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Polish Internet at the end of the 20th century

The past 20 years of Polish Internet have been a complex period in which its development and changes coincided with the transformation of the country, including all parts of the media. While we should analyse the first decade as a period in which only the "old media" was used, the second requires a longer reference to new technologies, when the growth of the Internet began to determine most of the changes occurring in this period in the areas of communication, culture and new social habits.

When the World Wide Web protocols were being developed in 1990 in Switzerland's CERN[1] (European Organisation for Nuclear Research), Poland had just become one of Europe's youngest democracies. Still, despite many limitations in the political, economic or social spheres, many operations on the academic level developed much more dynamically, including in the area of new technologies.

17 August 1991 is given as the symbolic beginning of the Polish Internet. That day, the first message data packet using the TCP/IP protocol was sent, between the Faculty of Physics of Warsaw University and the Computer Centre in Copenhagen University. The inclusion of Poland to the global net within EARN occurred 15 December 1991, after American limitations in access to modern computer and telecommunication technologies had been abolished for Poland. This was the reason why the initial growth of the Polish Internet proceeded in several stages.

Until 1994, the Internet in Poland was accessible only by higher education and scientific institutions within the Scientific and Academic Com-

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[1] Orig. Organisation Européenne pour la Recherche Nucléaire.

puter Network (NASK, *Naukowa i Akademicka Sieć Komputerowa*). In practice, the first years marked a limited use of services (IRC, email, forums). The real growth came with the development of broadband Internet connections in 1999, but due to various factors (the limitations of the infrastructure, monopoly of connection management, high fees for access,[2] low GDP) its dissemination was not as dynamic as in many other European countries.

Using the Internet in Poland – the first decade

In addition to the generally accepted date of the first data transmission using the TCP/IP protocol, there are also others that are less well known. These include the launch of the first leased line between CERN and the Kraków Institute of Nuclear Physics (IFJ) on 26 September 1990, the registration of the first IP address in Poland to the IFJ (19 November 1990), sending the first email from the CERN headquarters of the IFJ (20 November 1990) or earlier, on July 17 of that year, from the European Academic and Research Network (EARN) to the administrator of this network in Poland.[3]

A very important factor for the growth of the Internet in Poland was the rise of the first domestic website operator, which would be responsible for the management of all Polish academic networks. In March 1991 the Warsaw University established the Research and Academic Computer Network (NASK), which would fulfil this role until 1994. Due to the limits in the technical infrastructure, the Internet would only be available within it almost until the launch of the World Wide Web, and only to universities and research institutions.

In January 1993, the first Polish IRC (Internet Relay Chat) server was founded at the AGH–UST University of Science and Technology in Kraków, enabling communication with thematic or private network channels. In June 1993, the State Committee for Scientific Research (*Komitet Badań Naukowych*) decided to build a network of 11 Polish academic centres.

We can assume that the first turning point important for the prevalence of the Internet in Poland was December 1993, when NASK became an

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[2] Just as important was the increase of VAT on Internet services, from 7 to 22 per cent, on 1 March 2005 Telekomunikacja Polska SA (Polish Telecom) was synonymous with the Internet in Poland for quite a long time, with the exception of NASK.

[3] Read more in the report: *Internet PL. 20 lat internetu w Polsce. Raport PC World*, No. 1/2011.

independent research and development unit,[4] reporting to the State Committee for Scientific Research. However, this did not yet open the web to individual customers.

Access to the Internet for individuals became possible in 1995, with the launch of the Maloka BBS (Bulletin Board System).[5] In January 1995, a service named Public Access to the Internet began in Łódź; at that time, there were about 10 Internet service providers in Poland, mainly in its capitol, Warsaw. They were all still dependent on NASK. The situation changed a bit at the end of 1995, when NASK introduced new pricing for Internet usage according to the number of megabytes sent and received. This action accelerated the emergence of other, fully independent operators.

In December 1996, the Warsaw firm Polbox launched the first server with free email accounts, with a 2 MB capacity. In the same year, Kraków's Commercial Internet began to offer user accounts with a capacity of 3 MB. The market research company Estymator estimates that there were nearly one million Internet users in Poland by mid–1997.[6] More than 40 per cent of them used a network on a campus or at school and about 38 per cent at the workplace. About 23 per cent of Poles had Internet at home. The launch of an access number by telecom Telekomunikacja Polska SA[7] (0–202122) in April 1996 was another breakthrough. It opened up the opportunity to access the World Wide Web using a modem to connect with a speed of 56 kb/s.

1999 was another milestone year in the growth of the Polish Internet because of the entry of high-speed Internet, which meant much faster data transfer (sending and receiving at a speed of 115 kb/s), the ability to connect without blocking the phone line and assign a fixed IP address to a user .

In that same year many important, as it turned out later, websites and online shops were launched: Merlin.pl, the first Polish Internet bookshop, on 1 January and Allegro, the biggest auction marketplace, on 13 December (Poland's largest platform for online sales/purchases to this day). The first fully virtual bank, mBank, was founded on 26 November of the next year.

The first decade of the Polish Internet was in practice limited by the use of the services available through it (IRC, email, discussion forums).

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[4] At that time NASK with ATM company offered commercial Internet access, but rates for an account on the server were too high, that the network did not gain popularity.

[5] BBS is an online service with a shared place for the collection of documents, handling email boxes and file transfers.

[6] Data: Estymator Institute for the Study of Media and Markets. The survey was conducted in the period of March-May, on a group of 4,494 people aged over 15 years.

[7] Telekomunikacja Polska SA has been operating since 1 January 1992, after the division of the state-owned Polish Post, Telephone and Telegraph.

For this it was based on (technically) being a global network, although its commercial dimension was much easier to achieve. When the Internet began to function in the public consciousness of Poles for good, the world entered the era of Web 2.0. However, this did not affect the fact that the revolutionary form of communication in virtual reality was already equally developed – worldwide and in Poland. The new services had irreversibly changed habits, revolutionized ways of spending free time, enjoying entertainment, transformed channels of communication, learning, and satisfying information needs. And only the combination of various factors (restrictions in infrastructure, monopoly on the management of Internet connections, restrictive access charges, income levels) caused the speed of the development and dissemination of the World Wide Web in Poland to not be as dynamic as in many other European countries.

From information to social networks

Created in the early 90s, Polish websites mainly functioned for informative, promotional or cataloguing purposes, which the first Polish search engine made possible in 1996, when NEToskop and Sieciowid launched, followed by Infoseek in 1997 and Netsprint in 2001 (supporting only Polish websites). In 1998, Polish Google made its début. From 1995, the Internet in Poland developed in the direction of general websites. The following portals launched soon after: Wirtualna Polska (1995), Onet (1996), Interia (2000), as well as Hoga, Arena, Ahoj and Poland.com. A year later, the latter three no longer existed.

The Polish version of Wikipedia launched on 26 September 2001, eight months after the world premiere.[8] But many foreign websites did not do as well – MySpace and Bebo withdrew from the Polish e-market, while eBay and AOL lost the battle for primacy in their respective markets.

Many newspapers started web editions in the mid-1990s. The first Polish newspaper title available on the Internet was *Gazeta Wyborcza* (October 1994) and its Kraków edition insert "Computers and Office". Next, the *Super Express* (1996) tabloid and *Rzeczpospolita* (1997) opinion daily appeared. Despite its début in 2003, *Fakt*, the best-selling Polish tabloid, did not have its own website until 2008.

Today, all Polish newspapers have web editions of their titles, but their importance among the most watched sites in Poland is not as significant.

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[8] The service began using the common address (pl.wikipedia.org) in November 2002. Three years later, Polish Internet users had published over 100 thousand entries, with half a million by 2008.

Gazeta.pl was until recently the only significant press service, and ranked fifth of the most often visited Polish websites in 2010. Comparing the popularity of information portals, at the end of 2010 wyborcza.pl had 2.43 million users (13.34 per cent coverage), rp.pl (*Rzeczpospolita* online) a little more than 1.31 million (7.19 per cent), gazetaprawna.pl and dziennik.pl about 1.1 million each. The second most read press web service is se.pl (*Super Express*), ahead of fakt.pl (*Fakt*). Amongst weeklies, newsweek.pl has the largest number of online readers (983,400), followed by telemagazyn.pl (730,600) and wprost.pl (591,400).

It is worth noting the growing popularity of websites belonging to Regional Media (Media Regionalne), a group of regional newspaper websites whose titles are issued within the My City (Moje Miasto, mm.pl) project and municipal services. In January 2008, these sites were visited by a total of 921,000 Internet users, with 200,000 more than a year earlier. Data from January 2012 indicate more than nine million users in all MR services (an increase of 11 per cent).

According to the Polish Readership Survey (PBC, Polskie Badania Czytelnictwa), less than one per cent of the respondents get their news from the Internet today,[9] although 90 per cent of respondents claimed to read the paper version. One in four read both versions.

After a time of growth for information websites, the evolution of Web 2.0 idea has led to rise the a new trend: social networking sites. As spending time online became a substitute for leisure time, many opportunities were created for people to organise themselves into larger or smaller web communities within the framework of the web, creating some kind of belonging (or just membership), using a new system of codes, standards of behaviour and language. These needs were satisfied by social networks, with 58 per cent of respondents belonging to at least one of them in 2011. Nearly 80 per cent were aged 18-24, while 75 per cent under 34. Interestingly, over a quarter of all Polish Internet users over 65 also have online profiles.

The first social networking portal in Poland, Fotka.pl, was founded in 2001 as a platform to share photos and contacts (1.6 million users today). Grono.net, formed three years later, would provide the second major hub of social networking activity over the next two years, despite its relatively closed formula.[10] The revolution in domestic social media came on 11 No-

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[9] http://www.pbczyt.pl/news/items/35.html [online 07.01.2012].

[10] Only a person invited by another user could belong to a "grono" (eng. group, circle), because the structure of the site is based on small groups of people, focused on the consolidation of relationships with friends or the exchange of views on a specific topic.

vember 2006, with the début of nasza-klasa.pl[11] (nk.pl today), which would have nearly three million registered members by the end of the 2007, and more than 13 million two years later. Its domination ended with the Polish version of Facebook (launched in May 2008), which over the year gained 1.5 million users. Currently, Facebook is ahead of nk in terms of real users, 12.3 compared to 11.2 million. Additionally, the most popular Polish social networking sites include Chomikuj.pl, a file sharing website used as a "virtual hard drive", with over 4.8 million active users, Gg.pl, with 2.2 million users, and Mojageneracja.pl (both belonging to the Gadu-Gadu group) and also Goldenline.pl – strictly pro-business, with less than two million users.

Nor can we fail to mention existing foreign sites, which withdrew from the fight for this part of the e-market after failing to gain wider recognition among Polish users. This includes a conglomerate owned by Rupert Murdoch's MySpace, which closed its Polish branch just half a year after its founding, as well as AOL Bebo, operating since July 2007.

Instant messengers have played a significant role in web communication, whose features in many cases are similar to those of social networks. Here we can mention domestic brands such as WPKontakt (launched in 2001, later known as Spik) and Tlen (2001, application on the o2.pl portal that allowed for integration with other Internet messengers), and several smaller ones, like Jabber or Konnekt. The second most prevalent instant messenger in Poland today is global giant Skype, present here since November 2005.

58 per cent of Polish Internet users are members of at least one social networking site today,[12] excluding instant messengers.

Social implications of Internet dissemination

The first Internet research, as can be read on Nasik's page, was conducted in 1995 by the company RUN. From there emerged the picture of the av-

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[11] This was surprising, because back in 2002 there was a similar page, Szkolnelata.pl (in 2006 it had only 50,000 registered users) and formed an almost equal second social networking site, Sztambuch.pl.

[12] Source: *Użytkowanie internetu*. Komunikat z badań CBOS (BS/99/2011), oprac. M. Feliksiak, Warszawa 2011, http://www.cbos.pl/SPISKOM.POL/2011/K_099_11.PDF" [online 22.01.2012]. In the first quarter of 2010, 62 per cent of Internet users (32 per cent of adult Poles) were registered on at least one of the sites. More: *Społeczności wirtualne*. Raport CBOS (BS/58/2010), oprac. K. Wądołowska, Warszawa 2010, http://www.cbos.pl/SPISKOM.POL/2010/K_058_10.PDF" [online 22.01.2012].

erage Polish Internet user – someone within higher education. This was strictly related with the use of computers mainly by academic staff. The company Polish Internet Research (Polskie Badania Internetu, PBI) was formed in August 2000 solely to conduct web research.

Relying on their study from 1995, the number of Internet users in Poland reached half a million that year. OBOP data from 1997 indicates declared access to the web for eight per cent of society; three years later this number was estimated at 5.2 million, equivalent to 17 per cent of the overall population. The most frequent connections to the network were made at home (45.5 per cent) and workplace (37.9 per cent). Over the consecutive years the rate of growth, as well as ways to use the Internet, have changed, but it is still difficult to talk about their unique progress and diversity.

One thing is certain: with the emergence of the Internet, the time spent on the daily consumption of media greatly increased, initially without causing a significant departure from traditional media by audiences, but adding to the fragmentation of the media environment. Further, the supremacy of new communication technologies is growing and has become a substitute for other forms of activity, including leisure.

Analysing the results of CBOS research into forms of leisure preferred by Poles from 1988 we can see two trends: changes in the range of activity until the mid-1990s, reaching the lowest levels in all areas of life in 1993, the relative stability after 1997, and later increasing use of television, finally followed by spending ever more time browsing the Internet.

Only 28 per cent of Poland's Internet population use the web to contact public institutions[13] (similarly as in 2010), which puts Poland at fourth from the end of the European Union's 27 members. Poland is followed by Italy, Romania, Bulgaria and Greece. Compared with other countries, 81 per cent of Danes, 50 per cent of Germans and 39 per cent of Brits use the networks as a tool to connect with public institutions. The average value for EU countries is 41 per cent, and 44 per cent for Europe (78 per cent for Norway, for example). This result is still much better than in 2006, when 26 per cent of European Internet users used the network to connect with public institutions. It was barely six per cent of the population in the case of Poland. This ratio was the lowest in Europe.[14]

21 per cent of Poles receive information from the websites of public authorities, which compared to 2010 is at a relatively stable level (25 per cent in 2010). However, this result puts us at third place from the end, before

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[13] http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/tgm/table.do?tab=table&init=1&plugin=1&language-=en&pcode=tin00012 [online 27.01.2012].

[14] According to Eurostat data.

Romania and Bulgaria. In this case, the average result for the EU is 35 per cent, and 39 per cent for all of Europe.

11 per cent of Polish Internet users (five per cent in 2005) use the Internet to find work. The EU average is 17 per cent (16 per cent for Europe). In the case of such countries as Denmark, Estonia, Latvia, Great Britain and Scandinavia, this ratio remains at 20 per cent. Seven per cent of Polish Internet users use websites to create content and share it with other users (data from 2008). Also in this case, other EU countries' ratios are much higher: 21 per cent in Estonia, 19 per cent in Latvia and the United Kingdom and 17 per cent in Hungary.

According to the Public Opinion Research Centre (CBOS, *Centrum Badania Opinii Społecznej*), in 2006 the average Pole used the computer and the Internet nine hours a week; the average monthly time spent online was 28 hours and 23 minutes.[15] The average Pole spent approx. 12 hours longer watching television, more than seven reading newspapers and books and 10 hours listening to the radio. Quite often, respondents indicated television as their first source of entertainment. In 2011, they declared they used the Internet 12 hours weekly, or about three hour less than a year earlier (the World Internet Project survey gives slightly different numbers: 13 hours and 41 minutes, compared with 14h and 27' in 2010).[16] It is estimated that 34 per cent of 16-74-year-old Poles use the web mainly for communicating; barely eight per cent of users are ready to pay for content, while nearly a quarter play online games or download them, as well as downloading music, videos and photos.

Barely 28 per cent of Polish Internet users use the network to contact public institutions, while the information from their online sites reaches 21 per cent. 11 per cent of Internet users use the web to find work and seven per cent use it for content creation and sharing.

Conclusions

Estymator estimates that in mid–1997 almost a million people in Poland used the Internet.[17] Over 40 per cent used it at a college or school, and

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[15] During the year, this time increased from 25 to 30 hours per month.

[16] *World Internet Project – Polska 2011*, Raport Agory SA i Grupy TP. In Polish: http://bi.gazeta.pl/im/6/10726/m10726616,WORLD-INTERNET-PROJECT-POLSKA-2011-RAPORT-V.pdf. English version: http://www.worldinternetproject.net/_files/_Published/_oldis/760_world_internet_project_poland_2011.pdf [online 27.01.2012].

[17] Data: Instytut Badania Mediów i Rynku Estymator, a study conducted in March-May, on a group of 4,494 people aged over 15 years.

about 38 per cent at the workplace. At that time, 23 per cent of Poles had an Internet connection at home.

General access to the web in Poland proceeded slowly, although there has been an increase in the number of Internet users (up from 8.4 to 11.5 million in the years 2005–2006), with a five per cent increase already in 2011. Today, about 62 per cent of society uses the Internet in Poland (source: Eurostat),[18] and according to Net Track data the number is 16.7 million. Of the 27 countries of the European Union, only 10 are characterized by a lower level of Internet access (in 2006 the number was eight).

There are still many reasons for low Internet penetration, including gaps in infrastructure and the resistance/opposition of the elderly to any use of new technologies.[19] Opportunity can be seen in the growth of the mobile Internet; its universality here is similar to the global average – 37 per cent of Polish Internet users access the web this way at least once a month. This is due to the high penetration of the mobile telephone market. According to data from GUS (Główny Urząd Statystyczny, Central Statistical Office), at the beginning of 2011, 48.5 million cell phones were used in Poland.

It's hard to assess whether the 20 years of Internet in Poland have been used properly. In addition to the higher level of communication coverage in society, its development has brought many new dilemmas that remain unresolved, like social exclusion. We don't know if and which consecutive needs and wants will be satisfied over the coming years – primarily information, culture, entertainment and social – and whether it will continue to increase communication interactions.

The problem of "compatibility" of many websites with the Press Law is still unsolved. Blogging is not currently considered journalist activity. The methods of precise movement and type of website visitor measurement are also uncertain. These figures can reflect actual website attractiveness, and consequently, the future of the business model. Note that 70 per cent of Polish Internet users admit to shopping online, but the e-market is still barely three per cent of total trade.[20]

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[18] 65 per cent used it in the 12 months preceding the survey. Some statistics show penetration at the 67 per cent level. Eurostat data: http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/tgm/table.do?tab=table&init=1&plugin=1&language=en&pcode=tin00028 [online 27.01.2012].

[19] M. Lemańska, *Z sieci korzystają dwa miliardy ludzi.* „Rzeczpospolita", 28.05.2011 http://www.rp.pl/artykul/665029_W_Polsce_liczba_internautow_rosnie_wolniej.html [online 02.01.2012].

[20] We can choose from nearly 11, 000 online shops (in accordance with TNS OBOP data).

Other problems have been presented as projects for government consultation, like the idea of registering programmes disseminated over the Internet in KRRiT or blocking access to content threatening the physical, mental or moral development of minors by Internet Service Providers. Other law proposals contain include the promotion of "European works",[21] with at least 15 per cent of all audio-visual materials.

There were no such problems in the public consciousness in the late 90s, when the Internet did not have such a clear effect on the perception of traditional media. This was, however, mainly due to economic (high fees for access to the web), technical (modems, and therefore slow data transfer rate) and market (almost all calls were made through TP SA connections) restrictions. Among other things, the number of Internet users has been limited for these reasons.

It's worth remembering that the Polish Internet market is not easy and predictable, as the biggest global players have discovered: the eBay auction site, MySpace, and portals like AOL or Yahoo News. The most important field for Polish Internet users is communication: regular email checking, activity on social networking sites (even though their popularity has decreased), and contact using instant messengers. This may be because in their own opinion, online activity results in increased contacts outside the virtual world.

The average Polish Internet user has had six years of "practice" on the web (data: World Internet Project Polska 2011); uses it two hours per day, over 90 per cent of that time at home. He's active,[22] although the low level of this activity ranks Poles among the most aggressive and verbally vulgar users in the world.

For a number of reasons, a portrait of today's Polish Internet user is still incomplete and unstable in its "freshness". On the one hand, Poland is still "chasing" some parts of Europe and other more developed countries in the world; on the other, the habits, standards of behaviour, and lack of fully proven and respected ethical principles cherished in the society, result in plenty of chaos and haphazardness in what the society does.

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[21] Map, mig, *Co czeka polski Internet? Koncesje, cenzura i kary finansowe*, http://wiadomosci. gazeta.pl/wiadomosci/1,114873,9247597,Co_czeka_polski_internet_Koncesje_cenzura_i_ kary.html [online 14.03.2011].

[22] This activity is expressed by data such as over 100,000 registered .eu domains (December 2007) and two million .com domains registered in January 2011 (tu-tam.pl).

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