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INTERNET MEMES AS AN EXAMPLE OF POLITICAL DISSATISFACTION OF POLES ON THE INTERNET

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Introduction

There is a number of types of political communication on the Internet. Polish politicians willingly use such tools as Twitter or Facebook in order to be in touch with their voters. It is a very convenient and effective tool for them. The most characteristic publications are even reported by traditional media, such as television and press, and the most popular Polish politicians profiles have up to tens of thousands of followers¹. The Internet is, however, a specific phenomenon and gives opportunity to express one's views publicly not only to well-known people, but also to ordinary ones. Naturally such people have little likelihood of creating very popular profiles and as a result have the possibility of reaching great amounts of Internet users with their opinions and views. However, there are other means available for them. Commenting on political news by creating or sharing Internet memes is among the most popular of them.

¹ Ł. Woźnicki, *Który polityk rządzi na polskim Twitterze i dlaczego jest nim Radosław Sikorski*, http://wyborcza.pl/1,75478,15243508,Ktory_polityk_rzadzi_na_polskim_Twitterze_i_dlaczego.html, 22.01.2014.

The Internet meme is the main aspect of analysis in this article. An attempt to define and classify it and to observe its place and significance in political discourse on the Internet will be undertaken. According to the main hypothesis of the article, Internet memes can be regarded as an expression of political activity of Polish citizens on the Internet. The other aims of the article are to investigate the speed at which Internet memes spread in comparison to the political facts they apply and to determine the place of Internet memes in the political discourse.

The article is divided into three parts. First, theoretical analysis of Internet memes will be conducted. Second, Internet memes concerning politics in Poland will be assessed. This part will propose a typology of memes in Polish politics, as well as some of the most significant examples of the memes themselves. The third and last part concerns considerations on the role and significance of Internet memes in Polish political discourse and in political communication in general.

A semiotic approach will be used in order to investigate internet memes and its role in the political discourse. A semiotic method focuses on signs and texts and enables analysis on how the relations between images, texts and meanings connect with each other to form for example social and political messages².

What is an Internet meme?

The word “meme” is usually bound with evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins. In his book *Selfish Gene* in 1976, he described it as a natural *human*

² A. A. T. Kariko, Analysis of Internet Memes Using Semiotics, <http://english.binus.ac.id/2013/06/24/analysis-on-internet-memes-using-semiotics/>, 07.03.2014.

*spreading, replication, and modification of ideas and culture*³. The word *meme* was to be adequate for its meaning due to the similarity to the word *gene*. According to Dawkins, melodies, ideas, common phrases, styles of clothes, ways of building arcs etc. are the examples of memes⁴. In this perspective, memes are likened to genes or viruses. They are units of cultural information which, according to biological metaphor, replicate, evolve and mutate, just like genes. In other words, memes are the basic unit of cultural transmission which are formed by processes of identical replication and the capability of introducing innovations allowing for derogations⁵. Such approach is described as memetics.

This explanation of the meaning of a meme seems to be relatively general and not necessarily connected with the Internet communication. As a matter of fact, an Internet meme is a much narrower term. It can be described as content or a concept which has the ability to quickly spread between the Internet users⁶. According to Magdalena Kamińska, an Internet meme is a colloquial symbol of popular, semiotic complex transmitted via Internet, which most commonly has a characteristics of an Internet joke. It can be considered as a metaphor of a hypothetic cultural transfer or as a visualized meme itself. Along with the spreading of an Internet meme, it is transformed somehow, which seems to be in accordance with the theory of memetics that was mentioned earlier. This transformation of an Internet meme – creating new varieties – by adding, for instance new layers of comments to the original versions by Internet users – is called by some investigators as the *infectious-*

³ C. Chen, *The Creation and Meaning of Internet Memes in 4chan: Popular Internet Culture in the Age of Online Digital Reproduction*, „Habitus”, vol. III, Spring 2012, p. 7.

⁴ R. Dawkins, *Samolubny Gen*, Warszawa 2007, p. 244.

⁵ M. Kamińska, *Niechne Memy. Dwanaście wykładów o kulturze internetu*, Poznań 2011, s. 60, U. M. Husted, *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way from the Forum: The life and death of internet memes*, p. 19, <http://purl.umn.edu/137171>, 23.01.2014.

⁶ C. Bauckhage, *Insights into Internet Memes*, ICWSM, 2011, p. 42.

ness of a meme⁷. An interesting approach to explaining the meaning of an Internet meme has been introduced by Patrick Davidson, *according to whom an Internet meme is a piece of culture, typically a joke, which gains influence through online transmission*⁸. Humorous character seems to be the key feature.

Investigators draw attention to two characteristic features of Internet memes: the rapidity of spreading and similarity to the original version. Unlike spoken or printed jokes, an Internet meme is almost unlimited in terms of how quickly it reaches the new viewers. At the same time their shape remains unchanged because it is not dependent on, for example, memory like in the case of a spoken joke⁹. Transmitting Internet memes is crucial in this aspect. It is even claimed that "creating an Internet meme" does not necessarily mean "producing" it, but above all transmitting it by Internet users by a file or a link. According to Magdalena Kamińska, contents like a *web page, video clip or animation, which consists of a joke, a rumour, extraordinary news, a collage or an original graphics or a photography could be named Internet memes*¹⁰. However, in popular understanding of an Internet meme, it is an even narrower content.

The history of Internet memes started at the beginning of 1980s when emoticons¹¹ became popular. All variations of *smilies* became the first Internet memes, although very minimalistic. With the passing of time they were becoming increasingly complicated. In the late 1990s and at the beginning of the twenty-first century Internet memes began to be created on the basis of digi-

⁷ M. Kamińska, *op.cit.*, p. 61, 64.

⁸ P. Davidson, *The Language of Internet Memes*, [in:] M. Mandiberg (ed.), *The Social Media Reader*, New York 2012, p. 122, L.K. Börzsei, *Makes a Meme Instead: A Concise History of Internet Memes*, February 2013, p. 3, http://works.bepress.com/linda_borzsei/2, 23.01.2014.

⁹ P. Davidson, *op.cit.*

¹⁰ M. Kamińska, *op.cit.*, p. 63.

¹¹ This is a symbol of emotions created with the use of keyboard symbols, such as ":-)" or ":-(".

tal photographs or pictures manipulated in computer programs, such as Photoshop¹². Currently this exact form of an Internet meme seems to be the most popular – a digitally manipulated picture or photography, most frequently with a humorous phrase added on the top or bottom of it, or both¹³. A typical Internet meme is presented below.

Pic. 1. 'This flavor tastes like your soul' meme.



Source: littlefun.org, 07.03.2014.

The amount of Internet memes and their diversity is enormous. Both worldwide and in Poland there are plenty of web sites where Internet users publish or share Internet memes, for instance www.quickmeme.com, memebase.cheezburger.com, www.memecenter.com, www.memestache.com among English-speaking ones, and kwejk.pl, demotyworthy.pl, chamsko.pl and many other Polish ones. This article focuses on Polish memes.

The review of popular Internet memes available on the Internet suggests a number of characteristic features, such as plenty of vulgar expressions

¹² L.K. Börzsei, op.cit., p. 5-8.

¹³ P. Davidson, op.cit., p. 127.

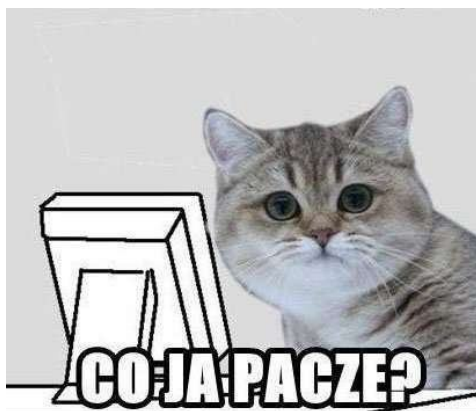
or grammatical and spelling mistakes apparently made intentionally. This last characteristics of Polish memes has been derived from the English-speaking ones.

Pic. 2. 'I can has Poland?' meme.



Source: www.theroyalpoke.com, 23.01.2014.

Pic. 3. 'Co ja pacze?' meme¹⁴.



Source: www.fakt.pl, 07.03.2014.

Popular Internet memes are created on the basis of old and popular pictures (they are the bases for many memes only with comments being changed) as well as of more original photographs and pictures. Very frequently their subject concerns politically incorrect matters. Racist, chauvinistic, anti-Semitic, homophobic etc. motives are very common, which obviously is an aberration concerning the all-embracing political correctness of the today's world. However, claiming that all Internet memes are that kind would be an excessive simplification. On the Internet there are also plenty of memes that are highly polite. What is more, many of the traditional types of media, such as TV broadcasters or newspapers, often show the most popular Internet memes, especially when they apply to current socio-political situation¹⁵.

¹⁴ "Co ja pacze" should be written as "Co ja patrzę", which means "What do I see".

¹⁵ See:

Internet memes as a citizen's reaction to politics in Poland

According to the theoretical considerations presented above, Internet memes can be described as simple forms of entertainment available to the vast audience that can be created by ordinary people. No wonder they are sometimes classified as "junk humor"¹⁶, an expression that highlights its simplicity and lack of sophistication. As has already been mentioned, Internet memes can concern plenty of matters. In this article memes will be restricted to those concerning politics – and specifically those Internet memes that are recognized as examples of political activity of Polish citizens on the Internet. The research question of this article can be stated as follows: can society express itself politically with the use of Internet memes and if they can, how?

In the context of political discourse, it appears – political memes are, most of all, examples of criticism of the political reality. Internet memes, as has been mentioned, are basically Internet jokes. Similarly to other satiric forms, such as a stand-up comedy, Internet memes are aimed to satirize or mock the social or political reality. As a result, the creators of "political" memes usually refer to current public news and try to mock either the situation or the politician responsible for it.

Categories

Proposing a typology of Internet memes concerning politics appears to be difficult. From one point of view they all have a lot in common – mocking politicians. On the other hand, great diversity of "political Internet memes" and particular issues that become objects of satirization. Five major categories

http://www.tvn24.pl/wideo/z-anteny/internet-drwi-z-zalanego-narodowego,520378.html?playlist_id=16572, 23.01.2014,

<http://rozrywka.dziennik.pl/hity-internetu/galeria/448707,1,elzbieta-taki-klimat-bienkowska-memy-galeria-zdjec.html>, 23.01.2014.

¹⁶ See: <http://natemat.pl/46913,dymitr-gluszczenko-tworca-kwejk-pl-opowiada-o-kwejk-u-sobie-pieniadzach-i-nowych-projektach-wywiad>, 28.01.2014.

should be taken into consideration. The first two regard whether the **politician represents the ruling or oppositional party**. The first group is much more common, especially concerning the fact, that very often they hold public offices. Representatives of political opposition are also mocked, especially in regard to overall negative image of a politician or after a public disgrace, although they seem to be less frequent. Classifying a meme to one of those groups may be difficult in respect to politicians working in local or regional authorities, so it is worth to introduce the caveat that regardless of the level of political activity, the politician shall be classified on the basis of the membership in the ruling party on governmental level. This division applies not only to politicians, but to parties as well, as they also happen to be mocked in internet memes.

Another three categories regard the **particular subject of the Internet meme** – concerning the reason for mocking a politician or a party. In relation to this division, memes can be assorted to one of categories:

- regarding disgrace of a politician,
- regarding politicians in charge of public services,
- regarding the overall negative image of a politician.

The memes regarding disgrace of a politician are the most numerous. Such disgrace can be derived from a speech that reveals incompetence or lack of understanding of problems of the people. Politicians can embarrass themselves by acting irresponsibly in private life, or by participating in a political scandal such as corruption. Most of the memes that will be presented in this article can be classified within this category (pictures 4-7, 14-17, 18-23, 26-29).

Another category of Internet memes concern politicians in charge of public services. They become mocked in internet memes especially when they

fail to assume their responsibilities. Such memes can be seen on pictures 24 and 25. This category can be very easily confused with the previous one. For instance memes on pictures 4-7 could be classified both as ones regarding disgrace of a politician and regarding politicians in charge of public services. In such situations the intention of the creator of the meme must be taken into consideration.

The third category regards the overall negative image of a politician. Some of Polish politicians are simply disliked by many people, due to many reasons, for instance past disgraces. As a result they become a frequent object of mockery in internet memes. Examples of this type can be seen on pictures 8-13.

In respect to the categories, 6 types of internet memes concerning politics can be presented:

- regarding disgrace of a politician representing ruling party,
- regarding disgrace of a politician representing oppositional party,
- regarding politicians in charge of public services representing ruling party,
- regarding politicians in charge of public services representing oppositional party,
- regarding overall negative image of a politician representing ruling party,
- regarding overall negative image of a politician representing oppositional party.

Tab. 1. Typology of Internet memes concerning politics.

Subject of mockery				
Representing ruling or oppositional party		Disgrace of a politician	Politicians in charge of public services	Overall negative image of a politician
	Representing ruling party	Disgrace of a politician representing ruling party	Politicians in charge of public services representing ruling party	Overall negative image of a politician representing ruling party
	Representing oppositional party	Disgrace of a politician representing oppositional party	Politicians in charge of public services representing ruling party	Overall negative image of a politician representing ruling party

Source: Own elaboration.

It must be noted that new internet memes concerning politics appear constantly. Therefore it is possible that in the future memes that do not match to any of the types presented above may be created. However, for the time being the presented typology seems to be exhaustive.

In January 2014, as a result of bad weather conditions (freezing rain in particular) considerable delays of some trains occurred. The Polish Vice-prime Minister and Minister of Infrastructure and Development Elżbieta Bieńkowska commented on this situation in a TV show *Fakty po Faktach* on TVN24 as follows: *Sorry, this is the type of climate we have* (originally: *Sorry, taki mamy klimat*) stating at the same time, that *out of 4 000 trains only two were stuck*¹⁷. What was exceptionally touchy, is that minister originally used the word “sor-

¹⁷<http://faktypofaktach.tvn24.pl/mroz-zatrzymal-pociagi-sorry-mamy-taki-klimat,389604.html>, 23.01.2014.

ry”, which in Polish has rather informal and in this case mocking character. The words may have sounded unfortunate and incorrect, especially concerning the fact they were said by the incumbent minister responsible for domestic railway communications. As a result, the reaction of the Internet users appeared very soon. Despite comments under news about the statement of minister Bieńkowska, many memes appeared as well (pictures 4-7).

Pic. 4. ‘Sorry, taki mamy klimat’ meme¹⁸.



Source: polska.newsweek.pl, 23.01.2014.

Pic. 5. ‘Winter is coming’ meme.



Source: polska.newsweek.pl, 23.01.2014.

Pic. 6¹⁹, ‘Sorry, taki mamy klimat’ meme



Source: polska.newsweek.pl, 23.01.2014.

Pic. 7. Elżbieta Bieńkowska in train’s restroom meme.



Source: polska.newsweek.pl, 23.01.2014.

¹⁸ English translation: *I can only say one thing to the passengers that got frozen in the trains; Sorry, this is the type of climate we have.*

¹⁹ English translation: *Sorry, this is the type of climate we have.*

The presented memes have a form of a simple photograph with a citation of a politician (pic. 4) or a modified image of the minister with the background showing a toilet in a frozen train (pic. 7), as well as more complicated forms referring to a popular TV series *Game of Thrones* (pic. 5 and 6). The time period between the statement of Elżbieta Bieńkowska and the appearance of the first internet memes is worth mentioning – both happened at the same evening²⁰.

The situation above refers to a politician currently holding public office. Such a subject of Internet memes concerning Polish politics seems to be especially eagerly chosen by the authors of Internet memes. Individuals holding public offices are particularly exposed to criticism and mockery. Currently in Poland many Internet memes refer to the Prime Minister Donald Tusk (examples on pictures 8-11).

Pic. 8. 'Które ulgi jeszcze zniesiesz' meme²¹.



Source: deser.pl, 23.01.2014.

Pic. 9. 'Ciong Le Mao' meme²².



Source: deser.pl, 23.01.2014

Pic. 10. 'Może i autostrady nam nie wyszły' Pic. 11. 'Dziwnie wymiawiam R' meme²³.

²⁰See: <http://natemat.pl/89287/elzbieta-bienkowska-o-paralizu-kolei-sorry-taki-mamy-klimat-internet-bezlitosny-dla-wicepremier>, 23.01.2014, <http://kwejk.pl/obrazek/1990532/sorry-taki-mamy-klimat.html>, 23.01.2014.

²¹ English translation: *Which tax credits are you going to lift? A – Happy Hours, B – Last Minute, C – Summer Sales, D – VITAY Loyalty program.*

²² This is a word play meant to look like a Chinese. Word *Mao* is used in reference to PRC leader Mao Tse Tung. In Polish *Ciong Le Mao* sounds like *Still too little*, which refers to tax raises introduced by Tusk's government.

meme²⁴.



Source:fabrykamemow.pl, 07.03.2014.



Source: sfora.pl, 07.03.2014.

Obviously Internet memes concerning politics in Poland do not focus only on politicians in-office. Oppositional politicians can also become subjects to criticism by Internet users through memes. This refers most often to individuals who are popular in media and in a way characteristic. Chairman of the biggest oppositional party in Poland (Law and Justice) Jarosław Kaczyński (pic. 13) and another politician of this party Antoni Macierewicz (pic. 12) are particularly often criticized and mocked in Internet memes. Kaczyński is accused of permanently criticizing the Tusk's government, while Macierewicz is accused of a characteristic attitude towards the crash of Polish Air Force aircraft with the president Lech Kaczyński onboard on 10th April 2010. They are, however, only examples and there are many other oppositional politicians that are satirized on the Internet (pic. 14-15).

²³ English translation: *When I lie, I pronounce "R" strangely*. This refers to Donald Tusk's speech impediment.

²⁴ English translations: *Maybe we didn't do well with the highways, but the sides of the roads are quite cool*.

Pic. 12. Antoni Macierewicz meme²⁵.



Source: rozrywka.dziennik.pl, 03.02.2014.

Pic. 13. 'Wina Tuska' meme²⁶.



Source: rozrywka.dziennik.pl, 03.02.2014.

Pic. 14. Krystyna Pawłowicz meme²⁷.



Source: www.comedycentral.pl, 03.02.2014.

Pic. 15. Renata Beger meme²⁸.



Source: m.dziennik.pl, 03.02.2014.

It should be noted, there are no strict rules concerning the objects of mocking of Internet users with the use of memes. Every politician can become

²⁵ English translation: *Went to a strip club, no one wanted to talk to him about assassination.* This refers to the thesis of Antoni Macierewicz that the crash of Polish president's aircraft was a result of assassination.

²⁶ English translation: *Duchess Kate is pregnant? It's Tusk's fault.* This refers to Jarosław Kaczyński's criticism towards prime minister Donald Tusk.

²⁷ English translation: *Society cannot provide sweet live to counterproductive relations of people that give it no benefit* Krystyna, 60 years old, not married, no kids, Member of the Parliament. This refers to a statement of Krystyna Pawłowicz in the parliament concerning the debate about registering partnerships, see: http://wiadomosci.gazeta.pl/wiadomosci/12,114927,13330678,Pawlowicz_Spoleczenstwo_nie_moze_fundowac_slodkiego.html, 03.02.2014.

²⁸ English translation: *I'm coming back to politics. I've run out of oat.* This refers to a former Member of the Parliament Renata Beger, who said once that she liked sex just as a horse liked oat.

a target of such criticism, regardless of the fact if he or she represents radical or moderate, governmental or oppositional party. Of course it is easier to find memes about famous and recognizable politicians. However, those less known can also become famous in the “world of Internet memes” – all they need to do is to embarrass themselves publically. This was the case of the Member of Parliament Przemysław Wipler, who took part in a scuffle with the police late at night on Tuesday on 29th October 2013 in front of a night club in Warsaw. After the occurrence, the MP was taken to a detoxification detention centre. Both Przemysław Wipler and the police presented different reports of the occurrence. According to the police, Wipler began to insult the police officers and scuffle with them, whereas according to the MP, it was the policemen who were aggressive towards him while he intervened during a quarrel between a few people and the police²⁹.

Even though the situation described above was not clear, it became the subject of many vicious comments of Internet users (pic. 16-17), especially concerning the fact that a Member of Parliament under the influence of alcohol took part in the quarrel at night in the middle of a week. Another thing that was criticized on the Internet was the fact that next day Przemysław Wipler was very bruised while giving interviews in public. Apart from this, photographs of the MP in a shirt covered with blood appeared on the Internet. Internet users tended to express disbelief of Wipler’s version. As a result, a number of memes concerning the situation appeared almost immediately, just as in the case of the minister Elżbieta Bieńkowska.

²⁹<http://www.polskatimes.pl/artykul/1029995,pijany-przemyslaw-wipler-bil-i-wyzywal-policjantow-w-warszawie-posel-zostalem-brutalnie-pobity,id,t.html>, 24.01.2014.

Pic. 16. 'Breaking Bad' meme.



Source: gadzetomania.pl, 24.01.2014.

Pic. 17. 'Monopol na przemoc ma tylko policja' meme³⁰.



Source: deser.pl, 24.01.2014.

The case of Przemysław Wipler shows clearly how quickly, due to a single embarrassment, a politician can become the main character of Internet memes. There are plenty of examples of such situations and probably most public humiliations of politicians receive such a response. For instance Polish president Bronisław Komorowski became a target of such memes after he made two spelling mistakes while writing a message in the book of condolences for the victims of the earthquake and tsunami in Japan in 2011³¹. This mishap became a sort of recurring motive in mocking the president on the Internet (pic. 18-19).

³⁰ English translation: *Only the police monopolizes the violence*. 997 is the phone number of the police.

³¹ See: <http://wiadomosci.wp.pl/kat,1515,title,Dwa-bledy-Komorowskiego-we-wpisie-z-kondolencjami,wid,13235385,wiadomosc.html?ticaid=112149>, 24.01.2014.

Pic. 18. 'Pszczola' meme³².



Source: komixxy.pl, 25.01.2014.

Pic. 19. 'Wąsy czy wonsy' meme³³.



Source: rozrywka.dziennik.pl, 25.01.2014.

Internet users reacted similarly to one of the statements of Stefan Niesiołowski, a Member of Parliament, about a report concerning malnourishment among Polish children. In the TV show *Kropka nad i* the politician said that he does not believe the figures in the report and that when he himself was of school age, children used to eat sorrel, while nowadays no one eats it³⁴. The statement reveals the same elements as the one of Elżbieta Bieńkowska concerning trains' delays. In both cases the politicians expressed a characteristic lack of empathy for ordinary people and disconnection with society. Such characteristics of politicians are always criticized. Consequently, the speech of Stefan Niesiołowski also evoked a kind of rage among Internet users, who commented on it satirically with the use of memes (pic. 20-21).

³² English translation: *A bee is written with e because it's an exception. And what, are you speechless??* In the Polish sentence a number of mistakes has been made: pżez (correct form: przez), wyjontek (correct form: wyjątek), zatkao (correct form: zatkało).

³³ English translation: *Should one write moustache or moustasche? And the problem is solved.*

³⁴ See:

http://wyborcza.pl/1,75478,13514594,Niesiolowski_nie_wierzy_ze_w_Polsce_dzieci_gloduja.html, 25.01.2014.

Pic. 20. 'Tyyyyle szczawiu' meme³⁵.



Source: wyborcza.pl, 27.01.2014.

Pic. 21. 'Dietetyk roku' meme³⁶.



Source: lodz.gazeta.pl, 27.01.2014.

Internet memes' creators joked about the former president of Poland Aleksander Kwaśniewski as well. The politician looked as if he had been drinking during a speech in Szczecin in 2007. When asked about his state of sobriety, he responded that it was due to a disease he contracted during his stay in Philippines, which requires radical treatment³⁷. Public opinion seemed to have not credited his explanations and Internet memes showing former president being drunk became frequent. For example they appeared when Aleksander Kwaśniewski participated in Europa Plus conference in April 2013, when president also seemed indisposed (pic. 22-23)³⁸.

³⁵ English translation: *Thaaaat much of sorrel we have eaten from the embankment.*

³⁶ English translation: *The dietician of the year.*

³⁷ <http://www.gk24.pl/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20071010/WYBORY/71010046>, 27.01.2014.

³⁸ <http://wiadomosci.wp.pl/kat,1342,title,Kontrowersje-wokol-wystapienia-Aleksandra-Kwasniewskiego,wid,15490897,wiadomosc.html?ticaid=11218f>, 27.01.2014.

Pic. 22. 'Europa %' meme .



Source: www.wykop.pl, 27.01.2014

Pic. 23. 'Jestem t!rzeźwiutki' meme³⁹.



Source: www.xdpedia.com, 27.01.2014

Politicians are often criticized with the use of Internet memes due to current problems that occur on different occasions. This refers to, for instance, local authorities when a city or regional local services' fail to fulfil its responsibilities. This may occur, for example, as a result of weather conditions, such as heavy rain. A frequent object of such criticism is the president of Warsaw Hanna Gronkiewicz-Waltz. In June 2013, a heavy storm occurred in the capital city of Poland. The sewage system was unable to absorb all the water, which resulted in the flooding of a few streets⁴⁰. Like in other similar situations, Internet memes concerning this situation appeared immediately. The majority of them were critical towards the president of the city (pic. 24-25).

³⁹ English translation: *I am completely sober, it's just the Philippines that work on me like this.*

⁴⁰ See:

<http://www.polskatimes.pl/artykul/915660,zalana-warszawa-burza-z-gradem-sparalizowala-stolice-zdjecia,id,t.html>, 25.01.2014.

Pic. 24. 'Zrobię Wenecję' meme⁴¹.



Source: kwejk.pl, 25.01.2014.

Pic. 25. 'Metho nie kuhsuje?' meme⁴².



Source: www.twojewiadomosci.com.pl, 25.01.2014.

The second of the memes above (pic. 25) reveals that delicate and completely faultless issues are used, such as speech impediments. It could also be seen in one of the memes concerning Donald Tusk (pic. 11).

In spite of the fact that Hanna Gronkiewicz-Waltz is probably the most frequent object of mockery in Internet memes among cities' presidents, other representatives of local authorities are also criticized that way. Two examples of Internet memes concerning the president of Wrocław Rafał Dutkiewicz have been presented below. The first of them (pic. 26) refers to one of the speeches of the president about the criticism towards him that the amount of money designated for the citizens budget in Wrocław was not big enough, comparing to Łódź. Dutkiewicz responded to it in Radio Rodzina that *if anyone thinks that it is better to live in Łódź, than he should move to Łódź*⁴³. The second (pic. 27),

⁴¹ English translation: *I'm going to do Venice here.*

⁴² English translation: *The subway isn't working? One can yacht.* The Polish version was misspelled: letters "r" were changed into "h", which refers to speech impediment of Hanna Gronkiewicz-Waltz.

⁴³

See: http://wroclaw.gazeta.pl/wroclaw/1,35771,13631551,Prezydent_Dutkiewicz_Prosze_si_e_przeprowadzic_do.html, 25.01.2014.

Pic. 26. 'Wrocław potrzebuje drugiego centrum' meme⁴⁶.



Pic. 27. 'Dutkiewicz and Solorz' meme⁴⁵.



⁴⁴ See:

[http://www.wroclaw.sport.pl/sport-wroclaw/1,123437,14692795,Wroclaw rezygnuje z Solorza a kogo ma w zamian Biznesmeni.html](http://www.wroclaw.sport.pl/sport-wroclaw/1,123437,14692795,Wroclaw%20rezygnuje%20z%20Solorza%20a%20kogo%20ma%20w%20zamian%20Biznesmeni.html), 25.01.2014.

⁴⁵ English translation: *The figures are correct? You should call >>Uwaga TVN<<*. This refers to the fact, that Zygmunt Solorz owns a Polish TV broadcaster – Polsat, while >>Uwaga TVN<< is one of the shows of another broadcaster – TVN.

⁴⁶ English translation: *Wrocław needs another city center. We are going to build it in Łódź.*

trips to their relatives and acquaintances. The whole affair resulted in the dismissal of the Minister of Agriculture Marek Sawicki⁴⁷. The scandal was described as “PSL⁴⁸ tapes” and generally the issue of nepotism in the Polish People’s Party evoked a strong reaction of the creators of Internet memes (pic. 28-29).

Pic. 28. ‘Partia Swoich Ludzi’ meme⁴⁹.



Source: kwejk.pl, 27.01.2014

Pic. 29. ‘Szczery plakat wyborczy’ meme.



Source: kwejk.pl, 27.01.2014

The amount of Internet memes that refer to politicians is enormous and growing. Almost in any situation when a political scandal occurs or politicians embarrass themselves somehow, a number of Internet memes are created. These memes are in a way comments on the current political situations. The Internet memes presented above are only some examples of mocking politicians or political parties this way.

⁴⁷ <http://www.tvn24.pl/raporty/tasmy-psl,473>, 27.01.2014.

⁴⁸ PSL is an abbreviation of the Polish name of the party: Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe.

⁴⁹ English translation: *It is the man that matters – our man. PSL. The Party of Our People*. In the background the emblem of the party can be seen. In the Polish comment a play on words has been used. The abbreviation of “The Party of Our People” is the same of the shortcut of the party’s name: Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe.

Internet memes as a part of political discourse

Legal aspects of humorous content available on the Internet, memes in this case, are an interesting issue. The examples of Internet memes presented above are relatively polite comparing to many others, which often have a very insulting and vulgar character. As a result, Internet memes concerning politics may often libel politicians. Despite this fact, legal accusations are extremely rare. There was however one case that gained a lot of attention, which concerned the Internet website antykomor.pl. Contents insulting and mocking the Polish President Bronisław Komorowski were stored there, Internet memes among others. The case also concerned the way of arresting the creator of the page Robert Frycz, who was detained at home by the Internal Security Agency officers⁵⁰. Frycz was found guilty of insulting the president and sentenced to one year and three months of restriction of liberty and 40 hours of social work. However, following the appeal against the decision, the court declared it null and void, claiming that politicians should deal with the situation that they can legitimately become the objects of mockery⁵¹. The statement of the judge seems to summarize the issue of the legality of publishing and diffusing Internet memes about politicians. The anonymity of people creating memes is another issue. Such people assign themselves a nick name instead of using their legal name and surname, so at least in theory they remain anonymous. According to all this, Internet memes can be described as content which is more or less controversial, but regarded as jokes only.

Are the Internet memes only entertaining, without any influence on politics? The answer to this question seems to be no. Under some circum-

⁵⁰ <http://tvp.info/informacje/polska/frycz-doniosl-na-abw-do-prokuratury/4558628>, 27.01.2014.

⁵¹ <http://www.tvn24.pl/wiadomosci-z-kraju,3/sprawa-antykomor-pl-sad-umorzyl-zarzut-zniewazenia-prezydenta,300610.html>, 27.01.2014,
http://wyborcza.pl/1,76842,13252281,AntyKomor_nie_zniewazyl_prezydenta.html, 27.01.2014.

stances, Internet memes do have the possibility of influencing people. According to Richard Bridie, there are three ways by which memes affect people: by conditioning (an Internet user sees a meme repeatedly so it begins to affect him increasingly, similarly to commercials on TV), by cognitive dissonance (according to which the mind struggles to make sense out of things that do not make sense, so in an unclear situation a mind can base its view on a meme) and in the manner of a Trojan horse (exceptionally interesting memes work this way, by attracting attention in order to *sneak in some other memes along with them*)⁵². Thus the political significance of Internet memes becomes quite plausible. As a matter of fact, many people who are not particularly interested in politics do not follow all the current news concerning this subject.

For example according to research conducted by the Institute of Public Affairs in 2012, 44% of young Poles at the age between 18 and 24 years old declare either very little or no interest in politics (17% very little, 27% none). At the same time, this particular age group is the most active in using Internet – 93,1%⁵³. It can be argued that Poles in this age group read Internet memes, including those about politics. As a result, such people can derive their knowledge and views concerning this area of life from memes instead of more credible traditional opinion-making media. Obviously such knowledge could be more or less distorted.

It is worth noting that the analyzed age group is constituted by full citizens, who despite no interest in politics are entitled to vote. In other words, they are a potential electorate of political parties, which at the same time may be uneager to vote for politicians that are mocked and criticized in Internet memes. Of course the influence of Internet memes on political attitudes of

⁵² R. Bridie, *Virus of the Mind. The New Science of the Meme*, London 2009, p. 188-189.

⁵³ D. Batorski, M. Drabek, M. Gałązka i J. Zbieranek (ed.), *Wyborca 2.0*, Warszawa 2012, p. 11, 31, <http://www.isp.org.pl/uploads/pdf/1674809630.pdf>, 27.01.2014.

young Poles requires further research, but it is possible that the role of Internet meme in the political discourse is bigger than it has been perceived so far. Maybe even the political parties should consider using Internet memes in order to embarrass political opponents, as a tool of political communication. At the same time it cannot be claimed unquestionably that they have not done it already, as the creators of Internet memes are usually anonymous, so some of the memes can well be created by the people related to political parties.

So far there are no voting statistics that can be correlated with internet memes. As a matter of fact such research would be extremely difficult to conduct, as it would be hard to assess to what extent for example voting decisions have been influenced by internet memes in relation to other means of political communication. Memes concerning political facts tend to appear simultaneously with many other means of communication. For instance when minister Elżbieta Bieńkowska commented on the delays of the trains, she was criticized by journalists in various media, by politicians representing oppositional parties, by Internet users putting comments under the information about her statement, in internet memes and probably in many other ways. Individuals can be affected by those means differently. Politicians and political parties obviously desire to avoid such criticism, but at the same time have nothing against their political opponents to be criticized that way. However, it should be noted that criticism of politicians usually appears simultaneously in various means of communication and it is impossible for politicians to work against any single form exclusively.

It could be argued, that many people do not read internet memes about politics at all, but on the other hand there are also Polish citizens who neither watch TV news nor read newspapers, but they take their knowledge about politics from internet memes. Such people are less probable to vote actively, but they still are a potential electorate of political parties. Therefore it

can be concluded, that internet memes can have political significance, but it is hard to assess the strength of their influence on the political discourse so far.

Conclusions

The article presents Internet memes in the context of participation of ordinary people in the political discourse. Considering the information about commenting the political events with the use of Internet memes brings a conclusion that these contents can actually be regarded as an example of political activity of citizens. As mentioned, it is one of the ways that ordinary people can comment on the political reality loudly. Most frequently these expressions are in fact more or less harsh criticisms. Commonly they are regarded as jokes only, and at the same time they are published and shared anonymously, which in a way secures their authors from legal consequences. Therefore Internet memes can be a convenient and at the same time safe way of expressing opinions about politics by citizens.

It is characteristic for Internet memes that they appear and spread very quickly. This applies to memes concerning politics as well. In most of the situations when a politician embarrasses himself, Internet memes appear very soon. Internet memes are therefore an extremely quick tool of shaping opinions of ordinary people on politics in public.

As it appears, in favorable circumstances Internet memes can mean more than simple entertainment contents. If their readers have no interest in politics, they may derive their knowledge about it from memes. As a result, in some situations Internet memes can be regarded as a tool of political communication aimed to discredit political opponents. It is very hard to assess their strength in political discourse though, as they appear simultaneously with other forms of criticism of politicians.

Abstract

The article deals with the issue of Internet memes concerning politics. Internet memes can be described as humorous contents that are created and shared via Internet. They can be regarded as one of the ways of commenting on political reality, available to ordinary people. In the article examples of situations when activities of politicians received responses from Internet users using Internet memes have been presented. According to the main hypothesis, these entertaining contents can be regarded as examples of political activity of the Poles on the Internet.

AKTYWNOŚĆ POLITYCZNA POLAKÓW W INTERNECIE NA PRZYKŁADZIE MEMÓW INTERNETOWYCH

Abstrakt

Artykuł dotyczy zagadnienia memów internetowych odnoszących się do polityki. Memami internetowymi można określić humorystyczne treści, które są tworzone i udostępniane przez internautów. Można je uznać za jeden ze sposobów komentowania sytuacji politycznej, który jest dostępna dla „zwykłych ludzi”. W artykule przedstawione zostały przykładowe sytuacje, w których działania polityków spotykały się z odpowiedzią internautów przy użyciu memów internetowych. Zgodnie z główną hipotezą te rozrywkowe treści mogą być uznane za przykład aktywności politycznej Polaków w Internecie.