

# HOW FACEBOOK POLARIZES PUBLIC DEBATE IN POLAND - POLISH FILTER BUBBLE

Zofia Sawicka<sup>1</sup>

---

## Abstract

*The dissemination of the media has led to the phenomenon of the mediatization of social reality, which in the era of new media has become dominant, because the new media have infiltrated almost every aspect of human functioning. The surprising paradox of the new media is the fact that on the one hand they give access to almost unlimited information, on the other hand they narrow it down extremely. The modern media user, often without realizing it, "uses" only the information that is offered to him by specially selected internet algorithms. Created in this way the so-called "information/filter bubble" condemns him to the only vision of reality - and in the absence of the possibility of verifying his observations what results from the way the new media works - in his opinion the only true one. This is particularly important in creating the vision of social order and the functioning of the state. The mediatization of Polish social reality - especially in the context of social media - led to the emergence of polarized groups isolated from each other and caused a lack of rational political debate on a number of important social issues.*

**Keywords:** Facebook, filter bubble, narcissism, public debate, Polish public opinion

---

## INTRODUCTION

Both the new and the traditional media are nowadays an extremely important element of human life and an integral part of culture. As a means of communication, as well as a source of behavioral patterns, they have significantly changed the functioning of societies. The number of data in the world is growing very fast. Every year, we produce more data than during the past few years of our history. The access to information is nowadays no longer a problem, the more difficult issue, in the current information overload, the more its skillful finding. Walter Lipmann already argued in his theory from 1921 that people are unable to the perception of surrounding them extremely complex and complicated reality, which is why in their minds simplified models of the external world are created. Lipmann called it "images in heads", and argued that the dominant role in their creation belongs to the press [Pyzikowska, 2001, p. 75]. According to Lipmann, information media create cognitive maps of the world, to which the recipients react, cutting off from the reality that is too complicated for the human mind. In this way the mediatization of social reality is created, which, according to Walery Pisarek, is a process

---

<sup>1</sup> Zofia Sawicka- PhD in College of Media and Social Communication at University of Information Technology and Management in Rzeszów, contact:zsawicka@wsiz.rzeszow.pl, ORCID: 0000-0001-7679-5303

of media mediation in exploring the world, influencing the media perception of phenomena inaccessible to direct experience, shaping the image of the entire social reality, and even comprehensive social experiences under the influence of media structures [Pisarek, 2006, p. 116].

The influence of the media on shaping public opinion is investigated by the theory of agenda setting, which, despite being created over 40 years ago, has not lost its relevance. According to this theory, media messages have a huge impact on public opinion, because they determine the information order of the day, deciding about the existence of selected messages in the consciousness of their recipients [McCombes & Shaw & Weaver, 2014]. What is more, the media, through the framing function, give their own interpretation to the presented content. In this way, the media not only tell their users what to think about, but also how to interpret the provided information [Nowak, Reidel, 2008, p.180].

In the era of the new media, the phenomenon of mediatization has become even more visible, because the new media have penetrated almost every aspect of human life. In the light of conducted research on the impact of the media (both traditional and new) on public opinion, it seems that thanks to online media and social media, the agenda-setting power of the media has been strengthened. The new media give more possibilities to identify and associate issues and their attributes corresponding to the preferences of the recipient [Nowak, 2016]. In this way, the surprising paradox of the new media starts to be visible. The new media on the one hand give access to almost unlimited information, on the other they extremely narrow it. The modern media user, often without realizing it, "uses" only the information that is offered to him by specially selected internet algorithms. This phenomenon is clearly visible on one of the most popular social media, i.e. on Facebook.

The following article aims to explain how Facebook polarizes public debate in Poland. The presented conclusions are based on the critical analysis of the discourse of Polish media including social media, mainly Facebook, observations and interviews with Polish students who belong to the generation of digital natives and on the assumptions of intercultural psychology and communication.

## **DIGITAL NATIVES AND FACEBOOK**

Today's social media have become an undoubted rival of the press or other traditional media in fulfilling the informational function about the world events. This competition is definitely won among the generation of digital natives, for whom social media become the basic source of knowledge about the world. At the end of 2018, over 2 billion users used Facebook worldwide. Among them, the largest group were people aged 18 to 34 [Kuchta, 2019]. Digital natives are- generally speaking- people who were born in the times of widespread use in the everyday and professional life of the Internet, computers and other devices, treating the Internet as an ordinary element of the world around them. Growing up in the world of new technologies has significantly changed their patterns of communication, processing and consumption of information [Prensky, 2001]. One of the distinguishing features of this generation is narcissism, which in this case is not only about focusing on the physical image (e.g. placing countless selfies on the web), but also on the media consumption model. According to research conducted by Pew Research Center, Facebook users (the vast majority of whom belong to the digital natives' generation, about 70% of them have accounts on this social network [Statista, 2019]) are looking for information that confirms the validity and the importance of their views. Moreover, they are not willing to speak in the discussion if they are convinced that others do not share their opinions [Anderson, Camount, 2014]. This is how the phenomenon of the egocasting is created, which consists in focusing only on content identical to individual interests, and omitting information with which he disagrees [Rosen, 2004/2005, pp. 51-72]. This leads to a situation in which the individual begins to live in a world of

their own beliefs without the possibility of their confrontation or verification. The rules of Facebook functioning significantly strengthen this mechanism.

### **FACEBOOK AND FILTER BUBBLE**

Although Facebook is the most popular social medium, according to Pew Research Center research, as many as  $\frac{3}{4}$  of all users do not know how it works. In this way, the mechanism of personalization the content escapes the attention of users and without their knowledge encloses them in an information bubble [Hiltin, Rainie, 2019].

Every Facebook user, after logging in to the website, notices the so-called newsfeed or wall on which he can see the latest activities of his friends. Their activity is so-called edge. According to the simulation, with having several hundred friends on an account on Facebook, with every login in to the site should appear about 1,500 new edges. In this way the user would be overwhelmed with the number of new information. To facilitate his task, Facebook has created content filtering algorithms that are designed to predict what will interest a given user. The algorithm calculates possible interests based on the user's previous behavior on the website and decides which content will be displayed and which is not, in this way the new phenomenon occurs, in which the information finds the user and not vice versa [Malinowski, 2016].

The first person paying attention to this mechanism was Eli Pariser, an American Internet activist. During his speech at the TED conference in 2011, he used for the first time the term filter bubble, which he defined as "a personal and unique information universe in which we all live online." He reached this conclusion by observing his own Facebook wall, when after clicking on links shared by liberal views friends, he stopped noticing content posted by his more conservative friends. The algorithm of Facebook based on his activity on the portal limited the content that Pariser would consider to be polarizing with his views [Pariser, 2011].

Pariser's remarks were confirmed by Matt Honan from the "Wired" magazine, who liked every activity of his friends that appeared on his wall. "Bemused" in this way the algorithm stopped displaying content shared by other users, showing only information from brands, which also showed to his friends [Honan, 2014].

Pariser's observations on the principles of Facebook's operation show the power of this medium in creating and strengthening the narcissistic attitudes of its users who locked in their own filter bubbles, have access to information in accordance with their preferences and likings. In this way, they are cut off from everything that the algorithm deems "unworthy" of their interests and freed from the content confronting their views on reality. Thanks to this mechanism, they gain the belief that their point of view is correct and all those who think differently must be wrong.

It is worth noting that the algorithms activity does not only cover the interests of Facebook users, although it also in this case deprives them of the possibility of changes. Based on their previous choices, the algorithms offer them similar content, not considering that the taste of each can change. Algorithms also personalize the news that reaches users closing each of them in a separate bubble. Access to other users is conditioned by the convergence of opinions, views or needs. In this way, public discourse is disturbed.

### **FACEBOOK AND PUBLIC OPINION**

In the world of the new media, the role of a gatekeeper, so far performed by media broadcasters or opinion leaders, has been taken over by algorithms what significantly influenced the shape of modern public opinion. The selection of information, devoid of a human factor, sorts them only according to the rules of importance for the user, not considering what is really important and what is less important for the general public. That leads to the situation where the user sees only the content with which he agrees and comes to the conviction that everyone thinks in the same way. If he meets a person with

different views, he is convinced that this person must be wrong. Isolating users from content that collides with their points of view leads to the creation of “digital ghettos” whose “residents” reinforce each other’s beliefs in the validity and importance of their views and consume only information that confirms their opinions [Szpunar, 2018]. At the same time, they are still convinced about choosing independently the content to which they have access. This illusion is further amplified by the confirmation bias our brain is subject to, i.e. the tendency to choose and prefer sources consistent with our worldview [Kahneman, Tversky, 1979]. Thanks to this, we protect ourselves and the conviction that we are right. These opinions and views are strengthened by spreading them through repeated and continuous communication between users who share the same type of thoughts in a closed system, i.e. on social networks. In this way, the echo chamber is created, which in turn leads to the rejection of alternative views and, consequently, to the strengthening of one’s own [Jamieson, Apella, 2010]. This situation is extremely convenient for the individual, because he is not forced to confront the content with which he does not agree. What is more, his belief that the world is homogeneous grows, because any form of difference is not allowed to his consciousness, which results in the radicalization of his views. This attitude leads to a state in which users close themselves to an alternative vision of the world, and any confrontation remains only in the declarative sphere [Szpunar 2018]. This situation has a huge impact on public opinion, because it significantly limits public debate, favoring the radicalization and polarization of opposing views. If we add the phenomenon of narcissism to this, then a debate with people with different views than ours will not be possible at all. This way of shaping public opinion is of particular importance in the generation of digital natives, because mainly among them the role of the information medium has been taken over by Facebook. It is also important for those who do not belong to this generation, but who also use social media. Since people are looking for information consistent with their beliefs, they will use those traditional media that share their opinion, Facebook’s algorithms will additionally confirm it. In this way, by using various sources of information, they will “concrete” in their own views.

What was one of the promises of the Internet- the creation of a public sphere that would foster debate and create a consensus, turned out to be not entirely true. The surprising paradox of the new media is the fact that on the one hand they give access to almost unlimited information, on the other hand they narrow it down extremely. The modern media user, often without realizing it, “uses” only the information that is offered to him by specially selected internet algorithms. Created in this way filter bubble condemns him to the only vision of reality - and in the absence of the possibility of verifying his observations what results from the way the new media works - in his opinion the only true one. This is particularly important in creating the vision of social order and the functioning of the state which is well illustrated by the example of Polish society and its division into “two” functioning parallel Poland. The mediatization of Polish social reality has led to the emergence of isolated groups, whose members - mainly through media activities - have limited opportunities to make choices and make independent decisions. It also caused a lack of rational political debate on a number of important social issues.

### **POLISH FILTER BUBBLE**

Facebook in Poland is one of the most popular social networking sites. At the end of 2018, 16,840,000 Poles used it, which accounted for 44.3% of the total population. Their age range was as follows:

- 7.6%** between the ages of 13 and 17 years
- 22%** between the ages of 18 and 24 years
- 29,1%** between the ages of 25 and 34 years
- 20,8%** between the ages of 35 and 44 years

**10,2%** between the ages of 45 and 54 years

**6,4%** between the ages 55 and 64 years [Górska, 2018]

So, it is clearly seen that the generation of digital natives most often uses Facebook, this is particularly important in the face of the fact that for 61% of all users of this medium Facebook is the basic source of news about the events in Poland and in the world [Statista, 2019]. If we compare these data with another survey, it turns out that for older Poles (60 years and older) the main source of knowledge is television (90%), while Facebook in the 18-29 age group is a source of information for 58% of them. The press as a source of the news is in this group in the reverse [Kolanko, 2019].

The situation that emerges from the results of the research presented above has a significant impact on the shape of public debate in Poland. Since Facebook encloses its users in filter bubbles, it means that over 60% of Poles using this medium do not have reliable knowledge about events in Poland and in the world. They are receiving personalized information, which on the one hand is very convenient for them, but on the other, from the point of view of social communication and building a public debate, this fact has disastrous consequences. Each of them lives closed in their information bubble and according to it assesses reality. If we assume (and this is confirmed by the author's observations) that the Internet, or more precisely Facebook is the only source of information for young Poles, they have no way of verifying their views, which in turn leads to radicalization of their opinions. Also, those who use television as the main source of information are not free from the filter bubble effect. With the current polarization of news sites in Poland, viewers of individual TV stations or readers of specific titles of weekly opinions will not get a chance to confront their views on the web. The algorithm will prepare information for them that will only confirm their views. In this way, there is a huge polarization and radicalization of public debate in Poland, in which there are no rational arguments on important social issues.

Politicians also are not free from the filter bubble effect. This is significant because they have a decisive influence on the shape of the public debate and what issues are raised in it. Since politicians have specific views and use social media, it can be assumed that information that does not coincide with their beliefs never reaches them. It can be seen from specific examples, such as during the interview of Rafał Trzaskowski, who was the minister of foreign affairs in the shadow cabinet of Civic Platform. Asked by Konrad Piasecki, the journalist of Radio Zet, he could not answer the question related to the dispute about the Smolensk Monument in New Jersey, despite the fact that this topic was dominant in social media for three days, his filter bubble did not contain this message [Piasecki, 2018]. Probably the algorithm treated this information as related with Law and Justice party what was automatically classified as not corresponding with Trzaskowski's opinion. Another example is the Polish migration policy project, which addresses issues related to refugees or Muslim migrants. This problem was discussed very strongly in public debate. The word "Islam" appears 47 times in the document and always in the context of security threats, terrorism and fundamentalism. Almost the entire subsection entitled "Ensuring security in the migration process" (over 12 pages) is devoted to the alleged threat from Islam. No other religious group is singled out in the policy draft in such a way. All Muslims are racialized and portrayed as non-integrated radicals, and if not present, future terrorists. There is no mention of the diversity of Islam and Muslim societies. The authors cite an article from the Catholic far-right website / bimonthly *Polonia Christian*, which was at the forefront of racism and stigmatization of Muslims in Poland, as well as information from the TVP Info news portal, which presented information in a similar tone about Muslims and refugees [Pędziwiatr, 2019]. The authors of the document (they were not undisclosed to the public opinion) connected with the ruling party, when created this draft, used sources of information available to them, limited by their own filter bubbles. They presented their image of Muslims, convinced of the correctness of their own views. In this way, the debate about such an important



problem for Poland as the problem of migration is polarized and extremely radicalized.

The filter bubble effect in the Polish public debate seems to be strengthened by the Polish national character, which, according to the author, perfectly fits into the activities of social media algorithms. Paweł Boski, a precursor of intercultural psychology, distinguishes among characteristics of Poles: the lack of social discipline, low level of social trust and sarmatism, which is inseparably connected with the conviction of being unique and always right [Boski, 2009]. Moreover, the tradition of the Polish public debate are the parliaments and councils, which were often dominated by excessive talkativeness, quarrels and disputes that resulted from the noble pettifogging characteristic for Poles also nowadays. Julian Ochorowicz, a nineteenth-century Polish philosopher, psychologist and publicist, also attributed to the Polish nation partisanship saying that when three Germans gather, they form a union, and three Poles form four parties [Lewandowski, 2007].

All of the above-mentioned features are easily reinforced by the nature of social media. Filter bubble divides the Polish Internet community into groups that cannot talk to each other. Social media are conducive to “excessive talkativeness” and, as has already been shown in the article, are a great tool for confirming your own uniqueness and infallibility, especially on the assumption that others cannot be trusted. While the filter bubble mechanism works similarly around the world, it seems that it can be assumed that its effects may depend on the cultural characteristics of network users. Although digitized reality may have its own culture and rules, then traditions and customs of reality still seem to be the leading force in determining and arranging relationships in virtual environments [Laurenson, 2014]. In this way, according to the author, the polarization and radicalization of the Polish public debate has been strengthened to the maximum.

## SUMMARY

One of the main hopes associated with the emergence and spread of the Internet was its ability to create a public sphere and strengthen democratic debate that will foster consensus. The subsequent stages of the development of this medium showed the deceptiveness of the expectations placed on it. In the era of the dominance of social media, such as Facebook, there is an increasing fear that the Internet actually strengthens opinion polarization processes, because users interact with like-minded people, and the tendency to personalize information on the web is growing. This technological bias divides the online debate into virtual echo chambers in which the user hears only the information with which he agrees. In this way, the possibility of public debate is extremely limited. The phenomenon of polarization of views is observed all over the world. Never before has it been so easy to conflict entire societies. According to Philip Zimbardo, polarization of the community to such an extent is a new phenomenon that will deepen. Zimbardo argues it is because of the loss of true communication skills, which occurred as a result of the development of new technologies [Suchan, 2019].

The impact of the filter bubble on the polarization of public debate is particularly evident in Poland. Algorithms of social media “strengthened” by the national nature of Poles divided Polish society into at least “two” functioning parallel Poland. To remedy this, media education is needed in Poland. Hopefully, thanks to it Poles will be able to leave their information bubbles and, on the basis of diverse information, conduct a rational public debate. Awareness of filter bubbles is the first step to leave them. It is hard to disagree with Goethe, who said: “None are more hopelessly enslaved than those who falsely believe they are free”. The time will show, what the future will bring.

## References

- ANDERSON M., CAUMONT A. (2014), How social media is reshaping the news, Pew Research Center, [online: September 10, 2019], <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/09/24/how-social-media-is-reshaping-news/>
- BOSKI P., (2009), Kulturowe ramy zachowań społecznych, Warszawa, PWN.
- GÓRSKA Z., (2019), Polscy użytkownicy social media na koniec 2018: Messenger i Instagram rosły szybciej niż Facebook, [online: 20 September, 2019], <https://napoleoncat.com/pl/blog/polscy-uzytkownicy-social-media-na-koniec-2018-messenger-i-instagram-rosna-szybciej-niz-facebook/>
- HILTIN P., RAINIE L., (2019), Facebook Algorithms and Personal Data, Pew Research Center, [online: 10 October 2019], <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2019/01/16/facebook-algorithms-and-personal-data/>
- HONAN M. (2014), I liked everything I saw on Facebook for two days. Here's what it did to me, „WIRED”, [online: 10 September 2019], <http://www.wired.com/2014/08/i-liked-everything-i-saw-on-facebook-for-two-daysheres-what-it-did-to-me>
- JAMIESON K.H., CAPPELLA J.N. (2010), Echo Chamber: Rush Limbaugh and the Conservative Media Establishment, Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- KAHNEMAN D., TVERSKY A. (1979), Prospect Theory: An Analysis of Decision under Risk, „Econometrica”, XLVII (1979), p. 263–291.
- KOLANKO M., (2019), Sondaż: Głównym źródłem wiedzy dla Polaków jest telewizja, „Rzeczpospolita”, [online: 15 September, 2019], <https://www.rp.pl/Media/190429917-Sondaz-Glownym-zrodlem-wiedzy-dla-Polakow-jest-telewizja.html>
- KUCHTA M., (2019), Ilu użytkowników korzysta z sieci i social media w 2019 roku?, SocialPress, [online: 4 September 2019], <https://socialpress.pl/2019/02/ilu-uzytkownikow-korzysta-z-sieci-i-social-media-w-2019-roku>
- LAURENSEN L., (2014), Culture's impact on social media adoption, [online:20 September 2019], <https://www.oreilly.com/ideas/cultures-impact-on-social-media-adoption>
- LEWANDOWSKI E., (2007), Co wiemy o charakterze Polaków?, „Polityka”, [online: 10 October 2019], <https://www.polityka.pl/tygodnikpolityka/spoleczenstwo/216105,2,co-wiemy-o-charakterze-polakow.read?page=52&moduleId=4686>
- MALINOWSKI B., (2016), Jak Facebook zamyka nas w bańce informacyjnej. Algorytm filtrujący newsfeed a zjawisko filter bubble, „Zarządzanie mediami”, Tom 4(1)2016, pp. 15–22.
- MCCOMBES M.E., SHAW D.L., WEAVER D.H., (2014), New directions in agenda-setting theory and research, „Mass Communication and Society”, Vol. 17, nr 6.
- NOWAK E., RIEDEL R., (2008), Agenda setting, priming, news framing. Analiza porównawcza telewizyjnych audycji informacyjnych TVN i TVP1 w okresie kampanii przedwyborczych w Polsce 2005 i 2007 r., „Zeszyty Prasoznawcze”, nr 1–2.
- NOWAK E., (2016), Teoria agenda-setting a nowe media, „Studia Medioznawcze”, 3 (66), pp. 11-24.
- PARISER E., (2011), Beware online “filter bubbles”, „TED”, [online: 10 September 2019], [http://www.ted.com/talks/eli\\_pariser\\_beware\\_online\\_filter\\_bubbles](http://www.ted.com/talks/eli_pariser_beware_online_filter_bubbles)
- PĘDZIWIATR K., (2019), The new Polish migration policy – false start, openDemocracy, [online: 1 September 2019], [https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/can-europe-make-it/the-new-polish-migration-policy-false-start/?fbclid=IwAR1nc-4PTgaBCI-ow66OPnNKjuqIBQBahH\\_SWL0rjaz3imKWDEIAu\\_dCHw](https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/can-europe-make-it/the-new-polish-migration-policy-false-start/?fbclid=IwAR1nc-4PTgaBCI-ow66OPnNKjuqIBQBahH_SWL0rjaz3imKWDEIAu_dCHw)
- PIASECKI K.,(2018), Gość Radia Zet: Rafał Trzaskowski, [online; 3 September 2019], <https://www.radiozet.pl/Radio/Programy/Gosc-Radia-ZET/Rafal-Trzaskowski-Jezeli-PKW-powie-ze-nie-wolno-czegos-robic-zastosuj-sie>
- PISAREK W. (ed.), (2006), Słownik terminologii medialnej, Kraków, Universitas.
- PRENSKY M., (2001), Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants, [online: 4 July 2019], <https://www.marcprensky.com/writing/Prensky%20%20Digital%20Natives,%20Digital%20Immigrants%20-%20Part1.pdf>
- PYZIKOWSKA A., (2001), Teoria agenda-setting i jej zastosowanie, [in:] Dobek-Ostrowska B. (ed.), Nauka o komunikowaniu. Podstawowe orientacje teoretyczne, Wrocław, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego.
- ROSEN CH. (2004/2005). The Age of Egocasting, “The New Atlantis”, vol.7, p.51-72, [online: 10 September 2019], <https://www.thenewatlantis.com/publications/the-age-of-egocasting>
- Statista,(2019), Distribution of Facebook users worldwide as of October 2019, by age and gender, [online: 2 November 2019], <https://www.statista.com/statistics/376128/facebook-global-user-age-distribution/>
- Statista, (2019), Main sources of news content in Poland in 2016 and 2018, [online: 2 November 2019], <https://www.statista.com/statistics/376128/facebook-global-user-age-distribution/>

[www.statista.com/statistics/980473/poland-news-sources/](http://www.statista.com/statistics/980473/poland-news-sources/)

**SUCHAN M.**, (2019), Philip Zimbardo: Stworzenia społeczne mile widziane-wywiad, [online: 22 November 2019], <https://fakty.interia.pl/wywiady/news-philip-zimbardo-stworzenia-spoeczne-mile-widziane,nld,3349089>

**SZPUNAR M.**, (2018), Koncepcja bańki filtrującej a hipernarcyzm nowych mediów, „Zeszyty Prasoznawcze”, T.61, nr 2(234), pp. 191-200.