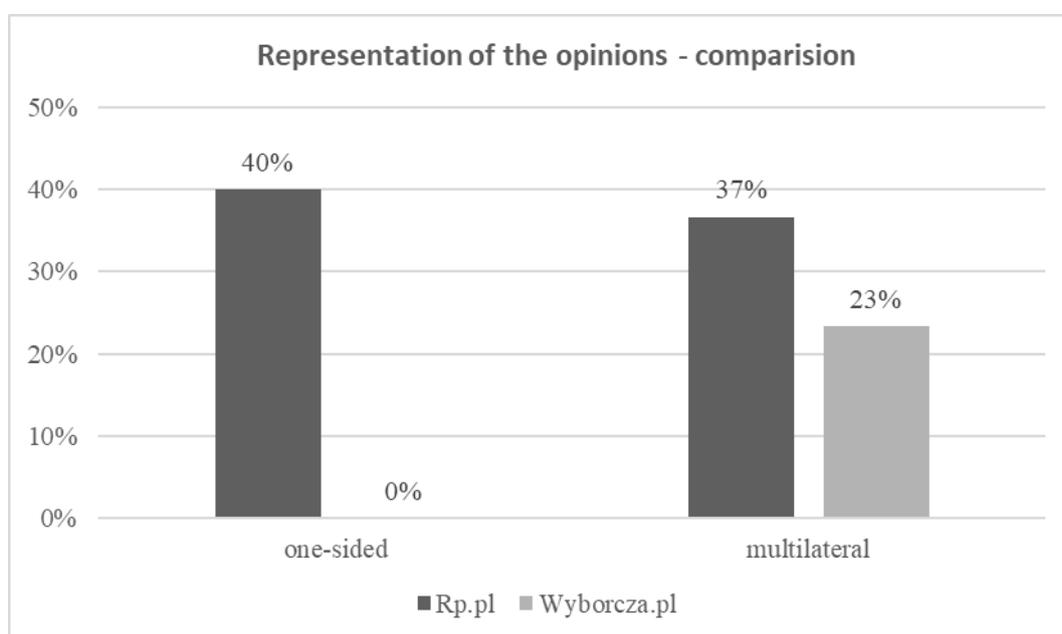


Figure 3 Presentation of the opinions – comparison

Source: own work

Detailed qualitative text analysis – the character of Poland's relations with other countries

Another analyzed trait was the distinctive character of Poland's relations with its neighbours. The trait was analyzed in two ways: as a general character of those relations (fig. 4) described in the text, and as a type of relation with each neighbour. Only Poland's relations with Ukraine and with Germany are described in detail in the Conclusions section, because other neighbours were mentioned either very few times or not at all (a maximum of 4 texts on both sites).

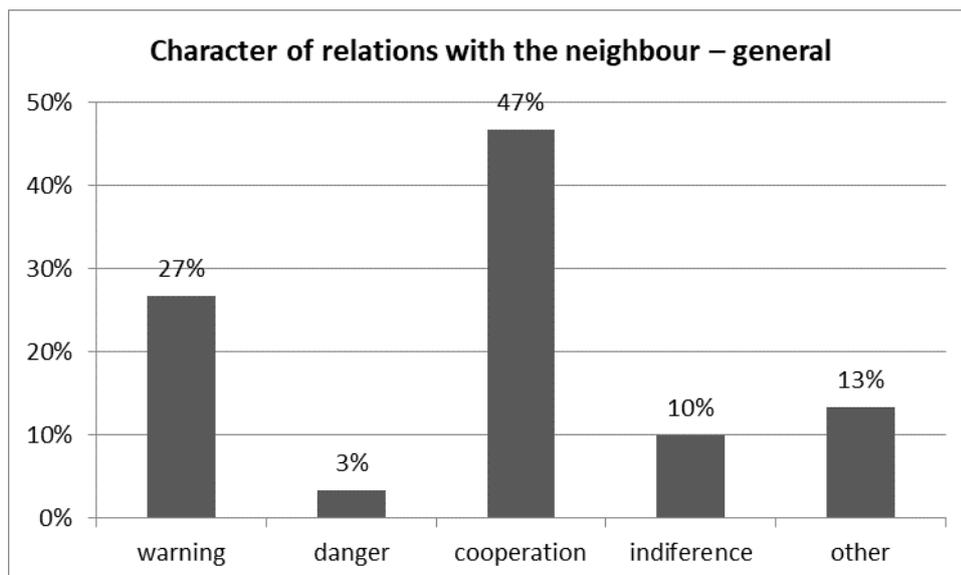


Figure 4 Character of relations with the neighbour – general

Source: own work

Taking into account the general character of Poland's relations with its neighbours, over half of the analyzed content referred to Poland's cooperation with a neighbouring country, as it was in the case of Lithuania's parliamentary elections when the Polish government declared their readiness to work together with their neighbor [18]. Many articles were published at that time regarding the ex-minister Sławomir Nowak's cooperation with Ukraine's State Agency for Roads (he now holds a high managing position there) [19]. This particular cooperation is not a typical example of relations between two countries, yet it demonstrates that Ukraine, still plagued with corruption and the ineffectiveness of their political elites, needs to look for specialists outside of its own borders (Sławomir Nowak is not the first Polish official now employed at a high state position there).

The next group in terms of quantity were texts describing Poland's relations with each country in the context of a warning (eight articles). This form is found in relations with almost all Polish neighbours (where relations with Russia and Germany had two articles each). In the first case, the character resulted from the tension related to the purchase of Mistral from the French, while the other referred to Poland and Germany's relations as a whole (and especially the conflict caused by the refusal to organize a screening of the film "Smoleńsk" in Berlin. "Smoleńsk", directed by Andrzej Krauze, tells a fictionalized story of the presidential plane crash in Smoleńsk (10th April 2010). Danger, indifference and any other type of relations represented a small percentage of the analyzed content.

Even though the number of articles regarding Poland's relations with its neighbours is relatively small, there can be certain differences noticed in the division of the content. The greatest amount of content refers to relations with Germany and Ukraine. Polish-German relations are described in various contexts but still in a similar way on both websites. What is even more interesting, Wyborcza.pl seems more focused on Poland's relations with EU members, while treating those with Eastern neighbours as much less important. It is also proven by a lack of information regarding relations with Russia and Lithuania on the website, and there was only one article on the subject of Polish-Byelorussian relations.

Detailed visual message analysis – typology and functions of photographs

Each article was illustrated with a photograph, although in two cases it was a copy of the “Smoleńsk” poster, as this was the subject of the article and so the poster was not treated as press photograph (“no photo” category). The photo type used most commonly was portrait presenting the author of the statement (commentary and column) or the person the article was about or whose citations were included in the article. The results are presented in figure 5.

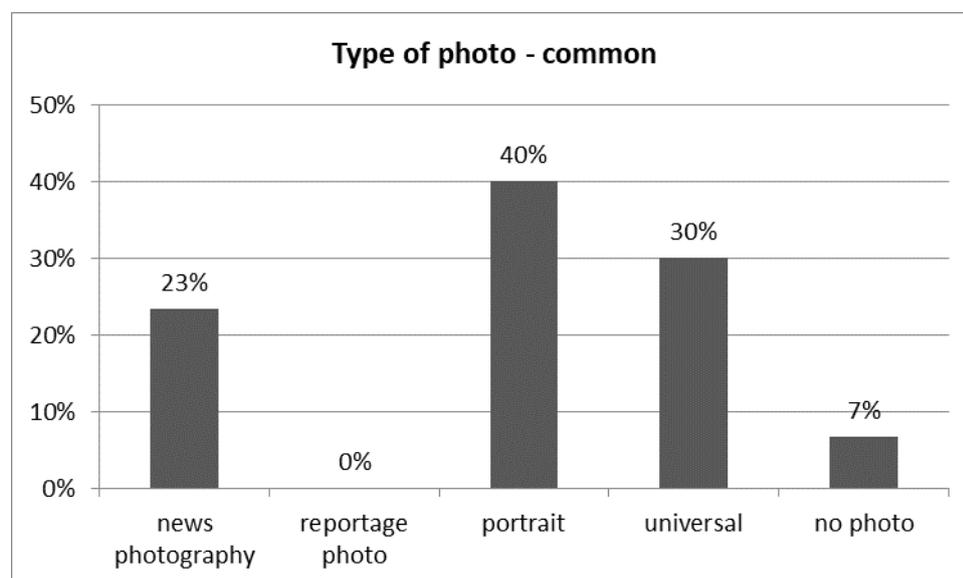


Figure 5 Type of photo - results for both web portals.

Source: own work.

Another commonly used type of photograph was a universal picture, loosely related to the content of the article. For instance an article on introducing a visa waiver for border regions tourists travelling between Poland and Belarus [20] was illustrated with a photograph of a water dam located in the tourist region mentioned in the text. Another example may be a text

discussing Poland being criticized by the Bundestag president [21], who holds a negative opinion of the government's actions regarding the Constitutional Court. This article was illustrated by a photograph of the empty plenary chamber of Reichstag.

A part of the used photographs are informative. They are closely related to the described event and they illustrate it (figure 6). However, they are not always posted by the event presented in the photo. Thus, for instance, an article regarding a statement by the Polish ambassador in Berlin [22], responding to critical remarks of some German politicians towards our country, is posted along with a photography showing that ambassador receiving his credentials from the Polish president, Andrzej Duda. No photograph of reportage-like nature appears in the analyzed articles, which seems to be justified by their themes.

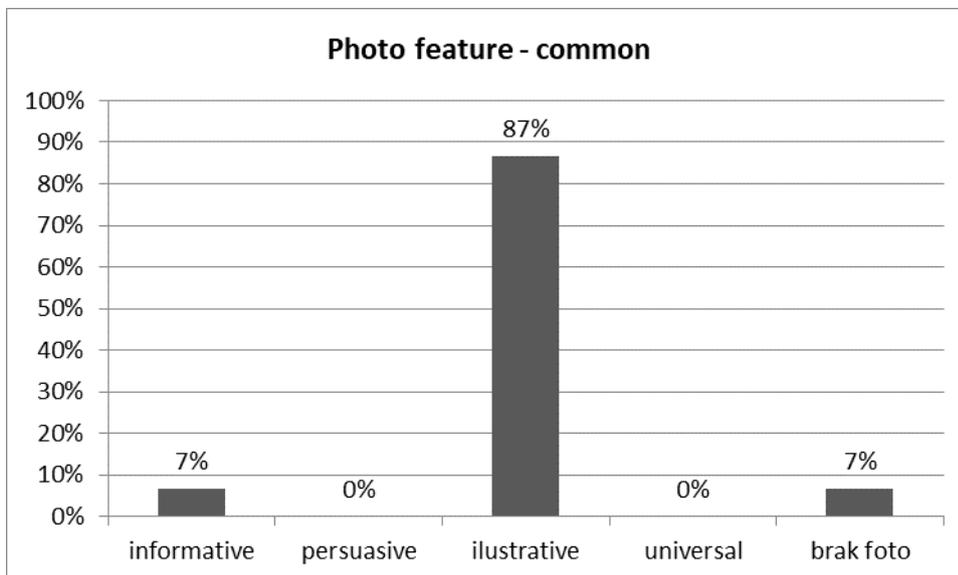


Figure 6 Photo feature - results for both web portals.

Source: own work.

The dominating function of the photographs comes as no surprise. Apart from the two uses of a film poster, and two where an informative photo was posted along with an article that seemed to describe the event shown in the image, all other photographs were used for purely decorative reasons. They were just an ornament whose function is to give a general idea about the content of the article. In the analyzed media coverage there were no photographs aimed at evoking recipients' emotions (persuasive function).

Conclusions

The authors of this article answered all the research questions they posed. The conclusions are as follows:

Firstly, the conducted analysis proved that most texts were written in neutral language, although persuasive language is also present. It is important to note that the editors of Wyborcza.pl are more prone to use persuasive language. Moreover, taking into consideration the tone of expression and selection of citations, it can be assumed that this website has a negative attitude towards the current Polish government's foreign policy (also, Agora SA's website was interested in subjects that overall were less crucial, but media-wise easier to present in an emotional way).

Relations with Ukraine and Germany gained the most interest of the analyzed media. The main actors in those articles were ruling party representatives or Poland itself. An almost complete lack of the opposition's statement in this matter is striking. This may point to a very low interest (in the analyzed period of time) in our relations with neighbours on their side. They may have been simply focused on internal affairs.

Secondly, a lack of photographs typically falling into the category of press photographs (for instance communicating information about an event, and broadening it by adding a visual layer of information) has been noticed. The photographs used were purely decorative as if to avoid a situation where recipients no longer want to click on the link because of its entirely textual character.

The authors of this article have confirmed their initial thesis that online media are subject to politicization of media and mediatization of politics when presenting Poland's relations with its neighbours. This thesis itself is the main subject of interest to the analyzed media coverage. Taking into consideration the tone of expression, it can be assumed that websites, mostly Wyborcza.pl, may become emotional and hence recede from equal presentation of all parties' statements. This in turn may indicate that nowadays we are all exposed to a large extent to significant (Wyborcza.pl) or moderate (Rp.pl in certain themes, such as the image of Poland) politicization of media.

In the context of mediatization of politics, in turn, it should be stated that media coverage has dominated political narrative, stressing the irrelevant events to create a foreign policy (perfectly proven by the case of the "Smoleńsk" screening in Berlin, which in itself is evidence of media politicization, as the ruling party was at the root of what became a media show).

Relations between media and politics are so strong in modern media systems that separating mediatization from politics and politicization from media is a very difficult task. It seems that both these worlds, linked by a common deadlock, are destined to coexist with regards to their image, programme and strategy.

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