

# MISCELLANEA

ANTHROPOLOGICA ET SOCIOLOGICA

22(4)–23(1)



**MEDIA, DISCOURSE AND POWER**

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE IN THE ANALYSIS OF MEDIA MESSAGES

KWARTALNIK  
GDAŃSK 2021–2022

WYDAWNICTWO UNIwersYTETU GDAŃSKIEGO

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Publikacja sfinansowana ze środków Instytutu Socjologii Wydziału Nauk Społecznych  
Uniwersytetu Gdańskiego oraz Dziekana Wydziału Nauk Społecznych Uniwersytetu Gdańskiego

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ISSN 2354-0389 (online)

Pierwotną wersją pisma jest wersja elektroniczna.

Numery archiwalne dostępne są na: <https://czasopisma.bg.ug.edu.pl/index.php/maes/index>

#### Adres redakcji:

Miscellanea Anthropologica et Sociologica  
Instytut Socjologii  
Wydział Nauk Społecznych, Uniwersytet Gdański  
ul. Bażyńskiego 4, 80-283 Gdańsk  
[miscellanea@ug.edu.pl](mailto:miscellanea@ug.edu.pl)  
<https://czasopisma.bg.ug.edu.pl/index.php/maes/index>

Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Gdańskiego  
ul. Armii Krajowej 119/121, 81-824 Sopot  
tel. +48 58 523 11 37, tel. kom. +48 725 991 206  
e-mail: [wydawnictwo@ug.edu.pl](mailto:wydawnictwo@ug.edu.pl)  
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## Table of contents

Krzysztof Arcimowicz, Urszula Kluczyńska	
Introduction . . . . .	5

### ARTICLES / 9

Krzysztof Arcimowicz	
Hybrid Masculinity and Power. Critical Discourse Analysis of Neoseries <i>Money Heist</i> . . . .	11
Ewa Kępa	
City Bombed with Yarn: Knitting Graffiti as an Ambivalent Practice of Resistance to Cultural Hegemony . . . . .	31
Klaudia Bączyk-Lesiuk, Sylwia Polcyn	
Activity of Facebook Users on Official Profiles of Ministries of Education in Poland and Ukraine in the Context of the School Year 2021/2022 . . . . .	49
Karolina Wierel	
The End, Power and the Media: Catastrophic Imagination in Film Discourse. Analysis of the Phenomenon on the Example of Adam McKay's <i>Don't Look Up</i> . . . . .	77

### VARIA / 93

Kaja Klencka	
New Movements and Old Dilemmas. Analysis of the Institutionalisation Processes in the Fridays For Future Movement in Poland . . . . .	95



Krzysztof Arcimowicz<sup>1</sup>

Urszula Kluczyńska<sup>2</sup>

## Introduction

This volume of the journal *Miscellanea Anthropologica et Sociologica*, entitled *Media, Discourse and Power. Critical Perspective in the Analysis of Media Messages* includes articles that address important and current issues. The authors' attention is focused on issues of gender relations, the COVID-19 pandemic, strategies of resistance to cultural hegemony, as well as the anxiety (and often collective fear) associated with the dislocation and unpredictability of the world at the beginning of the third decade of the 21st century.

Nowadays, the media, and particularly the mass media, are seen, on the one hand, as a mirror walking through the world and, on the other hand, are claimed to define more and more what that world actually is (Baudrillard 2005). We can observe a similar, but not entirely identical dialectic in the case of media discourses, which can reflect socio-cultural reality, but also shape and modify it (Fairclough, Wodak 1997; Reisigl 2017).

Media discourses, understood broadly as non-accidental, structured communicative events embedded in contexts, are nowadays studied with different theoretical and methodological assumptions. Critical approaches to media messages within the framework of critical theory (Adorno, Horkheimer 1994; Horkheimer 1987; Szacki 2007) aim to uncover inconsistencies, contradictions and paradoxes in the internal structures of discourse, to detect the persuasive or manipulative character of the discursive practices. Media discourses, which are often vehicles of ideologies and hegemonic cultural patterns based on inequitable power relations, can contribute through the use of masking strategies to the consolidation of hegemony and the social status quo (Fiske 1987; Reisigl, Wodak 2016). However, every hegemony breeds resistance (Gramsci 1951), which is why in the media, we

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<sup>1</sup> University of Białystok, Institute of Cultural Studies, krzysiek@uwb.edu.pl.

<sup>2</sup> Collegium Da Vinci, Faculty of Social Sciences, urszula.kluczynska@cdv.pl.

can find manifestations of the discursive struggle for meanings (Foucault 1998), as well as new – though nowadays increasingly having some mercantile dimension – counter-hegemonic blocks of ideas, values, patterns of behaviour.

Contemporary media messages are often the area of social conflict, as they show traces of ideological struggles for domination and hegemony. Regarding the discourse, power is realised not only through spoken or written language, but also through the non-verbal codes appearing in different media genres and formats. In discourses, power is legitimised or delegitimised, but power relations also constrain and regulate media discourses through various types of control procedures (Foucault 2002; Reisigl, Wodak 2016).

The volume opens with Krzysztof Arcimowicz's article *Hybrid Masculinity and Power. Critical Discourse Analysis of the Neoseries "Money Heist"*. Author analyses the verbal and non-verbal discursive strategies employed by the creators of one of the most popular TV neoseries of the recent years, which has become a global socio-cultural phenomenon. The results of the analysis conducted using the perspectives of Critical Studies of Men and Masculinities (CSMM) and Critical Discourse Studies (CDS) lead to the conclusion that discursive elements from both the hegemonic masculinity and the non-hegemonic versions of masculinity are used in the creation of the protagonist and the majority of the heroes of the *Money Heist*. However, these hybrid images in many cases do not serve at all to deconstruct the patriarchal status quo, but rather to conceal the patriarchal power.

In the article *City Bombed with Yarn: Knitting Graffiti as an Ambivalent Practice of Resistance to Cultural Hegemony*, Ewa Kępa describes the phenomenon of the creation of yarn graffiti, which takes many forms and is appearing with increasing frequency in urban spaces around the world. The author emphasises the role of new media in the development of interest in knitting. The knitted and crocheted elements appearing in the urban landscape are only seemingly silly and irrational: they are not only a multicoloured aesthetic touch, but also the driver and manifestation of socio-cultural change. The creative activities undertaken by the 'city knitters' embody multiple meanings. Kępa analyses the phenomenon of 'yarn bombing' primarily as a resistance strategy, a form of street art that turns knitting eyelet after eyelet, a cultural practice traditionally associated with femininity, into a series of handcrafted micro-political, discursive gestures.

Klaudia Bączyk-Lesiuk and Sylwia Polcyn in their text *Activity of Facebook Users on Official Profiles of Ministries of Education in Poland and Ukraine in the Context of the School Year 2021/2022* compare the activity of internet users in the era of the COVID-19 pandemic in the two selected countries. The authors of this article carried out quantitative and qualitative analyses of the comments and reactions of internet users posted under posts published on the Facebook profiles of the ministries of education. Analysis of the collected material leads to the conclusion

that the number of comments with positive and neutral overtones was higher on the Polish Ministry website than on the analogue Ukrainian website, but that the vast majority of reactions among users of both the Ukrainian and the Polish Ministry profiles were negative, thus demonstrating discouragement among citizens towards the government's actions and the introduction of new legal regulations, which do not always bring the desired results.

The present volume closes with an article by Karolina Wierel entitled *The End, Power and the Media: Catastrophic Imagination in Film Discourse. Analysis of the Phenomenon on the Example of Adam McKay's "Don't Look Up"*. Author focuses on the analysis of the film work, but these considerations are a pretext for a more in-depth and broader analysis of the collective imagination and the mental condition of the recipients of popular culture in these uncertain and not very optimistic times. In her reflections, Wierel makes use of various theoretical concepts and notions from the field of contemporary critical humanities, such as the perspective of the ecological turn or the notion of the apocalypse of reality. By means of an analysis of discourses focused on relevant social issues, such as the relationship between media and power, global warming and ecology, as well as anthropocentrism, the author identifies non-fiction sources of *Don't Look Up*.

We hope that this volume can provide inspiration and/or a starting point for a broader, more structured reflection on the relationship between media, discourse and power in the contemporary world.

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ARTICLES



Krzysztof Arcimowicz<sup>1</sup>

## Hybrid Masculinity and Power. Critical Discourse Analysis of the Neoseries *Money Heist*

The basic aim of the present study is to analyse discursive strategies applied by the creators of the neoseries *Money Heist* in constructing hybrid masculinity as well as gender power relations. The article presents the results of the analysis of 43 episodes of the show produced in the years 2017–2021. The discourse of *Money Heist* was studied with the use of the perspective of Critical Studies on Men and Masculinities (CSMM) and Critical Discourse Studies (CDS). The principal theoretical framework consists of the concept of hybrid masculinities (Bridges, Pascoe 2014; Demetriou 2001) and the hegemonic masculinity theory (Connell 1987, 2005). The basic research methodology is Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA; Wodak, Meyer 2016) supported by Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA; Jancsary et al. 2016; van Leeuwen 2000). The results of the analysis lead to the conclusion that in making the image of the protagonist and most of the characters in *Money Heist*, the creators used discursive elements derived from hegemonic masculinity and non-hegemonic versions of masculinity. However, in many cases the hybrid images by no means serve to deconstruct the patriarchal status quo, but to mask the patriarchal power.

**Keywords:** category of masculinity, gender relations, power, neoseries, Critical Discourse Analysis

Męskość hybrydowa i władza. Krytyczna analiza dyskursu neoserialeu *Dom z papieru*\*

Głównym celem artykułu jest przeanalizowanie strategii dyskursywnych zastosowanych przez twórczynię i twórców neoserialeu *Dom z papieru* w konstruowaniu męskości hybrydowej oraz genderowych relacji władzy. Przedstawiono tu wyniki analizy 43 odcinków serialu zrealizowanych w latach 2017–2021. Dyskurs *Domu z papieru* badano

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<sup>1</sup> University of Białystok, Institute of Cultural Studies, krzysiek@uwb.edu.pl.

\* The article was published in 2022.

w perspektywie krytycznych studiów nad mężczyznami i męskością (CSMM) oraz krytycznych studiów nad dyskursem (CDS). Główne ramy teoretyczne tekstu wyznaczają koncepcja męskości hybrydowych (Bridges, Pascoe 2014; Demetriou 2001) i teoria męskości hegemonicznej (Connell 1987, 2005). Podstawową metodą badawczą jest podejście dyskursywno-historyczne (DHA; Wodak, Meyer 2016), wsparte multimodalną krytyczną analizą dyskursu (MCDA; van Leeuwen 2000; Jancsary et al. 2016). Wyniki analizy prowadzą do wniosku, że w kreowaniu postaci protagonisty oraz większości bohaterów *Domu z papieru* wykorzystywane są elementy dyskursywne pochodzące z męskości hegemonicznej i niehegemonicznych wersji męskości. Jednakże te hybrydowe wizerunki często służą nie dekonstrukcji patriarchalnego *status quo*, lecz maskowaniu patriarchalnej władzy.

**Słowa kluczowe:** kategoria męskości, relacje płci, władza, neoserial, krytyczna analiza dyskursu

## Introduction

The neoseries *Money Heist* (original Spanish title: *La Casa de Papel*) is a global socio-cultural phenomenon and has achieved iconic status. In 2020, it was the most popular non-English language series broadcast by the world's largest streaming service Netflix<sup>2</sup>. The first season was produced in 2017 commissioned by the TV station Antena 3, but the Spanish broadcaster abandoned the production of further episodes and resold the rights to the series to Netflix (Točená 2020). The main creator (showrunner) of the *Money Heist* is Alex Pina, a Spanish TV producer, writer and director. The series is set in the present day, mostly in Madrid and the nearby towns. A group of people (most of whom have criminal past), recruited by a mysterious person hiding under the pseudonym of The Professor, raid the Madrid mint and subsequently the Bank of Spain.

In recent decades, television series have been reshaping themselves, with new formats and genres emerging (Arcimowicz 2020). In contemporary culture, the TV series has become one of the most important forms of storytelling about the world and people. Increasingly, series are taking on the function of explaining a complex social reality (Dukaj 2012). At the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries, new series productions were initiated in the United States and then in other countries, which began to be referred to in the Anglo-Saxon literature as 'complex drama'

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<sup>2</sup> In April 2020, the fourth season of the series was watched on Netflix by 65 million households on average (Butler 2021). In the first quarter of 2021, the number of Netflix subscribers exceeded 207 million (Stoll 2021). Given that in some households two (or even more) people watched the series, and the fact that in many countries there are illegal or 'semi-legal' streaming services offering audio-visual content, it is impossible to determine the exact number of viewers of the *Money Heist*, but it can be assumed that this production was watched by several hundred million viewers.

(Mittell 2006: 33) and ‘quality drama’ (Feuer 2007: 146). In Polish research, this type of production is referred to as *neoserial* (neoseries) (Arcimowicz 2020: 11) or called a ‘post-soap’, which is an abbreviation for ‘post-soap opera’ (Filiciak, Giza 2011: 7; Kaja 2014: 66)<sup>3</sup>. The HBO productions such as *The Sopranos* and *Six Feet Under* are most often cited among the first neoseries (Feuer 2007; Mittell 2006). Although they have grown out of older television forms, the new series in many cases radically break with this heritage. We find in them both interesting and controversial characters of men and women, often defying unequivocal interpretations (Arcimowicz 2016, 2020; Filiciak, Giza 2011). *Money Heist*, like many other neoseries, is a mixture of different genre conventions. This five-season production can be described as a crime series that also contains elements characteristic of other genres such as thriller, action film and black comedy.

One of the most important factors shaping gender identity nowadays, in addition to family, peer group and school, is the mass media. Michael Kimmel writes: “If masculinity is socially constructed, one of the primary elements in that construction is the representations of manhood that we see daily in the mass media” (Kimmel 1992: xii). As a result of the socio-cultural changes related, among other things, to the emancipation of women and sexual minorities, the category of masculinity is becoming increasingly diverse and complex. The literature has begun to use the term ‘masculinities’, thus emphasising that there are multiple versions of the masculinity as such and that they are historically and culturally variable (Anderson 2009; Bridges, Pascoe 2014; Connell 2005; Connell, Messerschmidt 2005; Elliott 2016; Kimmel 1992).

The main aim of this article is to analyse the discursive strategies used by the creators of the *Money Heist* series in constructing hybrid masculinity and power in gender relations. I am interested in the fissures in the discourse and the manifestations of discursive masking of male dominance and gender inequality.

### Theoretical assumptions of the study

I analyse the discourse of the *Money Heist* series related to masculinity and gender relations using the perspectives of the Critical Studies on Men and Masculinities (CSMM) and the Critical Discourse Studies (CDS). The basic theoretical framework of my reflections is formed by the theory of hegemonic masculinity (Connell 1987, 2005) and the concept of hybrid masculinities (Bridges, Pascoe 2014; Demetriou 2001), which is a development and to some extent a critique

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<sup>3</sup> In the present article, when referring to the *Money Heist*, I most often use the term ‘neoseries’ but also – mainly for stylistic reasons – the terms ‘next-generation series’ and ‘post-soap’.

of Raewyn W. Connell's theory which has dominated masculinities research in the last few decades.

According to Connell, the social order of gender that exists in contemporary societies belonging to Western culture is based on two pillars: the first concerns the domination of men over women, while the second concerns the domination of the hegemonic version of masculinity over other variants of the masculine identity, which have been referred to as: "subordinated and marginalised masculinities" (Connell 2005: 77–81). Hegemonic masculinity is marked by power, authority, aggression, competition, physical prowess and heterosexuality (Connell 1987: 186–187; Nijjar 2018: 3). This version of masculinity may be embodied by men who hold a lot of power, but this cultural pattern is also disseminated and reinforced by the creation of media images of 'tough' men (Connell 1987: 77; Demetriou 2001: 342).

The author of *Gender and Power* argues that hegemonic masculinity represents an ideal model to which a large group of men aspire, but which most of them are unable to realise in the real life. Men who benefit from supporting patriarchy (Connell refers to these benefits as the patriarchal dividend) but who do not embody all the components of the hegemonic masculinity form a category that the sociologist called a "complicit masculinity" (Connell 2005: 79–80).

According to the Australian researcher, subordinated masculinities mainly include homosexual men, but also some heterosexual men who do not meet the criteria for hegemonic masculinity, having the characteristics traditionally perceived as feminine, related to behaviour or physical appearance (Connell 2005: 78–79). Marginalised masculinities include men whose social and/or economic status is low due to their belonging to certain social classes and/or ethnic groups (Connell 2005: 80–81; Demetriou 2001: 341–342).

Connell's theory raised criticism (see Connell, Messerschmidt 2005; Kluczyńska 2017), which resulted in the emergence of new theoretical proposals. Demetrakis Z. Demetriou (2001) believes that Connell's (1987, 2005) assumption of the creation of hegemonic masculinity in relation to femininity and subordinated masculinities is correct. However, in his view, the contemporary hegemonic masculinity: "is a hybrid bloc that unites practices from diverse masculinities in order to ensure the reproduction of patriarchy" (Demetriou 2001: 337).

When the conditions that enable patriarchal reproduction change along the socio-cultural transformations, the hegemonic masculinity changes alike. Demetriou uses the term of "dialectical pragmatism" to describe the ability to incorporate some elements of subordinated and marginalised masculinities into the hegemonic masculinity (Demetriou 2001: 345). The researcher deconstructs the binarism concerning the discrepancy between the non-hegemonic masculinities and the hegemonic masculinity, introducing the term of "hybrid masculine bloc"

to refer to the combination of different patterns of men's behaviour (cf. Demetriou 2001; Kluczyńska 2017).

The concept of Tristan Bridges and C.J. Pascoe is an extension of the notion of "hybrid masculinities", this term: "refers to men's selective incorporation of performances and identity elements associated with marginalized and subordinated masculinities and femininities" (Bridges, Pascoe 2014: 246).

Bridges and Pascoe describe three consequences of the proliferation of hybrid masculinities. Firstly, through the "discursive distancing", hybrid masculinities can create the impression that they are cutting themselves off from hegemonic masculinity, when in fact they are supporting it. The creation of hybrid masculinities also results in the "strategic borrowing". Men belonging to privileged groups can create hybrid masculinities by borrowing some of the symbols and elements associated with the versions of masculinity situated lower in the gender order. They can thus expand their masculine capital, but this does not imply a negation of the hierarchy of masculinity. A third consequence of the hybrid masculinities is "fortifying boundaries". Bridges and Pascoe argue that the phenomenon of subordinated masculinities being taken over by white heterosexual men from a privileged group, while only seemingly blurring the boundaries between different unequal status groups, actually serves to conceal and maintain a system of inequality in historically new ways, often using dividing lines related to gender, sexuality, race and social class (Bridges, Pascoe 2014; Kluczyńska 2021).

Another theoretical perspective for the research I have undertaken is provided by the assumptions formulated within the Critical Discourse Studies. CDS is: "not interested in investigating a linguistic unit *per se* but in analysing, understanding and explaining social phenomena that are necessarily complex and thus require a multidisciplinary and multi-methodical approach" (Wodak, Meyer 2016: 2).

CDS remain faithful to the general tenets of the broadly understood critical theory originating from the Frankfurt School (Reisigl 2017: 48–50; Wodak, Meyer 2016: 6). Adopting a critical stance in CDS implies an in-depth analysis of the data collected, setting it in a socio-cultural context, and clarifying the position of the participants in the discourse. Critical analysis aims to uncover fissures, inconsistencies, contradictions and paradoxes in the internal structures of discourse, and to detect the ideological, persuasive or manipulative nature of discursive practices (Reisigl 2017: 50–51; Reisigl, Wodak 2016: 24–25).

CDS perceive the discourse as a non-accidental use of language and a form of social practice, and emphasise that in discourse analysis it is important to understand the context in which the discourse is produced and received (Fairclough, Wodak 1997: 258; Wodak, Meyer 2016: 5). In line with these CDS assumptions, I use a dialectical conception of discourse, according to which discourse is shaped

not only in a contextual – social and cultural – manner, but it also plays itself a role in forming and changing that context (Fairclough, Wodak 1997: 258; Reisigl 2017: 51).

## Methodology of own research

In my research, I used the tenets of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). A lot of untrue myths have grown up about the CDA. That is why it has to be clarified that CDA is not a method but a research perspective on which at least several methods are based (Wodak, Meyer 2016: 3). When analysing the neoseries *Money Heist*, I referred to the postulates formulated by representatives of the Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA), which is one of the most prominent methods within the Critical Discourse Analysis (Reisigl 2017: 44). The choice of this method was motivated by the fact that the tools specific to DHA enable the in-depth analysis of media messages and the identification of manifestations of discursive reproduction of power, domination and inequality occurring therein (Reisigl, Wodak 2016: 24–26). Furthermore, DHA allows for the application of different theoretical concepts and methods that are useful in the context of the topic under study (Reisigl 2017: 44–49).

A key element of the DHA is the analysis of the discursive strategies employed by the creators of media messages. Following the views of one of the most prominent representatives of the DHA, Ruth Wodak, it can be said that discursive strategy means systematically repeated ways of using language<sup>4</sup>, it is a more or less defined, consciously adopted programme of action aimed at achieving specific social, political, psychological goals (cf. Reisigl, Wodak 2016: 35). The Austrian researcher's reflections should be supplemented by the observation that discursive strategies can also serve a mercantile purpose, as is the case with many media messages, including the TV series.

Scholars using the DHA generally distinguish five types of strategies (Reisigl 2017: 52; Reisigl, Wodak 2016: 55), but due to the specificity of the chosen neoseries and the limited framework of the article, I will focus on three of them, which I consider the most important from the point of view of the topic and aim of the research, namely the nomination, predication and argumentation strategies. “Nomination strategies” refer to identifying people and the way they are represented in the speech from the linguistic point of view. “Predication strategies” involve categorising groups and social actors, assigning them specific characteristics, traits and roles in the discourse. This type of strategy can be combined with positive

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<sup>4</sup> I understand the concept of language broadly, encompassing not only the spoken and written word, but also the non-verbal codes.



statements or negative social stereotypes and prejudices. “Argumentation strategies” are used to justify either positive or negative judgements (Reisigl 2017: 52; Reisigl, Wodak 2016: 54). Ancillary role is played by topoi that act as rules of inference (Krzyżanowski 2010).

In the TV series discourse, in addition to strategies related to the spoken and written word, there are also strategies based on non-verbal codes, which is why in my research, in addition to the DHA, I used some assumptions of the Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA) method. I sourced from the MCDA mainly tools for describing the symbolic dimension of object attributes, sociocultural connotations, the visual construction of power and assumptions about stereotyping strategies (Jancsary et al. 2016; van Leeuwen 2000).

By 30 September 2021, which is when this article was completed, a total of 43 première episodes of the *Money Heist* post-soap had been broadcast and I analysed them all.

### Discursive strategies concerning hybrid masculinity in the neoseries *Money Heist*

The male characters appearing in the *Money Heist* represent different versions of masculinity, but an important group can be categorised as hybrid masculinities (cf. The Professor, Denver, Bogota)<sup>5</sup>. Given the large number of characters that appeared in this neoseries over the course of five seasons, I will focus on the character of The Professor who is the protagonist and *spiritus movens* of the *Money Heist* plot. It is a complex figure, and a very intriguing one from the point of view of the research topic I have undertaken. I would like to mention that in order to better illustrate the issues raised, I also include analysis of other characters, where necessary.

The plot of the first two seasons of the *Money Heist* was built around the robbery of the Madrid mint. The outline of the plan for the audacious robbery was created by The Professor’s father, who robbed banks to raise money to pay for his son’s enormous medical expenses. After his father’s death, the plan had been worked out in detail for many years by the post-soap’s protagonist. The Professor is a man in his forties who is the most important character of the *Money Heist*, but information about him is provided slowly and sparingly. It is worth quoting here the words concerning this main character and spoken by Tokyo, who is one of the main female characters and acts as narrator for four seasons: “The Professor, no criminal

<sup>5</sup> The men and women involved in the robbery of the Madrid mint and the Bank of Spain bear aliases that are the names of the capitals of different countries. Female characters are assigned prominent position in this post-soap’s plot, and some of them are leading roles (e.g. Tokyo, Lisbon).

background, no records. He hasn't renewed his ID since he was nineteen. For all intents and purposes, a ghost, but a very smart ghost" (*Money Heist*, S01E01)<sup>6</sup>.

The strategy of indeterminacy makes The Professor remain a rather enigmatic figure to the very end. Although we learn more and more about him as the series' plot develops, we miss the information about his education, livelihood or intimate relationships from before the mint robbery. Indeterminacy also applies to the way the main character's gender identity is created. Actually, from the beginning of this post-soap, we experience a kind of 'tug-of-war', as the *Money Heist* alternates in different proportions, depending on the episode, strategies characteristic of portraying characters embodying hegemonic masculinity and discursive elements from the non-hegemonic versions of masculinity (see Table 1).

Table 1. Essential verbal and visual discursive strategies used in the creation of The Professor's gender identity and interpersonal relationships

Types of discursive strategies	Versions of masculinity referred to by the discursive strategies	
	strategies (or their elements) associated with hegemonic masculinity	strategies (or their elements) associated with non-hegemonic versions of masculinity (and/or traditional femininities)
I. Nomination strategies	Terms indicating power, dominance and control: "brains of the operation", "big brother", "lone wolf", "professor"	Terms in contrast to the hegemonic masculinity: "tender man"
II. Predication strategies	Giving a leadership role Strategy of risk and determination in pursuing the goal Strategy of male superiority over women Negative stereotyping and stigmatisation of women and subordinate masculinities	Giving a leadership role Strategy of risk and determination in pursuing the goal Strategy of male superiority over women Negative stereotyping and stigmatisation of women and subordinate masculinities
III. Argumentative strategies	Topos of the male power Topos of rationality Topos of gender difference (intellectual and physical superiority of men over women)	Topos of shyness and romantic attitude in relationships with women Topos of bodily weakness (resulting from sickliness in adolescence)

<sup>6</sup> English-language translations of the *Money Heist* characters who speak Spanish come from Netflix.

Types of discursive strategies	Versions of masculinity referred to by the discursive strategies	
	strategies (or their elements) associated with hegemonic masculinity	strategies (or their elements) associated with non-hegemonic versions of masculinity (and/or traditional femininities)
III. Argumentative strategies	Topos of the 'weakest link' (for women and men representing subordinate masculinities)	Topos of loss of control over the course of an event Topos of showing feelings and emotions Topos of distancing oneself from physical violence
IV. Visual symbolic strategies Using subject attributes	Elements of the strategy: Motorbikes (black sports motorbike and cross motorbike) Clothing (black leather jacket) Premises and equipment (robbery command room filled with monitors, bug microphones) Gadgets (black motorbike helmet)	Elements of the strategy: Car (1992 red SEAT Ibiza) Glasses Clothing (woollen, usually brown jacket, shirt open at the collar, carelessly tied tie)
V. Visual symbolic strategies related to the body, motor skills and external appearance	Elements of the strategy: Physical fitness and knowledge of Eastern martial arts Resistance to pain Strengthening exercises which also improve physical fitness	Elements of the strategy: Physical appearance typical of a popular culture stereotypic portrait of an intellectual rather than a leader of a criminal group
VI. Visual strategies related to gestures, facial expressions and other behaviours of the main character	Elements of the strategy: Clenched fist signifying obstinacy and stubbornness in pursuing the goal Facial expressions signalling anger and desire to retaliate	Elements of the strategy: Crying and screaming as an expression of despair Facial expressions indicating nervous tension and/or distress Adjusting glasses with fingertips as a sign of nervousness

Source: own elaboration.

In the first episodes, The Professor appears to be a poised, amiable and rather shy person, especially in his relationships with women, but as time goes by, he reveals his other face and then the characteristics typical of the neoseries anti-heroes, such as rationalism, lust for wealth, determination to achieve the goal, lying and insusceptibility to external influences become more and more prominent in his discourse (cf. Arcimowicz 2020; Darska 2012; Major 2011).

The protagonist appears at the very beginning of the first episode of the *Money Heist*. A man pulls up in a car to a woman in her thirties walking along the pavement, nicknamed Tokyo (who is being pursued by the police for shooting an officer),

and offers her a share in the robbery of the Spanish mint. The outward appearance, manner of being and object attributes that the main character possesses (at the beginning) do not indicate that he has power. The Professor does not look like the leader and ‘brains’ of a criminal group about to carry out the biggest robbery in the history of the 21st century, but rather reflect the popular culture stereotypic portrait of an intellectual: he wears a brown woollen jacket, a shirt open at the collar with a rather carelessly tied tie and glasses.

The Professor invites Tokyo into his old and small car, a 1992 SEAT Ibiza, which has nothing to do with the luxury limousines generally used by the leaders of organised crime groups in films and TV series. The literature in sociology/anthropology of objects and gender studies points out that the car can symbolise social and economic status, as well as act as a phallic symbol associated with power and domination (Dant 2007; Komisar 1972). Contemporary culture categorises cars into ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’, as well into cars for ‘real men’ and ‘effeminate men’ (Arcimowicz 2019). The category of ‘masculine’ cars mainly includes vehicles that have a powerful internal combustion engine, great horsepower and/or are large, while ‘feminine’ and ‘non-masculine’ cars are small and have poor performance, just like The Professor’s car.

In the following episodes of the post-soap, the situation changes. Although The Professor does not have a car that could be a symbol of hegemonic masculinity, he does have two black motorbikes: a sports one (in season one) and a cross-over one (in season four), which can drive very well. The motorbike, like the car, can be an object attribute emphasising hegemonic masculinity. The non-verbal discursive strategies include also colour pattern, which plays a role in the categorisation of vehicles: dark colours, especially black, are associated with cars and motorbikes intended for men, while pastels and white, by virtue of contrast, are reserved for ‘feminine’ vehicles (Arcimowicz 2019)<sup>7</sup>. It is worth mentioning that The Professor, moving on a motorbike, is dressed in a black leather jacket and wears a black helmet.

As the plot of the neoseries develops, terms appear within the nomination strategies to indicate that the main character is the dominant and controlling figure. Tokyo and other gang members call him the “brains of the operation”, the “big brother”, the “lone wolf”. The main character’s hegemonic masculinity is evoked by a scene appearing early in the series. It depicts The Professor walking at the head of a group of eight thieves, heading towards a rented mansion where, under his leadership, they will prepare to rob the mint. It is worth noting that the scene

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<sup>7</sup> There are exceptions to the colour rule described above, but they do not fundamentally challenge the stereotypes associated with the colours of ‘female’ and ‘male’ vehicles.

in question is accompanied by loud rock music and was shot in slow motion to heighten the tension.

Subsequent scenes show the protagonist, who, like an academic lecturer, explains the eight robbers sitting behind the desks what their task will be. The training takes five months, during which the Professor's personality traits such as composure, precision and intelligence are revealed. The adjudication strategy of giving a leadership role to The Professor is clearly visible during the robbery. This strategy is correlated with other strategies such as the strategy of risk and the strategy of determination in pursuit of the goal, linking the figure of the protagonist to both the hegemonic masculinity and the figure of the anti-hero. The plan to rob the Madrid mint appears to have been worked out to the finest detail, but is nevertheless very risky, as no one has carried out such an audacious robbery before.

It should be noted at this point that the discourse of the neoseries is constructed in such a way that the audience is supporting (at least up to a certain point) most of the serial anti-heroes and anti-heroines involved in the mint robbery with moral relativism being the most important argumentative strategy. The morally, legally or socially reprehensible behaviour of The Professor and the members of his gang is sometimes justified by the post-soap's authors who suggest to us that the question of what is and what is not allowed should be considered not only in the context of legal norms, but also in the life circumstances of the given person (cf. Arcimowicz 2020). The topos of special circumstances makes us realise that some of the people involved in the attack are in a difficult financial or family situation and need money to pay for expensive medical treatment or to provide care for their loved ones (I refer here to the living situation of Berlin, Moscow, Nairobi or Bogota).

Creators of the *Money Heist* gain the sympathy of the audience for the series' anti-heroes, including The Professor, by juxtaposing their behaviour with the actions of the authorities. The anti-establishment topos of exposing the hypocrisies, lies and crimes committed by the Spain's ruling elites is extremely important here. Top politicians, high-ranking military officers (e.g. Colonel Luis Tamayo, Colonel Alfonso Prieto), police officers (e.g. Inspector Alicia Sierra) are all people who will not hesitate to do anything to keep their power, and are portrayed as lying, unscrupulous and deprived of moral compass. In contrast to this bleak picture of the Spanish elite, The Professor's gang is referred to in the *Money Heist* discourse as a 'resistance movement', and its members are portrayed as victims of neoliberalism seeking emancipation in the only way that is available to them. Most probably,

this way of constructing the discourse had quite a considerable impact on the success of the series in question, especially among young viewers<sup>8</sup>.

In the first season, The Professor is generally presented as a person in control of events, calm and acting rationally (the topos of rationality), but in subsequent episodes the strategy of “borrowing” (Bridges, Pascoe 2014; Demetriou 2001), which involves incorporating certain elements from subordinate masculinities into the identity of the main character, becomes increasingly apparent. It is manifested mainly through visual symbolic strategies related to gestures, facial expressions and physiological responses to stress, which makes The Professor, unlike many other pop culture figures representing hegemonic masculinity, not deprived of feelings and emotions.

The situation at the mint turns out to be much more complex than the protagonist of the series had assumed. The escalation of psychological tension resulting in violence leads to fatalities on the part of both the uniformed services and the robbers. These dramatic events were used by the creators of the *Money Heist* to outline the non-hegemonic face of the main character. When some participants in the robbery (first Moscow, then Oslo, Berlin, Nairobi and Tokyo<sup>9</sup>) die as a result of gunshot wounds, The Professor is unable to control his emotions: he cries more than once, his trembling hands and facial grimace emphasise his nervous tension and suffering. Another exemplification of the issue can be found in the scene showing the main character’s reaction to the news concerning the police finding the location of Lisbon’s daughter (Lisbon is The Professor’s partner, and her child is used by the secret services to blackmail the woman). The Professor gets out of the car, then gets down on his knees and begins to scream in an act of despair.

It should be noted at this point that the main character’s plan was to rob the mint without bloodshed or the use of physical violence against the hostages. The Professor, in a conversation with Nairobi (one of the gang members), says that this was his father’s wish: “He wanted me to fulfil his dream without hurting others” (*Money Heist*, S01E12).

The strategy of discursive distancing oneself from an important aspect of hegemonic masculinity, namely the use of violence (Bridges, Pascoe 2014), applies not only to the figure of The Professor, but also to other representatives of hybrid masculinities. Let us note here Denver, a young and impulsive man who do not execute the order given by Berlin (who coordinates the action at the mint on behalf of The Professor) and refrain from killing one of the hostages plotting

<sup>8</sup> I make this thesis on the basis of my own observations and the information contained in the documentary *Money Heist. The Phenomenon* (2020).

<sup>9</sup> There is every indication that Tokyo dies in the fifth episode of the fifth season, but we cannot be entirely sure of anything in the series. Even the death of the hero or heroine can be only apparent (Fiske 1987).

against the persons involved in the robbery. Denver looks after a wounded woman and soon falls in love with her with reciprocity. Confiding in his partner, he states: “When you shoot someone, you feel like shit, you know? You hate yourself for it” (*Money Heist*, S05E03).

Discursive distancing from violence is an important element in the construction of hybrid masculinities, but in the case of The Professor and other characters the declarations are not always confirmed by actions. It should be made clear that the deaths of several people close to The Professor do not dissuade him from pursuing his goal (to rob the mint and the bank). Moreover, when he learns that Nairobi is shot dead by the bank's security commander, he changes his attitude to one that is more aggressive and marked by violence. During telephone conversations with participants in the attack, he states that Nairobi's death means war with the police and the military. It is worth quoting here the following words of the series' narrator: “At that moment, the Professor no longer felt any pain. He was detached from his emotions and operated like a machine” (*Money Heist*, S04E07).

### Gender power relations in the discourse of the *Money Heist*

Power is a social relationship, a relationship between people and social groups, it is related to their position in the social hierarchy, it implies power and the capacity to influence others (cf. Duch-Krzystoszek 2007: 29–30). As it was emphasised by authors dealing with the gender issues, categories of masculinity and femininity in culture are constructed in a relational manner (Bourdieu 2004; Connell 1987; Kimmel 1987).

I would like to now look at The Professor and his relationship with Raquel Murillo, who at the beginning of the series is the antagonist of the main character and by the end of the second season becomes his partner. Inspector Murillo leads a group of police officers tasked with rescuing the hostages and capturing the perpetrators of the robbery; she negotiates with The Professor, leader of the criminal group. The policewoman does not know The Professor's identity (she only contacts him by phone), which the man tries to exploit. He wants to get close to the divorced woman and thus obtain information on the police's plans. The Professor follows the woman and enters the pub after her. There, he initiates a conversation and arranges another meeting.

In fact, from the beginning of the post-soap, the strategy of the protagonist's intellectual superiority over Inspector Murillo becomes apparent, which is linked to the topos of gender difference and the strategy of adjudicating the superiority of the man over the woman. Raquel becomes embroiled in an affair with The Professor, not realising that she is a tool in a game that he – up to a certain

point – is playing. In the course of negotiations related to the robbery, the policewoman gives the impression of being unable to cope with a cunning and intelligent adversary such as The Professor.

In the second season, the thread concerning the relationship between The Professor and Raquel is given more prominence than in the initial episodes of the neoseries. The man stops treating the woman instrumentally and an affection is born between them. However, this relationship is complicated because The Professor cannot unveil his true identity. After some time, Raquel begins to realise that she has fallen in love with the most wanted criminal in Spain. She feels cheated and is distraught, but at the same time determined – despite her feelings for The Professor – to get him arrested. The sixth episode of the second season is particularly important for the further development of the love plot (and other series themes): the policewoman points a gun at the main character, who tries to convince her that his feelings for her are sincere: “It was all planned out, Raquel. Everything. All of it. I’m sorry. It was all planned out, except what happened between us” (*Money Heist*, S02E06).

The man, taking advantage of Raquel’s moment of inattention, his physical strength and knowledge of Eastern martial arts, overpowers the woman, who is knocked down. When the policewoman regains consciousness, The Professor says: “I broke free. I could have escaped. I could have killed you, Raquel” (*Money Heist*, S02E07).

The man gives the policewoman her gun and walks away. The thread described is important because it implicitly reveals discursive strategies that affirm male power and dominance. We can speak of a patriarchal ideology here, because ultimately the man is the ‘master’ of the situation and can decide the woman’s fate. Furthermore, we deal here with the strategy of negative stereotyping women (Eunson 2016), when Raquel is portrayed as being out of control of her emotions and weak in contrast to The Professor, who is poised and strong (both mentally and physically). These strategies resonate strongly in season three, in which The Professor and Raquel are already a couple and the now former policewoman adopts the nickname Lisbon. The transformation of the series’ character from a policewoman to a gang member and partner of its leader was dictated not only by her feelings for The Professor, but also by her disillusionment with the corrupt public institutions.

The protagonist of the series, as in the previous seasons of this post-soap, directs the robbery of the Bank of Spain from afar, but this time he is assisted by Lisbon. The two move around the country in a camper van (so to confuse the police), equipped with the latest electronic devices.

From season three onwards, it is the uncompromising and devious police inspector Alicia Sierra who becomes The Professor’s main antagonist. Sierra’s actions, which are, let us add, often illegal, result in the couple being ambushed and having to flee. Lisbon is captured by the police. Unlike the Professor, she does not manage to lose



the police pursuit (she cannot climb a tree). What is revealed here, once again, is a strategy of male superiority over women concerning intellectual supremacy and greater physical fitness.

Thanks to a clever plan by The Professor, Raquel is recaptured (in the fourth season of the series) from a prison convoy. However, this is not the end of the main character's troubles. Well along in her pregnancy, the tenacious Sierra discovers the gang leader's hideout. The surprised man is captured by the policewoman. It seems that this time The Professor will be defeated, but the course of events changes radically as the pregnant woman goes into labour. The Professor cleverly plays up the situation that has arisen and the policewoman, seeing that she cannot handle the birth herself, frees The Professor and puts herself at his mercy. We can thus speak here of a topos of gender difference (the woman giving birth is helpless) combined with a strategy of the superiority of man over woman (intellectual, but also due to anatomical differences between the sexes).

Not all power relations relating to gender categories are interactions between women and men. Relationships within a group of men or women can also be of gender nature, as exemplified by the hierarchy of different versions of masculinity among men (Connell 2013: 129).

In the discourse of the *Money Heist*, the lowest place in the hierarchy is occupied by subordinate masculinity, represented (at least up to a certain point) by the twenty-five-year-old man nicknamed Rio. This man with outstanding IT skills is supposed to be responsible for breaking electronic security at the mint. The sensitive and romantic Rio, who is partnered with Tokyo, is captured by the police in the third season of the post-soap. Thanks to the negotiations of The Professor, who offers to hand over the compromising documents to the state authorities, Rio is freed. Let us note that of the dozen or so people who make up (over the five seasons of the series) the criminal group, the police arrest only women and a man who represents subordinate masculinity. We can speak here of a strategy of stigmatisation combined with the topos of the 'weakest link'; this term is actually used in the discourse of the series to describe Lisbon and Rio. Both are mainly driven by emotion in their behaviour and their actions often contradict the precise plan of action outlined by The Professor who remains rational.

## Discussion

The existing theoretical background seems sufficient for a sound analysis of most TV series characters. However, in the *Money Heist* (as in many other post-soaps) we encounter (anti-)heroes – important for the development of the plot – whose

masculinity is difficult to define, not only because of the mixing of different strategies in the discourse, but also because of theoretical and methodological problems.

In the neoseries in question, we find the characters of Berlin and Palermo. These men behave in a highly hegemonic manner for a long time, but it should be noted that Palermo is a declared gay man, while Berlin is most likely a bisexual one. According to Connell (1987, 2005), only heterosexual men can be representatives of the hegemonic masculinity. This position is disagreed with by other representatives of the CSMM, e.g. Demetriou believes that hegemonic masculinity is not always a conglomerate of practices carried out exclusively by heterosexual men. According to this sociologist, hybrid images appearing in popular culture can combine with non-heteronormativity, but at the same time be a certain mutation of the hegemonic masculinity (Demetriou 2001).

It is worth adding that the patriarchal and hegemonic image of Berlin is blurred over time by the borrowing of elements other than the bisexuality from the non-hegemonic versions of masculinity. It turns out that Berlin suffers from an incurable disease, is able to externalise emotions and feelings, and is an aesthete who enjoys painting and drawing. It can therefore be said that in the discourse of the *Money Heist*, he becomes another representative of the hybrid masculinities after The Professor and Denver. Hybridisation is thus a strategy for the reproduction of patriarchy, and hegemony reproduces itself through, among other things, hybridisation (Bridges, Pascoe 2014; Demetriou 2001; Kluczyńska 2021).

It should be noted that the creators of the *Money Heist* use a queerbaiting strategy, popular in the series format today and consisting of ‘luring’ but also ‘confusing’ and/or ‘teasing’ queer audience by suggesting in veiled form the non-heteronormative identity of the characters (Kobus 2017)<sup>10</sup>. This strategy applies to the character of Berlin, but also up to a certain point to The Professor, because at the beginning of the series one gets the impression that he is an asexual person. The *Money Heist* discourse also features female characters whose sexual identity, at least some of the time, is undefined (e.g. Tokyo and Nairobi). Aldona Kobus, analysing the commercial dimension of non-heterosexual heroes and heroines of neoseries, writes: “The ambivalence of queerbaiting captures the attitude of producer forces towards queer audiences, who are seen, on the one hand, as an attractive market and on the other as an unbearable burden to be accepted by the cisheterosexist hegemony that largely dictates what is accepted in the media content” (Kobus 2017: 144–145).

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<sup>10</sup> In the 21st century, there are a growing number of series aimed primarily at non-heterosexual audiences (e.g. *Queer as Folk*, *The Bisexual*, *Tales from San Francisco*, *Special*) in which non-heteronormative male and female heroes and heroines are the primary characters, but these productions (often referred to as the “LGBT series”) generally do not have the same reach as series that are by default aimed at a broad audience.

The emergence of new characters with complex identity can be interpreted in the context of the socio-cultural changes that have taken place over the last few decades in the Western world; I am referring to greater moral freedom (including sexual freedom) and more identity patterns (including gender ones). It can be said that post-soaps are, on the one hand, a reaction to socio-cultural transformations and, on the other hand, a response to the changing preferences of the audience who experiences these transformations (Arcimowicz 2016; Kaja 2014). However, it should not be forgotten that neoserries are commercial cultural texts, in the vast majority of cases they are not created to break the status quo, but to arouse emotions and attract the attention of viewers.

### Concluding reflections

The creators of the *Money Heist* employ varying conglomerates of discursive strategies in creating the image of the protagonist, but also of the other characters, in each episode and season. They accentuate the character's personality traits and subject attributes differently, bringing one or the other to the fore. The male figures represent different versions of masculinity with hybrid images being the most prominent. The characters' relationships with women or other men (in the case of non-heterosexual men) are compiled, which is a feature present in many post-soaps.

In the *Money Heist* and other neoserries (we can point to such productions as: *The Bridge*, *Ray Donovan*, *Ozark*, *Elite*, *New Amsterdam*) the category of masculinity is negotiated and appears in new guises. However, these new images of men in many cases do not serve at all to deconstruct the patriarchal gender order, but rather to mask the patriarchal power. The incorporation of some elements from subordinated and/or marginalised masculinities into the still prevailing cultural ideal of hegemonic masculinity and the magnification of non-heteronormative images of men in neoserries, more often serves the reproduction of hegemony, patriarchy and capitalism than the emancipation of the non-hegemonic masculinities (cf. Arcimowicz 2020; Demetriou 2001). The strength of the hegemonic masculinity lies in its ability to adapt to changing socio-cultural conditions and should be understood as a block capable of embracing what is useful for the project of domination at any given historical moment (Demetriou 2001: 348–349).

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Ewa Kępa<sup>1</sup>

## City Bombed with Yarn: Knitting Graffiti as an Ambivalent Practice of Resistance to Cultural Hegemony

Street lamp, bench, tree wrapped in a colourful knit, statue with a scarf or embroidered slogan hung on a gate, all constitute knitting graffiti, which is increasingly present in the cities around the world. It takes a lot of forms. It is not only a colourful aesthetic symptom, but also a manifestation and driving force of socio-cultural changes. Knitted and crocheted elements present in the urban landscape only seemingly tend to be frivolous and irrational. Creative actions made by these who 'knit the city' embody various meanings. In the presented article, the phenomenon of 'yarn bombing' is described primarily as a strategy of resistance, a form of street art, which makes the cultural practice of knitting stitch by stitch, traditionally associated with femininity, become a series of craftivist micro-political gestures.

**Keywords:** yarn bombing, craftivism, resistance, street art, creativity, cultural hegemony, new media

Miasto zbombardowane przędzą –  
*knitting graffiti* jako ambiwalentna praktyka oporu wobec hegemonii kulturowej\*

Otulone kolorową dzianiną uliczna lampa, ławka, drzewo czy też pomnik w szaliku i wyhaftowane hasło zawieszone na bramie to przykłady włóczkowego graffiti, które coraz częściej spotykamy w przestrzeni miast na całym świecie. Przybiera ono wiele form. Jest nie tylko wielobarwnym estetycznym akcentem, lecz także przejawem i motorem społeczno-kulturowych zmian. Wpisane w miejski krajobraz elementy wydziergane na drutach i szydełku jedynie z pozoru są niepoważne i nieracjonalne. Kreatywne działania podejmowane przez „dziergających miasto” ucieleśniają wiele znaczeń. W prezentowanym

<sup>1</sup> University of Białystok, Institute of Cultural Studies, e.kepa@uwb.edu.pl.

\* The article was published in 2022.

artykule zjawisko „bombardowania włóczką” (*yarn bombing*) interesuje mnie przede wszystkim jako strategia oporu, forma street artu, która z dziergania oczka za oczkiem, praktyki kulturowej tradycyjnie kojarzonej z kobiecością, czyni serię rękodzielniczych mikropolitycznych gestów.

**Słowa kluczowe:** „bombardowanie włóczką”, rękodzielniczy aktywizm, opór, sztuka uliczna, kreatywność, hegemonia kulturowa, nowe media

## Introduction

Knitting has remained an essential part of women's lives from years (Haveri 2013: 2). Over time, as second-wave feminists have repeatedly emphasised, it became part of a stereotyped femininity, according to which a woman fulfilling the social role assigned to her, 'confined' to a private space, selflessly served others, putting her own needs last. Engaging in knitting was one of the responsibilities of caring for home and family (Parker 2010: 6)<sup>2</sup>.

Needlework was associated with submissiveness. This is mentioned by Rozsika Parker in her interpretation of Marcus Stone's painting *In Love* (1888), which depicts a man gazing lovingly at his chosen one sitting opposite him and occupied by embroidery. In Parker's view, the silent embroiderer personifies the stereotypical femininity. Indeed, her posture symbolises modesty, submissiveness and poise: the embroiderer has her eyes downcast and her head bowed (Parker 2010: 5).

Naomi Wolf points out that since the Industrial Revolution, embroidery and lace-making, as meticulous and time-consuming activities, were assigned to middle-class women in order to “consume the female energy and intelligence in a harmless way” (Wolf 2002: 15). However, she adds that at the same time reaching for needlepoint or lacemaking allowed women, as much as possible, to express their creativity and passion (Wolf 2002: 15). In the past, handicrafts repeatedly became for women a source of pleasure stemming from creation and a way of self-expression within the limited conditions (Parker 2010). This was due to women's ability to combine conflicting activities, referred to as the “creative tension between conformity and subversion” (Durham 1990: 342).

Contemporary forms of women's textile crafts have developed as an extension of women's daily work arising from their assigned duties. Today, there is no need to make garments or interior design elements by oneself. That is why today, in the field of knitting, tradition and utility are clearly giving way to artistic activity and unfettered creativity (Haveri 2013: 2).

<sup>2</sup> The perception of knitting as an activity that is a kind of exemplification of stereotypical femininity is not universal. I write more about this in: *Knitting – (wo)mens occupation* (Kępa 2019).



Textile handicrafts are becoming increasingly popular today. All over the world, groups of people united by knitting are emerging. Workshops on traditional handicrafts, including knitting and crocheting, are popular. There are also more and more knitting festivals<sup>3</sup>. In many cities around the world, there are even special 'knit cafés' popping up and gathering knitters. New media play a significant role in the development of interest in knitting. There are more and more places on the internet every day where knitters, crocheters and embroiderers discuss their passion. These include Facebook and Instagram profiles, as well as blogs and vlogs. Social networks that connect craft enthusiasts are also hugely popular, e.g. Ravelry which has over 9 million registered users.

The interest in knitting is, among other things, a response to the omnipresent consumerism. According to this idea, the haste that accompanies modern human leads to a situation where we increasingly feel the need to slow down, to stop. Handicrafts created from yarn offer exactly such an opportunity. It results from the fact that dealing with it takes time: completing a handicraft project often takes days or even weeks. This feature of knitting is highlighted by Wendy Parkins, who highlights the fact that it helps us to look at our lives at a pace that is unusual for us. In her view making stitch after stitch, which stems from the need to be creative, allows the weaving of rhythms and relationships that are a response to the disillusionment with the all-encompassing rush (Parkins 2004: 432).

In the present article, I look at knitting as a form of cultural resistance to dominant values, patterns of thought and behaviour. I refer here to the concept of cultural hegemony developed in the field of cultural studies by the Italian philosopher Antonio Gramsci. This hegemony is as the process of creating, maintaining and disseminating the concepts of meaning dominant in a given society (Gramsci 1951, 1961). In doing so, I point out that new media play a key role in the process of contesting the hegemony through knitting, as they enable the spread of the phenomenon known as knitting graffiti.

I also interpret the practice of making yarn graffiti by drawing on anthropology and the sociology of everyday life. In the article, I also take up the issues of activism in the context of popular culture, and refer to the relationship between the power and citizens' right 'to the city'. I thus present knitting as an ambivalent phenomenon, suspended in a dense web of meanings, impossible to be classified unambiguously and definitively.

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<sup>3</sup> These include Edinburgh Yarn Festival (UK), Swiss Yarn Festival (Sweden), Barcelona Knits (Spain), Sheep & Wool Festival (USA), TWIST. Fibre Festival (Canada). In Poland, the Drutozlot convention of knitting enthusiasts has been held in Toruń since 2015.

## City bombed with yarn

Knitting graffiti<sup>4</sup> also referred to as yarn graffiti or even as yarn storming and guerilla knitting is a form of expression derived from traditional textile handicrafts. It brings together amateurs and professionals, and makes tradition and modernity intermingle. This 'soft' type of urban art is based on artisanal skills, but works through strategies typical for the field of fine arts and street art (Haveri 2013: 1).

Yarn bombing is a multisensory form of graffiti that, unlike 'traditional' graffiti, is easy to remove. Its creation involves leaving handmade elements of thread and fabric in the urban landscape. Yarn graffiti can be sophisticated – when it comes to dressing a statue in a jumper – or simple – when a street lamp is wrapped in a crocheted scarf. Some knit small works difficult to spot on an urban lawn, others create huge realisations capable of enveloping monuments. Yarn bombing can be made with a labour-intensive and intricate stitch or be composed of elements representing a uniform and simple pattern. It can be easily spotted or placed in some low-traffic areas where it can only be seen by careful observers (Moore, Prain 2009: 17–18).

Yarn bombing arose mainly from the need to make grey reality more colourful. It was initiated by Magda Sayeg, who in 2005, while running a boutique in Houston, one day, feeling bored, made a blue and pink doorknob wrapper, now called the "alpha piece". The resulting installation was well received and popular with customers. Having noticed this, Magda Sayeg and her friend (soon to be known as PolyCotN and AKrylik) knitted another colourful 'garment', this time for the road sign standing in front of the shop, which began to attract the attention of the townspeople. This is how the group known as Knitta Please, which created works all over the world, was born. The activities of the Knitta group started a so-called global revolution, changing the way knitting is perceived. This revolution saw embroidery, knitting or crocheting transcend the boundaries of private space to become a surprising and eye-catching element of public space (Moore, Prain 2009: 19–21). The change in question was brought about by new media offering new ways of creating, disseminating, processing, exchanging and storing information.

Yarn bombing is now an international phenomenon. Groups of stitch-by-stitch knitters in cities and towns all around the world are infiltrating the urban tissue through the emotional force of collective interventionism (Price 2015: 81). Colourful fluffy graffiti is appearing in Europe, America, Asia and Australia. In Italy, American artist London Kaye used the yarn to bomb a coastal cliff (Kaye 2019).

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<sup>4</sup> The word 'knitting' is commonly used in the context of yarn graffiti. However, it should be noted that textile guerrillas also use other tools and methods to carry out their work. Many of them make stitches with the use of a crochet. In addition, it happens that the authors of the yarn graffiti make embroideries.

In London, the Knit the City group decorated the railings of London Bridge with little sheep to bring a “touch of humour” to the city, and ‘enclosed’ a telephone box at Parliament Square with yarn (*Knit the City Yarnstorm* 2009, 2010). Yarn bombing has reached China (Lyne 2015). It is also spreading in Russia, Morocco and Iran (Wollan 2011)<sup>5</sup>.

One reason for the expansion of ‘urban knitting’ is the existence of social media. Authors of the yarn graffiti photograph and film their work and then post their accounts online. Information about their activities thus reaches distant places, inspiring more enthusiasts of unusual knitting to take up initiative.

### ‘Yarn attack’<sup>6</sup> as a form of handicraft activism

As a practice of resistance, the phenomenon of yarn bombing intersects with craftivism. Knitting graffiti has become one of the most popular tactics undertaken by craft activists (Fitzpatrick 2018: 10). Craftivism is a term launched by Betsy Greer, who founded in 2003 the website *craftivism.com*. The term referred to is a combination of the words ‘craft’ and ‘activism’ (Paavolainen 2018: 223). Greer’s work is guided by the idea that knitting skills can be used to change the world for the better. Within the handicraft activism, a type of creativity assigned to the private sphere, mainly performed by women as part of being a good housewife capable not only of mending socks but also of decorating the interior of the flat with an embroidered tablecloth, has transformed into an activity that enables them to creatively communicate their power and convictions to the world (Chansky 2010: 683).

Craftivism is based on the belief that even small acts of resistance can have a significant impact on socio-political reality, providing an invitation to debate

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<sup>5</sup> It is worth mentioning that the knitted works in public spaces are not only realised and presented by amateurs. Handicraft activism is, for example, an integral part of the work of Agata Oleksiak, a crochet artist using the pseudonym ‘Olek’, who uses yarn to address personally relevant and socially relevant problems. Oleksiak is known for impressive productions created all over the world, from New York to India. She is the author of works such as *Our Pink House* (Avesta Museum, Avesta, Sweden 2016) and *Our Pink House* (Kerava Museum, Kerava, Finland), which she created with refugee women in need of a home and their own place on earth. Together with these women, she covered two houses with pink knitted fabric: one in the town of Avesta, Sweden, and the other in the town of Kerava, Finland. Agata Oleksiak emphasises that the actions she carries out prove that together people become stronger and can do a lot (Cooke 2016). According to her: “Crochet is just the way I illustrate my thoughts to the public. [...] I employ my crochet hook as my language” ([olek olek] 2021). However, evoking the figure of Agata Oleksiak in the context of yarn bombing is not obvious, as the artist does not like to be identified with this phenomenon. As she once said: “I don’t yarn bomb, I make art” (Wollan 2011).

<sup>6</sup> I borrowed the term ‘yarn attack’ (*włóczkonatarcie*) from the Saskie Trykoty group, about which I write below.

the issues raised through the creation of handicrafts placed in public space. One of the slogans embroidered by the handicraft activists refers to the words of Mahatma Gandhi captured in the wording: “In a gentle way, you can shake the world” (Morrison 2017). As declared by Greer, craftivism is an activity that grows out of a passion for creation undertaken to connect people (Greer 2019).

The idea of craftivism is subversive, it inverts meanings. Craftivism is a tactic of resistance that takes the form of interference in the way we see the world around us. It is a social process with the experience of collective empowerment, action, expression and dialogue at its core (Carpenter 2010). This is brilliantly captured in a photograph posted on one of the blogs, where the textiles scattered on the table are accompanied by the words: “connect”, “challenge”, “craft”, “reflect” and “calm”) (Craftivist Collective online).

I have taken the quoted phrases from the work of the Craftivist Collective, a global movement initiated by Sahra Corbett in 2009. Its motto encourages to seek answer for the following: “If we want our world to be more beautiful, kind and just, then our activism should be beautiful, kind and just?” (Corbett 2017). Corbett has delivered more than three hundred workshops and events to more than eleven thousand people worldwide as part of her work. She has collaborated for this purpose with art institutions such as the Southbank & National Portrait Gallery, as well as charities such as Save the Children and Unicef (Craftivist Collective online).

The handicraft activism initiatives can certainly also be described as subversive acts of questioning the meanings assigned to traditional handicrafts. Their power stems from the potential to bring about change inherent in performativity (Butler 1988: 27). Quoting handicraft gestures, performing stitch after stitch, in contexts that disrupt traditional notions of textile handicraft, is an activity that can be defined as part of the transformation of traditionally perceived femininity and the corresponding division between the private and the public.

Betsy Greer sees yarn bombing as a variation of craftivism, which is meant to beautify reality but at the same time make people look at their ‘old surroundings’ in a different way (Greer 2019). The power of the yarn bombing’s impact comes from placing in unexpected places unexpected reveals of what belongs, in everyday life, to the private space. Moreover, yarn graffiti artists usually work in teams. Contemporary collective knitting practices, using this feature of yarn bombing, construct a new reality, as knitting in the city creates opportunities for creative recomposition of the urban environment. Yarn bombing is a type of political intervention in urban space that builds on positive emotions, leading to the renegotiation and reweaving of assumptions about urban spaces (Price 2015: 81–82). It is also a form of criticism aimed at the homogeneity of the dominant culture and the established power relations.

## Gentle practices of resistance: 'softening' militarism, wrapping and warming the world

Yarn appears in the urban space for many reasons. Yarn activists, organising actions for world peace, proclaim: "Make craft, not war", thus referring to the anti-war slogan from the Vietnam War period: "Make love, not war" (*Craft Not War* 2012). In 2006, artist Marianne Jørgensen dressed an M.24 Chaffee tank in a 'pink jumper' as a protest against Denmark's involvement in the Gulf War. This combat vehicle, a symbol of military expansion, was thus transformed into an object evoking concepts such as care, concern and compassion. *Pink M.24 Chaffee* carries the potential to initiate critical discussion regarding 'global militarism' (Carpenter 2010).

Similar actions have been taken on a number of occasions. The London-based group Cast off Knitting Club for Boys and Girls has designed a yarn hand grenade in line with its proclaimed slogans: "Instead of dropping bombs, start stitching" and "Make jumpers not war" (Wilczak 2011). In October 2010, on the other hand, Magda Sayeg invited to Bali by the Insight 51 website as part of the 'Untitled' campaign, wrapped a giant gun and holster of a statue depicting an unnamed soldier in colourful knitwear. The propaganda power of the statue was thus weakened by the rainbow stitching. Four years later, Magda Sayeg also took part in the Swedish Artscape 2014 festival, where she dressed Carl Fredrik Reuterswård's work *Non Violence*, depicting a gun with a barrel tied in a knot, in soft blankets (*Extreme Yarn Bombing* 2014).

Another spectacular action, called Wool Against Weapons (WAW) was initiated by Jaine Rose under the Action Atomic Weapons Eradication (AWE) programme. "Action AWE" is a campaign consisting of peaceful actions to stop the production of nuclear weapons at the UK factories in Aldermaston and Burghfield (Action AWE 2016). Realisation of the WAW project involved the creation of a seven-mile pink scarf that linked the two sites mentioned (Wool Against Weapons 2012). The scarf was knitted by hundreds of people united by a common idea, including knitters from outside the UK. Parts of the scarf were made in public places, in line with the idea "Ask me what I am knitting", according to which it is important above all to talk about what influence you want to make with your knitting.

The Viva Vittoria project, launched in 2015 in the Italian city of Brescia, which aims to combat gender violence and support the social reintegration of women who have experienced it, certainly stimulates the debate. Its guiding idea is encapsulated in the following words: "Awareness is the source of change: a woman must first develop an awareness of change in herself in order to be able to implement it" ("La presa di coscienza e l'origine del cambiamento: la donna deve prima sviluppare

dentro di se la consapevolezza del cambiamento per poterlo mettere in atto”) (Viva Vittoria 2021). The project is constantly evolving. So far, several thousand volunteers knitted 5,000 squares measuring 50 by 50 centimetres. They were used to make 100 by 100-centimetre blankets which were laid out in the squares and streets of Italian cities and afterwards auctioned off for charity. The proceeds from their sale are donated for combating violence against women. In 2021, the Viva Vittoria project was hosted in Milan, Bologna and Rome, among others (“*Bombardowanie włóczką*” 2021; Viva Vittoria 2021).

Another knitting initiative carried out to support the fight with violence against women is the guerrilla crochet art project “Roses against violence” initiated in 2018 in the Austrian Tyrol. Its aim is to raise awareness of violence against women. Activists engaged in the project make crochet roses tagged with the slogan “Stop violence against women!”. They then place the roses in public places and take photos of them, which, since the pandemic, they have published on Instagram and Facebook, among others (Roses against violence 2021).

Knitting graffiti, however, does not always take the form of a politically or socially engaged activity. A representative of the Stockholm-based formation Guerrilla Knitting said that projects performed by the group are often, but not always, accompanied by a political message. The founders of a Stockholm-based yarn-bombing group called Masquerade also claim that knitting graffiti is fun, eccentric and has only a subtle potential for global impact (Rothschild 2010: 6). This attitude is shared by Maja Brzozowska-Brywczyńska, sociologist and member of the now no-longer existing group Poznańska Partyzantka Włóczkowa (Poznań Yarn Guerrilla)<sup>7</sup>, who, when asked why she was involved in knitting graffiti, replied that the group creates its works: “To beautify, tame, warm the urban space. To make ‘something’ that would break us out of our routine, wake us up. The colourful yarns contrast with the greyness of the city. Sometimes we just do it for fun. To have fun. The yarn can be wound on anything, it is patient, it can be arranged in all sorts of patterns and tangled in all sorts of ways” (Wilczak 2011).

Yarn graffiti also played quite a considerable role in dealing with the situation of lockdown associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. The Lockdown Letterboxes initiative was born in the UK. Eye-catching brightly coloured knitted and crocheted hats knitted by people aged between seven and eighty and bearing a QR code with information about the opportunity to donate to the charity began to appear on red mailboxes. The action was intended to bring joy to passers-by and to provide motivation to people involved in knitting. As part of this “British madness”, a book and calendar for 2022 have been produced. Proceeds from their sale are to be

<sup>7</sup> By the way, it is worth noting that many of the yarn-bombing groups and the initiatives they undertake are ephemeral, temporary in nature.

donated to the YoungMinds organisation (*'Yarnbombing' Knitters* 2021; Lal 2021; Lockdown Letterboxes 2021).

When museums closed due to the lockdown, Nina Elliott, nicknamed The Rock Vandal, created an exhibition of colourful knitwear on a two-kilometre stretch of roadway in Twillingate, in Newfoundland, Canada, and called it Newfoundland's First Outdoor Art Gallery. In doing so, she wanted to lift people's spirits during the grim pandemic period (Elliott 2021; Hawthorn 2020; The Rock Vandal online). These are just some of the textile ventures that have emerged in urban spaces as a remedy for anxiety and the limitations that came with it.

### Taming craft activism

Guerrilla knitting is sometimes removed from urban spaces. However, the authorities and cultural institutions of many cities increasingly become patrons of knitters colouring the streets. For it turns out that knitting graffiti is a kind of creativity that "serves the city": on the one hand, by uniting residents in undertaking common activities, and on the other, by becoming a kind of tourist attraction. Among the activities organised on the initiative of municipal institutions, there are for example the Santa Cruz Urban Knitting festival organised in 2013 in Tenerife. The event gathered 55 women and men who, divided into neighbourhood groups linking generations, were given yarn to make colourful clothes for the trees. The plants decorated in this way became a tourist attraction admired also by the townspeople themselves. The City Council of Santa Cruz de Tenerife considered that this measure contributed to the revitalisation of the city's commercial district (*Centro-Ifara* 2013).

Yarn graffiti proves to be an effective tool for promoting regions and cities. Representatives of the local authority are beginning to recognise this. Social media plays in this process quite an important role. On the one hand, they enable to reach, in a relatively easy way, a wide range of people who could be potentially interested in participating in the creation of yarn projects. On the other hand, social media makes it possible to effectively disseminate information about ready-made realisations in this field.

News about the knitting graffiti made on the initiative of the city and consisting of a 60-metre-long crochet awning, shading one of the streets of the historic centre, posted online had more than 427,000 views. Organisers and authors of the work, which is an ecological alternative to plastic roller shutters, received compliments and congratulations from many parts of the world. Municipal authorities expressed satisfaction with the effectiveness of this form of promotion of local tourism and trade (*Las tejedoras del gran* 2021).

In 2021, the Finnish city of Turku hosted for the fifth time the Knit'n'Tag festival uniting city residents of all ages: from children to senior citizens, individuals and those belonging to associations, organisations or educational institutions. On the May 8, trees along the Aurajoki River were decorated with colourful knitting. The organisers of this edition of the festival referred to the aforementioned project "Roses against violence" (*Yarn Bombing Ideas* 2021; *Knit 'n Tag Turku* 2021). Another locally established group, Social Work Knit Berlin, meets to embellish its district, Friedenau, with knitwear (*Social Work Knit Berlin* 2021).

Knitting groups are often formed also within cultural institutions. The Material Girls Truro, a group from the UK town of Truro, was operating by the town's library and organised in 2018 an event called Yarn Bombing at Royal Cornwall Museum in collaboration with the Royal Cornwall Museum. During the event, citizens of the town had knitted together elements that were afterwards used to adorn the walls of the royal museum (*Spotlight On* 2018).

The Knit the Bridge group also carried out a huge-scale knitting campaign commissioned by the authorities of Pittsburgh. It gathered around 1,800 participants, who knitted and crocheted 580 colourful blankets that were later fixed on a bridge near The Andy Warhol Museum (Hamilton 2013).

Yarn graffiti is developing also in Poland with municipal cultural institutions willingly participating in its creation. In 2011, in Poznań, the SPOT. foundation, in cooperation with the Institute of Sociology of the Adam Mickiewicz University, organised the exhibition "Knitted City". The exhibition was accompanied by crochet and knitting workshops open to all generations (*Wystawa "Miasto Dziergane"* 2011). It featured lace graffiti made by the artist NeSpoon, city transport tickets 'dressed' in wool by Anna Maćkowiak, as well as sewage manholes, trees and Poznań Goats wrapped in yarn. The latter were decorated by the already mentioned Poznańska Partyzantka Włóczkowa (Zaczyński, Malesa 2011).

In Gdańsk, on the other hand, a workshop was held at the City Culture Institute in 2012 under the slogan: "Jewellery for the City". According to the announcements, the workshop was to consist of making a street-art embroidery to "decorate the gloomy parts of the city" (*Weekendowe warsztaty* 2012). The institute has been regularly organising knitting and crochet workshops aimed at city residents for several years (*Robienie na drutach* 2019).

In Lublin, urban knitting is developing through the Cultural Centre, where women of different generations and professions participate in open action meetings entitled "Bombing with yarn". Existing since March 2014, the group designed and created, among other things, a colourful installation on the Cultural Centre's cloister and coloured the railings in the square in front of the Centre's building (*Bombardowanie włóczką* 2019). As part of the Lublin yarn bombing, the windows and trees of the Paediatric Haematology, Oncology and Transplantology Ward



have already been decorated in the Christmas-winter theme six times. In turn, on 6 December 2021, Santa hats were deployed in a number of locations in the city. Knitted ornaments also appeared on one of the city's trolleybuses (*Bombardowanie włóczką* 2021).

As part of the Rękodzielnia (Handicraft) project, the Cultural Centre in Żyrardów, together with the group Żurek – Żyrardowskie Utalentowane Rękodzielniczeki Kulturalne (Żyrardów Talented Cultural Female Crafters) realised the installations *Mandala Ceiling*, *Colourful Wings*, *Żyrardów Linen Flower* (Centrum Kultury w Żyrardowie, 2 October 2021; Rękodzielnia 2021; Żurek 2021).

Social media play a key role in promoting and carrying out the activities described by cultural institutions. In April 2021, the Ustka House of Culture encouraged people to take part in the making of a yarn “Cultural Patchwork” on Facebook. Organisers of the campaign wrote: “We have a quarantine mission for you! Please knit or crochet 20 cm x 20 cm squares. Do not limit yourself in colours and patterns” (Dom Kultury w Ustce, 20 April 2021). As early as on June 11, the finished patchwork was presented on the wall of the aforementioned institution (Dom Kultury w Ustce, 11 June 2021).

Cultural actors who, when organising yarn actions, use social media include also: Municipal Cultural Centre in Wągrowiec (*Światowy Dzień*, 5 June 2019), Local Activity Centre in Pionki (2019), Mościce Art Centre (2019), Cultural Centre and Public Library of the Suchy Las Municipality (2021) and many others.

At the same time, it is worth emphasising that grassroots actions by yarn guerrillas in our country are very rare. These include an event in Warsaw, where ‘unknown perpetrators’, as they have been described (or, in fact, creators gathered under the banner Mupka Designs), put a cover with the Superman sign on the shield of the Warsaw Mermaid (*International Yarn Bombing Day* 2011; *Nieznani sprawcy* 2011). Mupka Design, in collaboration with the “Ja Wisła” Foundation, also took part in the action to defend the trees in Port Czerniakowski (*Wełniana partyzantka* 2011). Similar events have taken place in Krosno, where, thanks to Maluca Yarnbombing, a cactus has ‘grown’ on the arm of the Ignacy Łukasiewicz statue, and in Poznań, where the Nicolaus Copernicus statue wears colourful clothes during the yearly student carnival and ‘puts on’ a red cap on the occasion of Christmas (Kwiatkowska 2014; *Pan Ignacy* 2011).

Poznań is also the area of the activity of the Pikotki Crew group, whose members write about themselves: “We are Pikotki Crew, or the Poznań Yarnbombing Collective: a group of girls who want to go beyond the comfort of home with their passion and popularise crochet and knitting, as well as yarn bombing as a form of artistic expression. On the one hand, it is great fun for us and an opportunity to put a smile on someone’s face. On the other hand, it is a way to support

certain social initiatives, a form of drawing attention to issues or celebrating events” (Pikotki Crew online).

In Warsaw, a group called *Saskie Trykoty* has also been active for several years, regularly dressing up trees in the area of the *Saska Kępa* district and putting caps on street poles. The group is made up of three friends living in Warsaw at the *Saska Street*: Joanna, Kinga and Karol, who “have a great time, aware of the fact that the world cannot be changed, but that it is always worth trying” (*Saskie Trykoty* online). Yarn graffiti has also made its way to Warsaw’s *Bielany* district. Residents of the blocks of flats at the *Lipińska Street* decided to enliven their shared space as part of the neighbourhood action “We wrap with yarn in our garden” (Wóźnica 2021).

Years after the birth of yarn bombing, it is worth asking: to what extent has this originally grassroots handicraft practice resisted absorption into the cultural mainstream? Indeed, it sometimes happens that the authors of countercultural acts of resistance, often unaware of the mechanisms to which they are subject, reinforce capitalism (Heath, Potter 2004). The practice of yarn storming began with contesting the meanings, both attributed to knitting and to the art of graffiti. However, over time it has become a fashion trend that has been commoditised by large corporations. Today, yarn bombers are not only engaged in art projects by the city authorities. They also carry out commercial projects advertising well-known brands. The yarnbomber from USA, London Kaye, has collaborated with Starbucks, Adidas and Miller Beer, among others (Kaye 2019). *Deadly Knitshade* created works commissioned by companies such as Toyota, Nintendo and Saatchi & Saatchi (Kępa 2017).

People working to change the world for the better also often fail to recognise their entanglement in practices that exclude people who do not belong to the white race, who do not have the privilege of time, economic resources or cultural capital to engage in artisanal social activism. The creators of yarn graffiti are further accused that their actions not only reverse the meanings ascribed to textile handicrafts, but paradoxically also reinforce the traditional gender roles that second-wave feminism sought to eliminate (Paavolainen 2018: 224).

## Conclusions

Yarn bombing is inextricably linked to the development of new media. Knitting activism repeatedly takes the form of a technologically mediated social and cultural movement. Using digital media, its participants balance the private and the public, the local and the global, being online and off-line. New opportunities for communicating, developing own skills, as well as archiving and publishing information

about one's activities provide a means of building creative identities for individuals, as well as a sense of community and engagement referred to as "DIY citizenship" (Orton-Johnson 2014: 141–148).

Knitting graffiti is a form of cultural resistance that takes many forms. Its subversive potential is ambivalent. Yarn guerrilla can have a dimension of spectacular undertakings that constitute a strong and visible act of defiance by organised groups of people formulated in the name of values such as peace, justice, equality, the right to agency and the expression of one's own subjectivity. Initiatives against consumerism, violence, indifference and inaction. Actions for the weak, the excluded and the needy. Creative endeavours that question the meanings ascribed to traditional handicraft undertaken to reclaim and beautify the urban space, taking the form of play, providing a cure for anxiety and insecurity. Knitting graffiti is also sometimes an expression of "a local, impermanent, individualistic, micrological resistance implementing Foucault's idea of 'personal insurrection'" (Brzozowska-Brywczyńska 2010: 116–117). An opposition that does not initiate a revolution but rather introduce minor transformations to the dominant model of cultural and social order.

Yarn bombing is an ambiguous form of cultural resistance also because of the 'intentions' and 'effects' of the actions taken. The subversive aspirations of its authors do not always lead to a violation of the existing social order. The ignorance of the mechanisms of cultural and social reproduction can even contribute to reinforcing existing hegemonies. The actions of the yarn bombers may then serve to reproduce what they appear to act against (Aggleton, Whitty 1985: 62–63, 66; Willis 2007: 40–41).

Referring to the words of Rafał Drozdowski, it can be agreed that yarn bombing, like most cultural practices that come into conflict with the dominant culture, repeatedly "conventionalises, fusing with the cultural mainstream" (Drozdowski 2010: 27). Although knitted graffiti creates 'fissures' in the existing reality, provoking the questioning of the obvious, it is often absorbed and turned into a tool for practices that have little to do with the ideas originally guiding its creators. Knits in public spaces not only breaks aesthetic conventions, communicate about social inequality, wars or the pitfalls of consumerism. They also become practices representing those who hold the power. Many authors of knitting graffiti accept invitations to carry out projects commissioned by cultural institutions, city authorities and even corporations. Recently, it has become increasingly difficult to find examples of grassroots craft knitted activism.

However, saying that yarn bombing, like many manifestations of cultures of resistance, reproduces the rules of the existing social order rather than transforming them, is certainly not true. Knitting graffiti as a handicraft practice of beautifying reality (Fitzpatrick 2018: 10) is above all a spectacular form of making one's

presence felt, a way of expressing oneself, a route to self-realisation: either individually or on the basis of relationships forged within the handicraft groups. Urban knitting ‘softens’ the harsh lines of urban landscapes and disrupts the conviction that textile handicrafts are meant to be useful and functional. Knitting objects placed in urban space are not created with their utility and practicality in mind; cultures centred around passions (‘hobby cultures’), including communities of knitters, are capable of transforming the social and emotional geographies of the city. Indeed, knitting in the city reminds us of the richness of the rhythms in which urban life can be actively experienced and transformed, and points to the variety of social relations established in the urban environment (Price 2015: 85).

If we accept that subversion: “as a transformative action concerns interventions into culture and the pictorial, spatial or normative orders that dominate it, but at the same time it reconfigures the culturally shaped (and therefore also involving these orders) identity of the one who undertakes these interventions” (Skórzyńska 2010: 56), yarn bombing can certainly be considered a type of practice undertaken against social perceptions and expectations. It is an action that violates habitual ways of thinking and feeling imposed by culture and makes people capable of criticising, challenging and changing it.

The motivations for engaging in yarn graffiti are also varied. Some artists find the juxtaposition of yarn and graffiti amusing, others see it as a series of acts that, step by step, change the face of street art and of the cities themselves. Finally, some see it as an escape from everyday life. There are also those who declare that they want to liberate the art of knitting from the “long-standing obligation of making useful things”.

Yarn bombing can therefore be political, heart-warming, funny, kitsch and even profitable. Whatever form it takes, however, it has a micropolitical impact, drawing our attention to what we repeatedly fail to see, as the non-obviousness of knitted items placed repeatedly in public places works more effectively than posters and demonstrations.

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Klaudia Bączyk-Lesiuk<sup>1</sup>  
Sylwia Polcyn<sup>2</sup>

## Activity of Facebook Users on Official Profiles of Ministries of Education in Poland and Ukraine in the Context of the School Year 2021/2022

As of 2020, the SARS-CoV-2 virus outbreak has had a huge impact on the functioning of people around the world. Therefore, the purpose of this article is to compare Facebook user activity before the upcoming 2021/2022 school year in Poland and Ukraine in the era of the pandemic. The quantitative and qualitative analysis was performed on comments and reactions of internet users posted under the most engaging posts published on Facebook pages of ministries of education in two selected countries during the study period.

**Keywords:** online education, Facebook, social media, ministry of education, education, Poland, Ukraine, COVID-19

Aktywność użytkowników Facebooka na oficjalnych profilach ministerstw edukacji w Polsce i Ukrainie w kontekście roku szkolnego 2021/2022\*

Od 2020 r. epidemia wirusa SARS-CoV-2 miała ogromny wpływ na funkcjonowanie ludzi na całym świecie. Celem tego artykułu jest porównanie aktywności użytkowników Facebooka przed zbliżającym się rokiem szkolnym 2021/2022 w Polsce i Ukrainie w dobie pandemii. Analizie ilościowej i jakościowej zostały poddane komentarze i reakcje internautów zamieszczone pod najbardziej angażującymi postami w badanym okresie, które opublikowano na profilach ministerstw edukacji w dwóch wybranych krajach na portalu społecznościowym Facebook.

**Słowa kluczowe:** edukacja zdalna, Facebook, media społecznościowe, ministerstwo edukacji, oświata, Polska, Ukraina, COVID-19

<sup>1</sup> Collegium Da Vinci, Faculty of Applied Sciences, klaudia.baczuk-lesiuk@cdv.pl.

<sup>2</sup> Collegium Da Vinci, Faculty of Applied Sciences, sylwia.polcyn@cdv.pl.

\* The article was published in 2022.

## Introduction

As of 2020, the SARS-CoV-2 virus pandemic has had a huge impact on the functioning of people not only in Poland, but around the world. It has undoubtedly led to a global crisis, a paralysis of society, of the economy, of politics. This was caused by the numerous reorganisations in the following spheres of life:

- social (restrictions on access to commerce, services, culture, art, restrictions or prohibition of movement within the immediate area of residence, region or travel outside the country, obligation to cover mouth and nose in closed and/or open spaces, introduction of the obligatory social distance between citizens, quarantine),
- economic (restriction of goods purchased, restriction of the number of people in the premises, closure of workplaces),
- professional (change in the way and form of work, switching to remote mode) (Regulation of the Council of Ministers of 31 March 2020; Szara, Frejtag-Mika 2021; ZPP 2021).

Education also underwent several changes. The introduction of a different, non-traditional (non-stationary) way of conducting the educational process took place in many countries around the world, including Poland and Ukraine, which, due to the authors' research interests, became the subject of the analysis.

The purpose of choosing the subject of the study is primarily due to the growing number of students of Ukrainian nationality in Poland and the continuing lack of sufficient knowledge about curriculum differences applicable in educational systems other than Polish (NIK 2020). The possibility of comparing the activity of users of the official fan pages of the two ministries may allow not only the observation of citizens' attitudes towards government institutions, but also offers the possibility to identify themes manifesting themselves in both countries in the social discussion focused on education. Analysing the aspects of the discourse may also become a stimulus for discussion on the need to identify the needs regarding the methodological guidance for teachers educating both children of Polish origin and those coming from abroad.

### Carrying out education in the coronavirus era in 2019/2020 and 2020/2021

From March 2020 (with temporary interruptions), education in Poland and Ukraine was dominated by the remote system introduced by the ministers of education of the respective countries. It was aimed at reducing the spread of the virus while

enabling children and young people to fulfil their compulsory schooling (Ministerstwo Edukacji i Nauki 2020; 2021; Наказ МОН 2020; Постанова 1 2020; Постанова 2 2020). Both the ministry in Poland and Ukraine (based on the recommendations of the ministers of health) developed recommendations related to the implementation of distance teaching in connection with the prevention, counteraction and eradication of COVID-19 (Raport Ministra Edukacji Narodowej 2020; Лист МОН 1 2020; Лист МОН 2 2020; Лист МОН 3 2021). Similar guidelines for the implementation of pandemic education in Poland were provided by UNICEF Poland (UNICEF Polska 2020).

Despite numerous guidelines from the academia, ministries and other non-profit organisations, as well as materials, guides and courses offered for teachers, various difficulties arose within the remote education in the pandemic era. Based on the report “Remote Education in the Times of Pandemic” of April 2020, we can identify the most common problems:

- teachers’ lack of experience in providing education using modern technologies, problems with the proper handling of programmes and applications,
- lack of equipment and internet connection problems among teachers and students,
- difficulty of conducting remote classes due to time and space issues at home among teachers and students,
- problems with adapting the current core curriculum to remote classes (not all learning content can be delivered through modern technologies) and fear of failing to transfer the basic content (consequences from the school management and the education office),
- difficult contact with other teachers, school management and parents of students,
- additional bureaucracy and reporting of remote teaching,
- problem with the assessment of students’ progress and the way notes are given,
- difficulty of adapting content to the level of knowledge and skills of all students and the lack of opportunities to individualise the teaching process,
- fear of having one’s own image public, classes being recorded and criticism/hate speech from students,
- emotional and psychological problems of teachers and students in the context of remote education (Plebańska et al. 2000: 5).

These problems and constraints in the delivery of education most likely influenced the relatively low public trust in the Minister of Education and Science, Przemysław Czarnek, who, as indicated in the survey carried out by the Public Opinion Research Centre (CBOS) in June 2021, was trusted by only 18% of respondents, while 33% expressed distrust. Moreover, 13% of respondents

could not clearly state their position, 5% indicated the answer “difficult to say/refusal to answer”, while 31% said they did not know who was the current minister (Cybulska 2021: 5).

Similar problems are pointed out by CEDOS, an organisation that studies social issues in Ukraine (NGO Centre for Society Research). In its report “Освіта в умовах пандемії у 2020/2021 році: аналіз проблем і наслідків” (“Education in the 2020/2021 pandemic: an analysis of the issues and implications”)<sup>3</sup> published on 25 August 2021, it highlights, among other things:

- Access to education – the biggest problem was the material situation of the students, as reported by the Head of the Yuri Saenko Centre of Social Expertise at the Institute of Sociology of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine (Гульбаршин Чепурко): “The biggest difficulties in terms of education were related to technical issues. 78% of respondents<sup>4</sup> stated that access of individual students to computer technology is limited, 63% of respondents indicated the lack of modern mobile devices, such as computers and other gadgets, 55% the lack of internet connection” (Чепурко et al. 2021); according to the study: “15% of children lost full access to education with the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic” (CEDOS 2021).
- The quality of education (resulting from the inability to digital, remote and blended teaching), as revealed by the survey: up to “86% of Ukrainian teachers had no significant experience of using online education tools” (CEDOS 2021).
- Lack of sufficient assistance from the state authorities (as many as 15.63% of respondents who were school principals indicated the lack of assistance from the authorities and 31.5% received only partial assistance) (Гриневич et al. 2020).
- Increase in domestic violence affecting children (data from Ла Страда-Україна indicate that “in the whole 2020, there were 100,000 complaints of violence against children and in the first three months of 2021 as many as 41,000 complaints. Incidents of violence were most often reported by girls. 31% of the complaints concerned cases of domestic violence against children. High levels of domestic violence affect the quality and process

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<sup>3</sup> The analytical note was prepared within the framework of the project “European Union for a Sustainable Civil Society in Ukraine”, implemented by ISAR Unity with financial support from the European Union, and is based on a dozen reports on the changes introduced by the Ukrainian government in the organisation of the educational process during the quarantine, as well as the recommendations of international organisations regarding remote education (CEDOS 2021).

<sup>4</sup> The survey was conducted in January–February 2021 in five regions (Vinnytsia, Dnipro, Kherson, Chernihiv, Chernivtsi) with the participation of 150 respondents. The survey was conducted mainly by officials of local communities and local education departments (Чепурко et al. 2021).

of learning, especially for remote learning when all or most family members are at home”) (CEDOS 2020, 2021).

- Problems associated with the digitisation of the country.

The study also highlighted the lack of data on the impact of the pandemic on the mental state of participants in the education process. It was noted that at the national level, no recommendation was made on how to provide psychological support to educational institutions for school students, university students and teachers. Moreover, no guidance was given on how parents could take care of their children’s mental health.

Negative emotions that were accumulating among Polish and Ukrainian society found vent in the virtual space. Public discontent, growing frustration with the difficult economic situation in the countries surveyed, changes and social constraints resulting from the spread of the virus have become the germ of expressing emotions on the internet, especially on the websites of ministries of education. Internet, as a medium, a means of social communication, facilitates the expression of emotions, which are often extreme and communicated in an exposed manner (Goban-Klas 2004; Juszczuk 2011; Levinson 2010). While in the past it used to be anonymity that fostered negative, ‘hater’ statements, nowadays many internet users express negative, often vulgar comments with their first and last names well visible.

As Monika Jaworska points out: “participants in the online conversation (although it is not a face-to-face situation, which, perhaps may be the reason for this phenomenon) say unpleasant, aggressive, slanderous things without considering the feelings of other participants in the discussion. In doing so, they disregard ethical and linguistic norms” (Jaworska 2019: 83). A similar view is formulated by Paweł Trzaskowski, who points out that: “online comments [including these on social media such as Facebook], especially unethical ones, have little to do with communication understood as the act of transmitting information between sender and receiver” (Trzaskowski 2017: 29). Following the author, it can even be concluded that: “the purpose of these texts is also not persuasion, even in a vulgar form, but the externalisation of the negative emotions by the commentator” (Trzaskowski 2017: 29), also in the context of the existing authority and the changes it is implementing.

Media discourse is currently becoming an important voice in the public discussion, where social networks, including Facebook, are proving to be a tool for communicating views. Motivated by the topics raised by the authorities (ministers of education), internet users are part of the modern area of communication mediated by the media with “their specificity: crossing taboos, lack of identity [...], interactivity and visuality (sound, print and image), which are potential or present

to a limited extent at all levels of interpersonal communication” (Kawka 2014: 168), while expressing their (in)satisfaction with the hegemony of authorities.

## Methodological assumptions

The main aim of the study was to compare the activity of Facebook users before the upcoming 2021/2022 school year in Poland and Ukraine. Authors focused on the post-pandemic perspective of recipients in the area of interaction between sender and receiver, but also between receiver and message, context and receiver, or the different components of the message. Specific objectives of the study included:

- studying the activity of Facebook users on the ministries’ pages in the two previous months (fan growth, engagement rates, daily number of interactions, total reactions per day),
- presentation of the subject matter of the posts published and the activity of the page administrator (distribution of the intensity of fan activity related to the content published on the page by day of the week and by hour of publication, efficiency of content publication),
- analysis of ten posts (separately on the Polish and Ukrainian sites) that evoked the highest number of reactions, where reaction is understood as: the number of comments and shares, as well as the response in the form of emoticons, combined with an analysis of these comments according to a specific categorisation key.

The specific objectives of the own research thus formulated led to the emergence of the following research problems: How was Facebook user activity manifested on the ministries’ pages in the two months before the beginning of the 2021/2022 school year? What topics were covered in the published posts and in the activities of the administrators of websites of the ministries of education in Poland and Ukraine? Which post(s) on the official profiles of the ministries in Poland and Ukraine engaged the largest number of internet users?

The material for the content analysis (Lisowska-Magdziarz 2004) was extracted from official fanpages of the ministries of education in Poland (Ministry of Education and Science) and in Ukraine (Міністерство освіти і науки України).

The material was selected deliberately according to the following criteria:

- Place of publication – the material in the form of posts (and reactions to them) and user comments was generated from the official profiles of the ministries of education in Poland and in Ukraine (see Facebook profiles [*Facebook Community Standards* online]) and substantive statements (referring to the official position of the government, while getting rid of the numerous

conspiracy theories and spreading false information that can be observed on other, unofficial profiles dedicated to education) (Hatalaska 2021).

- Time of publication – the study was conducted in September, taking into account the two-month holiday period (similar in both countries): 2 July – 1 September 2021. Furthermore, in order to test the correlation between Facebook user activity and the beginning of the school year, it was decided to extend the research to September 1.
- Topics of the publications – issues that dealt with higher education or were not directly related to education were excluded from the study.

It should be added that the research material quoted in the following section has been anonymised, which involves, among other things, the removal of any personal information including name, profile picture, city names in comments (if they appear) (Baker et al. 2006: 13).

The study was carried out in stages: first, the posts with the highest number of responses were collected with collating key parameters, such as:

- the number of comments and shares, the average lifetime of the post (which shows how long the discussion under the posts was going on),
- Engagement Rate illustrating how engaging the content published on the page is; calculated based on interactions with posts and reactions such as likes, comments, shares, divided by the number of fans on the day the content was published (NapoleonCat 2022),
- Social Interaction Index (SII), additionally taking into account mentions and tagging of the page by other fanpages and by private users in posts with public settings (NapoleonCat 2022).

In this phase, data collection was carried out with the use of NapoleonCat, a social media marketing toolkit.

Subsequently, comments under the indicated posts were analysed in detail, with a breakdown according to their emotional content, where: 1 stands for positive aspects, 2 for neutral aspects and 3 for negative aspects. Authors chose to examine positive messages in terms of praise (also through approval or even adoration), neutral messages as balanced, without value judgement characteristics, often complementing the information contained in the post, and negative messages as explicitly critical (presenting phenomena, events, persons in a negative light).

Table 1. Model categorisation key

Pos.	Topics of posts which provoked the highest number of reactions	Key parameters			Number of comments by emotional content (1, 2, 3)
-	-	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Number of comments</li> <li>• Number of shares</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Average life span of the post</li> <li>• Engagement Rate</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sum of reactions</li> <li>• Total reactions to posts and comments</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 1</li> <li>• 2</li> <li>• 3</li> </ul>

Source: own elaboration.

The results in this form could be used, among other things, to draw general conclusions about the mood before the next school year approaches. In addition, they could provide an impetus for decisions related to the different way ministries run their Facebook pages (e.g. changing the form of publications).

Based on the research material, the number of comments obtained was: on the website of the Polish ministry of education: 1391, on the website of the Ukrainian ministry of education: 1292. They were assessed and assigned to one of three values. When the authors of the present paper gave an equal rating to a particular entry, then it was considered binding. In other situations, the decision was determined by the so-called referee, i.e. an additional assessor who re-examined the cases of non-compliance and determined what value should ultimately be assigned. It should also be added that comments appearing on the website of the Polish ministry of education were judged by a Polish native speaker, while comments on the website of the Ukrainian ministry of education were judged by a Ukrainian native speaker. This enabled the exclusion of doubts in the sphere of non-literal communication and paying attention to the influence of contextual variables (e.g. situations).

## Findings in the Polish context

Polish Ministry of Education and Science promotes its activities on various social media such as: Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, LinkedIn and Instagram.

On Facebook, the number of fans reached 126,600 in July, while on September 1, it was already 127,700. It also seems interesting to note that the largest increase in page likes occurred in the days right before the beginning of the school year



(mainly mid-August), which was probably driven by internet users' desire to access the latest information on the mode and method of running classes (stationary or remote) in the new school year.

Prior to the beginning of the 2020/2021 school year (in the summer holiday period, especially in August), the official social media profiles of the Ministry of Education and Science featured a lot of information on how and in what mode would the school activities be run in the educational institutions from 1 September 2021. This had a major impact on the user engagement translating into quite high average ER and SII rates<sup>5</sup>.

The average ER indicating fan interactions (reactions, comments, shares) during the studied period was 0.358, reaching a maximum value on 16 August 2021 (2,894). Figure 1 also shows that users on the profile of the Ministry of Education and Science were most active on Saturdays, while the least engagement was seen on Tuesdays.



Figure 1. Effectiveness of content published on the profile of the Polish Ministry of Education and Science

Source: (NapoleonCat 2022).

On what concerns the highest engagement per day, the most engaging publication times were 8:00 and 14:00. On the other hand, when analysing the SII index, it should be pointed out that its average value for the period from 2 July to 1 September 2021 was 51.512 with a highest value of 368.70.

<sup>5</sup> The definitions of the indicators referred to are discussed in the methodological assumptions of the own research.

The main determinants of user engagement on the portal were fan reactions, which manifested themselves in the following form: image communication (emoticons) – a total of 21,358, as well as shares – 3,043, and comments – 3,858. In addition, only one mention about the profile on other users' pages was observed, while no fan posts were noted (Fig. 2).

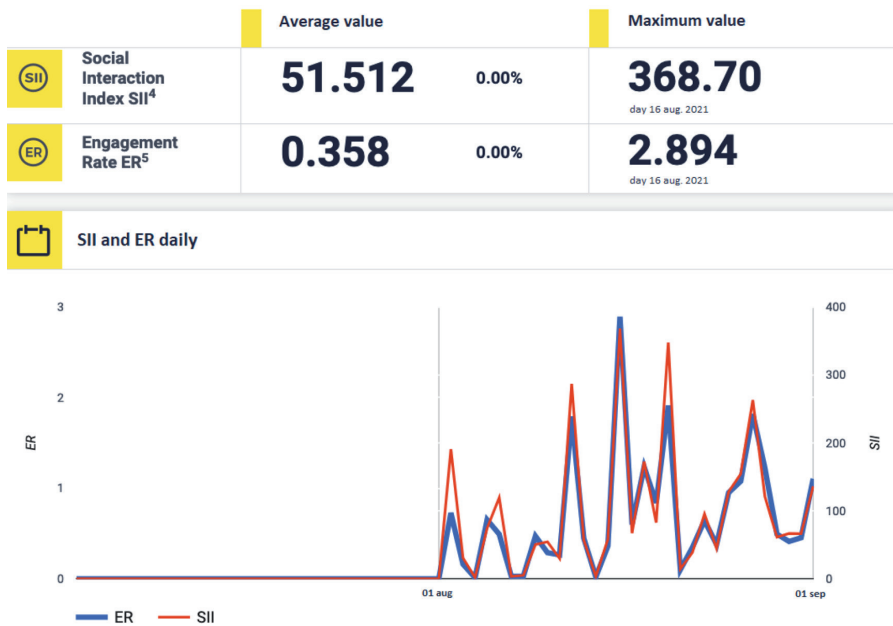


Figure 2. Internet user engagement rates on the profile of the Polish Ministry of Education and Science

Source: (NapoleonCat 2022).

During the period under study, 133 posts were published on the ministry's website, of which the 10 most user engaging ones were selected for analysis within the own research. The content of the posts mainly concerned regulations introducing changes to the core curriculum, including changes to the compulsory reading list, introduction of an extended core curriculum in the history of dance for the four-year secondary schools and five-year technical schools – the change will enter into force on 1 September 2023, as well as the conditions and manner of implementation of the subject “preparation for life in the family” – the change is effective from 1 September 2021 (1), and finally the regulation introducing stationary classes on the pre-pandemic basis for school and university students from 1 September 2021 (3).

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Moreover, the content of the posts covered issues such as: the restoration of teacher authority among children and parents, as well as teacher pay rises (2), directional changes in the professional status of teachers (4); the minister's pilot programme Discover Poland (6, 8), issues related to the organisation of vaccinations in schools, including: tasks for the school principal, cooperation with the vaccination centre and issues of parental presence during the vaccination of children (7); preparations and guidelines for the return of pupils to stationary classes from September 1 (5, 9, 10). The published posts included text (10/10) and basic multimedia: photos (4, 8, 10), web links (1, 2, 3, 5, 7, 9) and a video (6). Table 2 provides an analysis of the most engaging posts along with key parameters.

Table 2. The most engaging posts along with key parameters on official internet profiles of Polish Ministry of Education and Science

Pos.	Topics of posts which provoked the highest number of reactions	Key parameters			Number of comments by emotional content (1, 2, 3)
		number of comments, number of shares	average life span of the post, Engagement Rate	sum of reactions, total reactions to posts and comments	
1	Regulation concerning, among other things, changes in the school compulsory reading list, addition of a core curriculum in the history of dance, changes in the way in which classes in the subject "preparation for life in the family" are carried out	260 290	1,683 18h 17' 32"	419 1,588	1: 14 2: 93 3: 153
2	Minister's interview with the Polish Press Agency on restoring teacher's authority among children and parents and the announcement pay raises for teachers of several dozen percent	203 35	1,174 23h 12' 12"	353 1,260	1: 2 2: 63 3: 138
3	Regulation concerning stationary classes on the pre-pandemic basis for students and university students from 1 September 2021 #PowrótDoSzkoły (#BackToSchool) #edukacja (#education) #szkoła (#school)	116 365	1,050 21h 31' 18"	421 855	1: 9 2: 40 3: 67
4	Proposals for directional changes in the professional status of teachers concerning, among other things, less bureaucracy, more work with students and increased pay for teachers	134 25	827 6h 26' 35"	440 892	1: 6 2: 35 3: 93

5	Guidelines (set of guidelines and recommendations) of the Ministry of Education and Science, the Ministry of Health and the Chief Sanitary Inspectorate for primary and secondary schools, which will apply from 1 September 2021 for the safe and hygienic organisation of classes in the epidemic conditions in the new school year	83 315	717 19h 32' 57"	146 512	1: 2 2: 28 3: 53
6	Minister Przemysław Czarnek presents at the conference the new pilot project #PoznajPolskę (#DiscoverPoland) #PoznajPolskę #PolskiŁad (#PolishDeal)	155 103	624 22h 39' 49"	271 535	1: 7 2: 48 3: 100
7	Information packet on how to organise vaccinations in schools: tasks for the school principal, cooperation with the vaccination centre and issues of parental presence during the vaccinating of children #szczepimySię #szczepienie (#lets vaccinate #vaccination)	116 115	624 19h 25' 34"	130 563	1: 5 2: 34 3: 77
8	Information on the call for applications for the new project of Minister Przemysław Czarnek #PoznajPolskę (#DiscoverPoland) #PoznajPolskę #PolskiŁad (#PolishDeal)	113 141	591 23h 23' 47"	162 496	1: 11 2: 40 3: 62

Table 2. cont.

Pos.	Topics of posts which provoked the highest number of reactions	Key parameters			Number of comments by emotional content (1, 2, 3)
		number of comments, number of shares	average life span of the post, Engagement Rate	sum of reactions, total reactions to posts and comments	
9	Interview with Minister Przemysław Czarnek in the #SygnalyDnia (#SignalsoftheDay) programme broadcast by Polish Radio 1 on preparations for the return of schools to running stationary classes from September 1 #edukacja (#education) #powrótdoszkoly (#backtoschool)	133 17	490 12h 39' 10"	190 472	1: 5 2: 25 3: 94 4: (spam: 9)
10	Information on preparations for the beginning of the new school year in stationary mode: Ministry of Education and Science together with the Government Strategic Reserve Agency will provide the schools with safety equipment: disinfection stations with temperature measuring function, thermometers, as well as personal protective equipment: masks, gloves, disinfectants	78 86	459 9h 45' 14"	167 421	1: 0 2: 38 3: 40

Source: own elaboration.

The further, second stage of the author's own research involved a qualitative analysis of the content of comments posted on the Facebook page of the Ministry of Education and Science concerning their emotional content. Facebook users' comments were meant to show how internet users perceive the ministry and its representative in the period right before the new school year 2021/2022.

1. This post provoked numerous reactions among the users, with negative comments prevailing. Internet users expressed their dissatisfaction with the new compulsory reading list and pointed out particularly the removal of positions they considered as valuable and the addition of new ones, e.g. written by Pope John Paul II. Furthermore, they expressed their dissatisfaction in the context of adding dance history content to the core curriculum. According to the internet users, it would be more important to add activities that develop students' motor and physic skills, rather than the purely theoretic content. There were also a few voices that approved of the changes proposed by the minister (14). Neutral comments, on the other hand, concerned the explanations of regulatory changes or were responses to comments made by other internet users directly, unrelated to the given topic.
2. The post aroused mostly negative emotions among the internet users, who emphasised that the minister himself had repeatedly undermined the authority of teachers, and also pointed out that authority is not built by top-down guidelines, but it is the role of the teacher to inspire such authority among students and parents through his or her actions. The post also provoked 63 neutral comments on the general role of the teacher and 2 positive ones expressing appreciation for the minister's words.
3. According to the information provided, teaching was to take place on a pre-pandemic basis. Internet users took this information overwhelmingly negatively; they often questioned the justness of allowing students to attend stationary classes or even ridiculing its duration. Many internet users claimed that the stationary classes would not be valid for more than three weeks, after which, in their opinion, schools will return to remote teaching. Only nine internet users approved the minister's proposal, while 40 took a neutral approach to the content provided.
4. The information on the proposal for directional changes to the professional status of teachers triggered a number of reactions among portal users, with negative reactions prevailing. Internet users accused the minister of lying in the context of increasing salaries at the expense of working time. They also referred negatively to the information on the reduction of bureaucracy, ridiculing the minister's proposals. Only six statements indicated support for the minister's words. There were also 35 neutral opinions included in the post, mainly concerning the interpretation of the rules or

having the form of responses to statements made by other users and related to secondary issues.

5. Information on the ministry's guidelines issued in cooperation with the Ministry of Health and the Chief Sanitary Inspectorate for primary and secondary schools effective from 1 September 2021 met with numerous negative comments from the internet users. Users highlighted the lack of opportunities to work with younger age students according to guidelines, the lack of adequate school infrastructure, they also criticised the social distance within the school walls. In addition, they stressed that, as in the last school year, stationary classes would only last a few weeks, after which remote teaching would be reintroduced. Only two statements were positive.
6. Internet users were overwhelmingly negative about the assumptions of the minister's new project Discover Poland. They were particularly unhappy with the amount per student allocated for organising the trips. Their doubts about the success of the project and a possible lack of interest among students were raised by the thematic areas of the sites indicated in the ministerial proposal. In addition, internet users made enquiries about the additional remuneration for teachers-guides on trips and how their working time is accounted for. There was also positive feedback in the comments, praising the minister's idea. Neutral comments appearing in the statements mainly concerned teachers' experiences in the context of organising school trips.
7. Portal users reacted negatively to the minister's idea of organising vaccinations in schools, fearing the effects of vaccination of children and adolescents, citing studies of low mortality from coronavirus in the 0–18 age category. They also had doubts about the way in which vaccination was to be organised on the school premises and the responsibility of teachers and management. Only five comments about the minister's actions were positive. Neutral comments, on the other hand, mainly concerned responses to comments made by others, including in the context of secondary issues.
8. A post about the application deadline for the pilot programme Discover Poland provoked negative reactions from internet users. As with post No. 6, they pointed to a lack of interest on the part of the pupils, a lack of sufficient resources to organise such trips and a lack of clear guidelines for accounting for teachers' time. Only 11 responses from internet users supported the programme proposed by the minister. Statements of a neutral nature were responses in the discussion, often with no particular substance or referring to issues other than the topic addressed in the post.
9. The post included information on the minister's statements about pupils returning to school for stationary classes from 1 September 2021. Internet users again questioned the proposed guidelines, referred to the duties



of the school principals and the possible duration of residential learning. In addition, they expressed indignation about the implementation of remote education and staff shortages in education. Spam, i.e. statements or pictures that do not directly reflect the content, also appeared in the comments.

10. Internet users once again reacted negatively to information about the ministerial preparations for the beginning of the new school year in stationary mode and the transfer of security measures by the Ministry of Education and Science together with Government Strategic Reserve Agency to schools. Portal users also pointed out other shortages of hygiene items in schools and negatively commented on the obligation for children and young people to wear masks on school premises. There were also concerns about vaccination among the youngest segment of the population. A comparable number of opinions were neutral comments which were mainly responses in the discussion.

### Findings of the study in Ukraine

The Ukrainian Ministry of Education and Science has profiles on various social media such as: Facebook, YouTube, Twitter and Telegram.

On Facebook, the number of fans reached 218,600 in July and 218,700 on September 1. Interestingly, the biggest increase in interest in the profile was seen at the beginning of the school year, increasing the number of new fans by 114 users. The reason for this may have been the First Bell (Перший дзвоник) and doubts about the organisation of the new school year.

Despite the holiday period, the ministry's profile showed quite high average SII and ER rates, which in turn translate into user engagement. The average ER value for the period studied was 0.690, reaching a maximum value on 8 July 2021. It can also be noted that internet users were most likely to read content accompanied by a photo, which is a contemporary trend across all social media. Facebook users on the profile of the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine were most active on Thursdays and least active on Sundays (Fig. 3).



Figure 3. Effectiveness of the published content

Source: (NapoleonCat 2022).

The most engaging hours of publication, based on the sum of admin posts published during the hours in question and their average ER, were: 8:00, 14:00 and 16:00. This partly coincides with the findings of research showing that the best days to publish educational content are Tuesdays and Thursdays (at 10:00), while the worst are Sundays (Arens 2021). However, these results are influenced by a number of factors (such as target group, sectoral themes, time zone), which demonstrates the individual nature of the profiles in question. The average SII from 2 July to 1 September 2021 was 297.008, with a highest value of 2,209.21 (Fig. 4).

The 10 most engaging posts (233) were selected from all those published during the period under review. The topics that provoked the biggest number of reactions among users were related to education in grades 1–11 and were most often tagged with the hashtag #ЗагальнаСередняОсвіта (1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 7, 10). Publications on inclusive education (9) and ministerial methodological recommendations (2, 6, 9) also met with numerous reactions. The list of education-related topics covered include also issues related to the beginning of the school year (8) and the fight against fake news (10). The recipients' interest in the minister's statement on the teaching profession and the core mission of education seems interesting (4).



Figure 4. Engagement indicators

Source: (NapoleonCat 2022).

The main determinants of user engagement on the portal were fan reactions, which manifested themselves in the following form: image communication (emoticons) – a total of 51,808, as well as shares – 36,910, and comments – 4,719. However, mentions about the profile on other users' pages and fan posts were not observed (this option is entirely disabled on the ministry's official profile).

In addition, posts referring to finance (5) and food (1) were included. They all consisted of text and basic multimedia (in 8/10 cases this meant photos). There were also two videos in the top 10 (6, 8). The first post (6) was shared as a live report and dealt with changes in the activities of educational institutions in connection with the introduction of the new physical education model ("Новий унський школі – нова фізична культура"). The second video (8) was a recording from the programme Сніданок з 1 + 1, hosting Minister Serhiy Shkarlet (8). In the interview, the minister outlined the plan for the coming school year, taking into account the epidemiological threat and the vaccination rate. The meeting also addressed the topic of education in hybrid mode. The table below illustrates the most engaging posts along with key parameters.

Table 3. The most engaging posts along with key parameters on official internet profiles of the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine

Pos.	Topics of posts which provoked the highest number of reactions	Key parameters			Number of comments by emotional content (1, 2, 3)
		number of comments, number of shares	average life span of the post, Engagement Rate	sum of reactions, total reactions to posts and comments	
1	Explanation (issued jointly with the Ukrainian Ministry of Healthcare) on individual issues of food organisation in the pre-school, general and secondary education in 2021–2022 #ЗагальнаСередняОсвіта #Харчування	97 4,275	2,888 3d 9h 18' 53"	685 1939	1: 0 2: 40 3: 57
2	Approval of methodological recommendations for the assessment of educational results of students in grades 1–4 in general education institutions #ЗагальнаСередняОсвіта	62 2,958	1,974 1d 19h 48' 23"	616 1,294	1: 0 2: 0 3: 62
3	Determining that additional training costs during the pandemic can be funded from what rests of the educational subsidy #Субвенція #ЗагальнаСередняОсвіта	156 1,543	1,966 1d 8h 12' 21"	1,347 2,597	1: 0 2: 38 3: 118
4	Minister's emphasis on the importance of supporting the teaching community #ЗагальнаСередняОсвіта #ВсеукраїнськийШколаОнлайн	201 246	1,956 22h 38' 36"	969 3,829	1: 10 2: 32 4: 159
5	Information on the calculation of the size of the education subsidy for regional and community budgets for 2021	432 499	1,810 5h 7' 0"	617 3,025	1: 0 2: 44 3: 388

6	Discussion on changes in the implementation of physical education in schools #ЗагальнаСередняОсвіта #НоваУкраїнськаШкола	1,192* 297	1,673 2h 1' 45"	637 2,168	1: 12 2: 93 3: 47 4: (spam: 11)
7	Introduction of a new procedure for ordering, producing and receiving primary education certificates #ЗагальнаСередняОсвіта #Цифровізація	61 2,193	1,551 17h 24' 26"	698 1,135	1: 0 2: 9 3: 52
8	Declaration on the operation of the educational institutions regardless of the situation related to the spread of COVID-19 (+ video) #Освіта #Вакцинація	86 1,033	1,272 2d 22h 27' 53"	601 1,660	1: 0 2: 23 3: 63
9	Presentation of methodological recommendations concerning the organisation of education of persons with special educational needs for general education institutions in the 2021/2022 academic year #ІнклюзивнаОсвіта #МетодичніРекомендації	2 2,084	1,151 1d 0h 58' 36"	430 430	1: 0 2: 1 3: 1
10	Disparaging rumours about the cancellation of the educational process appearing on social media #СтопФейк #ЗагальнаСередняОсвіта #Профосвіта #ФаховаПередаючаОсвіта #ВищаОсвіта	36 1,302	1022 1d 4h 42' 39"	734 1,177	1: 0 2: 13 3: 23

\* 163 comments were carefully analysed according to the 'most relevant' display option.

Source: own elaboration.

The second stage of the research analysed the content of the online comments, grouping them by to their emotional content. The statements made by internet users were meant to show the general mood of Ukrainians before the upcoming 2021/2022 school year. A special role was given during the analysis to discussions reminiscent of simultaneous debates, the topics of which differed from the content published on the ministry's profile (Urzędowska 2019: 135).

1. The post concerned the new nutritional standards in educational establishments and health and leisure facilities for children. It raised a number of concerns among participants, most of them concerning the omission of students with special dietary needs and the creation of divisions according to material resources. The discussion repeatedly highlighted the insufficient material resources, the poor quality of the food and the lack of professional training of cooks and kitchen helpers. The number of negative and neutral comments was balanced.
2. All comments on the methodological recommendations were negative, often directly criticising the new regulation, but also mocking or even derisive. Descriptive assessment and the need for individual interviews with each student were particularly refuted. For some users, the new recommendations, as well as the ministry's position, were unclear.
3. The post provoked many negative reactions. Most of them indicated the lack of funds in schools; there were also voices questioning the teaching profession itself. Parents expressed their dissatisfaction with the obligation to finance materials in the facilities and discrimination by teachers/principals. The neutral comments mainly included questions about the library supply.
4. The minister's words evoked extreme emotions, most of them negative. Internet users discussed the role of the teacher, salaries and compulsory vaccination. These themes were treated with the biggest criticism. Some of the statements were sarcastic, some were directly addressed to the minister; in several cases people used GIFs instead of text. Neutral comments were devoid of emotion and presented the situation in the regions concerned, often based on the users' personal experiences. There were some positive comments under the post, but these were heavily criticised by the other users.
5. The dominant theme of the discussion was not directly related to the published post (statements referring to the content presented were most often neutral). One of the users inserted in the comment a video addressing the phenomenon of Ukrainophobia among teachers. This initiated a critical discussion around the promotion of pro-Russian policies and the government's inept performance. Vulgarisms and incitement to aggression

- were also spotted in the statements made by users. This was the only one of the posts surveyed in which hate speech was detected.
6. The discussion that took place concerned the new model for physical education classes in schools. Most commentators were interested in the ministry's actions, either offering support or asking for clarification. The whole was characterised by the substance of the statements and the orderliness of the issues raised. Criticism was most common in the issue related to the general reluctance to change and head teachers. Spam-like comments also appeared under the post, repeated in replies to other users' contributions.
  7. Most internet users expressed their negative attitude towards the introduction of the new certificates, often calling the idea a waste of money or nonsense. There were no positive voices in the discussion; the neutral ones addressed the presentation of the procedures in place and provided a kind of complement to the content of the published post.
  8. The comments appearing under the video were dedicated mainly to vaccination among teachers. Negative voices seemed to stem mostly from the fear of experimentation and the potential introduction of remote education. The statements made by internet users often manifested critical attitude towards the government's actions and pressure on particular social groups. Concern about human rights was also expressed several times. Neutral comments appeared as a response to statements made by other users to clarify their statements and complement them with additional data.
  9. There were only two comments under the post, one was neutral, while the other criticised another regulation that was the source of misinformation among teachers and their assistants.
  10. Most of the comments appearing under the post were addressing the topic of remote education. The lack of involvement of both teachers and students in the process was highlighted. Critical statements concerned also the poor performance of children, repeatedly combined with calling the online education an experiment.

### Summary of study conducted in Poland and Ukraine

A total of 2,683 comments was collected within the study, of which 1,285 in Ukraine and 1,382 in Poland were analysed; the above-mentioned comments were sourced from 10 posts published on the official profiles of the ministries of education, which raised the highest number of reactions. The comments were subdivided according to their emotional content with the following values

assigned: 1 denoting positive aspect, 2 denoting neutral aspect and 3 denoting negative aspect. Moreover, the material examined included 11 spam-like comments in the case of Ukraine and 9 in the case of Poland, which were not taken into account in the analysis. The final results are presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Summary of the number of comments on the websites of the ministries of education in Poland and Ukraine

Total number of comments analysed	Poland	Ukraine
		1,382
Positive aspect	61	22
Neutral aspect	444	293
Negative aspect	877	970

Source: own elaboration.

The number of comments with positive and neutral aspects was higher on the Polish Ministry website than on the analogue Ukrainian website, but the vast majority of reactions among users of both the Ukrainian and the Polish Ministry profiles were negative, thus demonstrating discouragement among citizens towards the government's actions and the introduction of new regulations, which not always bring the desired results. This also indicates the tendency for internet users to post unflattering, often negatively emotive comments signed with their first and last names. The vast majority of reactions in both cases, i.e. users commenting the Ukrainian and Polish ministerial website, were negative, thus showing citizens' discouragement with the government's actions and the introduction of new regulations.

In both Poland and Ukraine, the most controversial topics included issues concerning COVID-19 vaccination and the role of teachers and their professional status (also in a political context). Great excitement was also raised by the topics of continuing remote education in the countries surveyed. Moreover, in Poland, internet users were reluctant about the minister's pilot programme Discover Poland, the changes to the core curriculum, especially to the compulsory reading list, the introduction of a core curriculum for the history of dance, or changes to the implementation of the classes 'preparation for life in the family'. In Ukraine, on the other hand, the ideas of new nutritional standards in educational institutions as well as in health and leisure facilities for children were of particular concern, provoked by the allegedly insufficient financial basis for such reforms.

In both Poland and Ukraine, internet users were largely unhappy with the changes proposed by representatives of the respective ministries and expressed concern in the context of starting the new school year in the era of the COVID-19



pandemic. In both countries, the planned government action was (as indicated by positive user comments) praised (albeit slightly), however, the users repeatedly asked for the information to be more specific (which, in turn, was evidenced by comments of neutral aspect). The thematic convergence of the topics most engaging the internet users is most likely due to the pandemic situation occurring globally.

The emerging reports summarising the implementation of changes in education during the COVID-19 pandemic frequently highlight proposals for changes that could increase the quality of education and are thus worth consideration (CEDOS 2021; Новосад 2021; Human Rights Watch 2021; Gajderowicz, Jakubowski 2020; Plebańska et al. 2020). These recommendations most often focus on several areas, such as the activities of ministries of education, health and safety (here, in particular, with the focus on the mental health of students and teachers), digital and distance learning skills (emphasising the need to integrate the competences needed for remote learning into the educational standards), access to and quality of education.

The most repeated conclusions included the following:

- establish a hotline where restrictions on access to remote education could be reported (CEDOS 2021),
- develop practical solutions for remote education (CEDOS 2021),
- provide equipment and internet access to people in difficult life situation (Gajderowicz, Jakubowski 2020),
- carry out a number of studies monitoring the quality of education at different levels (Новосад 2021),
- identify knowledge gaps among children and young people (Новосад 2021),
- examine the budget to ensure equal access to education for all citizens in accordance with the Constitution (Новосад 2021),
- conduct remote education training among teachers (Plebańska et al. 2020),
- conduct a campaign promoting the return to stationary classes (Human Rights Watch 2021),
- focus on mitigating the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on children and young people who were at risk of exclusion (Human Rights Watch 2021),
- develop policies that take into account the impact of economic, racial and social inequalities on students and schools (Human Rights Watch 2021).

Based on the results of the research, the authors would add a few more recommendations that in the future could ensure a better understanding of the changes being implemented by the authorities, while translating into more positive online comments:

- more detailed explanations of the changes being made,

- providing information on the timetable for the school year in advance,
- answering questions asked by the internet users in the comments, thus taking an active part in media discourse,
- providing precise justification for modifications to the system (in particular for elements entailing an additional cost),
- referring to the scientific research to confirm the credibility of the government representatives.

Due to the specific nature of the own research carried out, it is difficult to find a reference to the results of other authors' research comparing Internet user activity on the official websites of the ministries of education and science in Poland and Ukraine before and during the pandemic. The small sample of research findings presented cannot be generalised to the entire population. However, this analysis reveals important issues and methodological approaches that can be used in the preparation of larger-scale studies on post-pandemic public sentiment (in different countries) as revealed in the social media.

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Karolina Wierel<sup>1</sup>

## The End, Power and the Media: Catastrophic Imagination in Film Discourse. Analysis of the Phenomenon on the Example of Adam McKay's *Don't Look Up*

The article will indicate the catastrophic sources present in the film *Don't Look Up* by Adam McKay. Among the films released at the end of 2021, this title was most often chosen by viewers and widely discussed by critics and in social media. By analysing discourses relating to important social problems, such as the relationship between media and power, problems related to global warming and ecology, as well as anthropocentricity, the non-film narrative sources of *Don't Look Up* will be identified and a cultural-studies interpretation of this popular culture film text will be undertaken. The following concepts will be used for analysis and interpretation: eco-criticism, denialism, the apocalypse of reality, criticism of the West using the methods of source analysis, the perspective of the ecological turn and the critical attitude of the author of the article.

**Keywords:** catastrophe, end of the world, asteroid, media, science, power, Peter Sloterdijk, Adam McKay

Koniec, władza i media: wyobraźnia katastroficzna w dyskursie filmowym.  
Analiza zjawiska na przykładzie filmu *Nie patrz w górę* Adama McKaya\*

Wśród premier filmowych ostatnich miesięcy 2021 r. *Nie patrz w górę* Adama McKaya był tytułem najchętniej wybieranym przez widzów i szeroko dyskutowanym przez krytyków, zyskał również spore zainteresowanie użytkowników mediów społecznościowych. Celem artykułu jest próba wskazania przyczyn popularności tego filmu, który można potraktować jako odzwierciedlenie wyobraźni zbiorowej odbiorców kultury popularnej początków trzeciej dekady XXI w. Przeprowadzona tu analiza dyskursów odnoszących

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<sup>1</sup> University of Białystok, Institute of Cultural Studies, k.wierel@uwb.edu.pl.

\* The article was published in 2022.

się do istotnych problemów społecznych, takich jak: związek mediów i władzy, globalne ocieplenie i ekologia, a także antropocentryczności, pozwala dotrzeć do pozafilmowych źródeł fabularnych *Nie patrz w górę* oraz przedstawić kulturoznawczą interpretację tego filmowego tekstu kultury popularnej. W rozważaniach wykorzystano takie pojęcia, jak: humanistyka ekologiczna, denializm, apokalipsa rzeczywistości, krytyka Zachodu oraz metody analizy źródłowej, perspektywy zwrotu ekologicznego.

**Słowa kluczowe:** katastrofa, koniec świata, asteroida, media, nauka, władza, Peter Sloterdijk, Adam McKay

## Introduction

Images of the end of the world are a constantly recurring theme in cultural texts produced in the first decades of the 21st century. These visions of the 'end' were shaped primarily through the mass media, which reported on successive threats leading to global catastrophes. The dates of the apocalypse were constantly being changed and postponed (Carlin 2021). The expectation of catastrophe was escalated by interpreting natural phenomena (tsunamis, hurricanes, floods, earthquakes), epidemics of unknown diseases (AIDS, AH1N1) or the COVID-19 virus pandemic, which was interpreted as announcements of the imminent end of the world.

From 2019 until today, people all over the world have been living in a state of permanent catastrophe caused by the COVID-19 virus, which has changed the way the whole world functions in many areas: economic, political, social, cultural or educational. This catastrophe of a cosmic (natural) nature fits in with the image of the catastrophe from the film *Don't Look Up* (2021), chosen for analysis in order to illustrate the relations linking the categories of power, end and media in a popular culture text, as I agree with the opinion of the Israeli historian Yuval Noah Harari, who believes that: "a good science-fiction film is worth much more than articles in periodicals such as *Science* and *Nature*" (Harari 2018: 301). Considered as a cultural text, Adam McKay's 2021 film deserves reflection because of its power to influence the collective imagination and its impact on audiences as well as film critics. This film image can also be seen as a dystopian vision of a not so alternative reality, directed to pop culture audiences.

In the context of the reflections undertaken in this study in the third decade of the 21st century, it is worth to recall words of the German philosopher Odo Marquard, who, analysing the reality of the second half of the previous century, stated:

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Whatever our times are supposed to be, they are in any case an epoch of alternating utopias and apocalypses, of enthusiasm for salvation on earth and the certainty of a catastrophe, of anticipation of the imminent arrival, on the one hand, of heaven on earth and, on the other, of hell on earth, and in any case – all too emphatically – of philosophies of progress and philosophies of decline. Why do they both belong to our world? (Marquard 1994: 79)

The cited philosopher points out the essential thought and emotional tendencies of ‘modernity’ in the Western perspective: the split between the desire for the fulfilment of the technical, social and political utopian projects based on the idea of progress confronted with the desire to be ‘natural’, ‘authentic’ and sensitive to the needs of change within the postmodern culture. This ‘rupture’, described by Marquard, is represented in the film by the interrelation of the authorities and the Silicon Valley visionary, Peter Isherwell with a real cosmic threat in the form of an asteroid that will destroy the earthen paradise. The entropic vision of reality can apply to both the plot of McKay’s film and the realities in which its audience operates. In this study, Marquard’s question may help to reflect on the role of the media in shaping public attitudes in an emergency situation and to express public opinion on the role of politicians and scientists in the context of an impending disaster.

In philosophical texts and academic publications, in artistic creation, literature and film, as well as in the media (press, radio, television, internet) of the 1990s, and the first two decades of the present century, a growing sense of insecurity have become noticeable. Since the beginning of our era, the date of the end of the world has been set 148 times, or on average every 13.5 years (Krasecka 2013). In the 19th and 20th centuries, the date of the apocalypse was announced with greater frequency and, thanks to the expansion of the means of mass communication, visions of doom reached a wider audience.

The apocalyptic tone of media information also recurs a century later. News with apocalyptic overtones around the year 2000 seemed to be one of the regular news items of the day, fuelling the interest in visions of the end of the world of both the public and the artists. Nowadays, news stories about the end of the world which are to attract the attention of the public are constantly appearing (Kermode 2010). McKay’s 2021 film seems to confirm the enduring popularity of the motif of ‘the end’, ‘apocalypse’ or ‘catastrophe’ in popular culture, because they have not lost their importance as figures of the collective imagination.

## Media and science

The last decade of the 20th century and the first decade of the 21st century are characterised by an exceptional wealth of visions of the 'end' of history, geography, art, man and the world. Frank Kermode, in his book *The Sense of an Ending*, notes that for people: "the end seems to have lost its naïve inevitability, its shadow still hovers over our narratives; we can speak of it as an immanent phenomenon" (Kermode 2010: 11). The omnipresence of the theme of 'the end' in various cultural texts as well as in news services translates into not treating threat in a realistic and responsible way. Today, the task of determining the date of the end of the world has been undertaken, among others, by mathematician Nafeez Ahmed, working with a team of scientists responsible for creating a computational model called HANDY, which stands for Human and Nature Dynamical.

The HANDY research project is funded by NASA (Ahmed 2014). The main task of the team of scientists drawn from various fields of knowledge is to identify possible causes of the disaster, calculate the most precise date of its occurrence and develop strategies to counteract the destructive factors, which are both human and natural. The research takes into account a number of factors, e.g. historical data on the collapse of past civilisations, as well as the population size of particular social and species groups, access to water, food.

Ahmed pointed out that predictions of the collapse of Western civilisation currently based mainly on capitalism and democracy, should not be disregarded, as figures show that stubborn adherence to the current political and economic direction will inevitably result in the collapse of the Western civilisation. As the mathematician points out, the overexploitation of natural resources, the unequal distribution of wealth and resources, as well as rapidly increasing social stratification on financial grounds could become the main causes of the collapse of the current cultural pattern. Consequently, the factors identified in the form of problems accumulating in many spheres of social life will ultimately lead to disaster. Mathematician leading the scientific group of the HANDY project believes that the fault for impending inexorable catastrophe is attributable to the elites concentrating power and financial resources in their hands.

The degeneration of the Western social elites (consisting of political, religious and artistic circles) is a prominent theme addressed by Adam McKay, director and writer of the 2021 film *Don't Look Up*, who began his career by starring as a comedian on the popular show *Saturday Night Live* (Bauer 2021) and gained a practical understanding of how the media works. Criticism of the way the media operates is not a new theme in the work of this director, who in his previous films such as *Anchorman: The Legend of Ron Burgundy* (2004), *The Big Short* (2015)



or the critically acclaimed and award-winning series *Succession* (2018–) exposes the mechanisms of media corporations and criticises the level of contemporary journalism. The relationships and dependencies of power and the media are the main discourse at the basis of the plot of *Don't Look Up!* (2021).

McKay's *Don't Look Up!* became the most popular film of late 2021 on the Netflix streaming platform not because of its special effects or sophisticated scenario, but because of the themes explored and the selection of actors involved in the project, who, in addition to their work on the sets, are active in many fields of social discourse, including the environmental, feminist and even economic one (Boni 2019; van Diggelen 2012; Lips 2018; Newbold 2020). McKay's cinematic work may owe its popularity to the fact that it fits perfectly with the social mood of the popular culture audience that functions in binary environments: media and non-media, audience seeking answers to a multitude of questions in the fields of politics, economy, sociology or cultural studies and, finally, lost viewers who cease to distinguish between fiction and reality.

This exaggerated, satirical film seems to be a pop-cultural reflection of the notion of the apocalypse of reality (Sloterdijk 2021: 115), which is a philosophical attempt to summarise in a synthetic way the 20th century and the semantic scope of which also extends into the first decades of the 21st century. The German philosopher's concept fits perfectly with the situation depicted in the plot of McKay's film: the inevitable apocalypse to be brought by a speeding comet and the reception of this news in different social circles: journalists, politics, family, friends.

The question that may constantly accompany the viewer is: who would I believe if I were in an analogous situation to the characters in the film: journalists, politicians or scientists? The contemporary recipient of cultural texts lives in several areas that can be called multiverses, and the boundaries of these spaces are blurred, which has been shown in an exaggerated but convincing way by the makers of the film *Don't Look Up!* (2021).

In his latest film, McKay revisits the critique of the media, one of the major issues in the social discourses of the early 21st century. In the analysed work, journalists treat the news of a deadly threat like an interlude between news of celebrity romances, explaining this by the need to convey distressing information in an "easily digestible" form, "because it's healthier that way" (*Don't Look Up!* 2021: 39:24–56). An exasperated young PhD student, Kate Dibiasky, played by Jennifer Lawrence, who has discovered the asteroid hurtling towards Earth, says: "The destruction of the entire planet is not a light, funny news. This is disturbing, even frightening information" (*Don't Look Up!* 2021: 42:12–25).

Her rational assessment of the situation meets disregard, and she is deemed "crazy" by the programme's viewers. Randall Mindy, played by Leonardo DiCaprio, the researcher accompanying Kate, asks the host if their message of mortal danger

has reached the audience. He receives the reply that it “it is done”. “You’ve been great, but the girl [Kate] [...] needs some media training. She fell flat” (*Don’t Look Up!* 2021: 41:26–36).

Another scene with striking meaning takes place after the scientists’ appearance on the TV show, when a group of journalists analyse the reception of the two astronomers in the world of social media. Kate becomes object of mocking memes, while the comments on doctor mainly focus on his sexual attractiveness. He has been named: “the sexiest scientist”, “bed-time prophet”, “A.I.L.F.” (*Don’t Look Up!* 2021: 42:57–43:10).

The subsequent sequence of events in the film deepens the feeling of dismay of the scientists, who are confronted with media analysis. The scientists’ message concerning the impending apocalyptic collision of the asteroid with Earth is not as important as the perception of the characters’ physical appearance. This cinematic motif is quite critical to the recipients of media messages, and thus also the viewers of the film *Don’t Look Up!* itself. One would like to say after the classic author of the theatrical grotesque, Nikolai Gogol: “What are you laughing at? You are laughing at yourselves!” (Gogol 1987: 125), which the director uses in a brilliant manner to build an interpretive path for his work, using irony, cynicism, and grotesque to tell the story of a 21st century American reality reflecting the worst features of journalism and politics.

At the end of the journalistic analysis of the impact of news about the end of the world, the scientist hear that their message was ranked in terms of ‘clickability’ below the weather forecast and traffic news, which is something Kate and Randall find truly striking. Faced with little interest in the report on the catastrophic threat, the editor-in-chief of the New York Herald begins to undermine the credibility of the scientists, discrediting the significance of their discovery. This change of position by the editor is supported by the opinion of the head of NASA, another person whose competences do not match the responsible position, who said that scientists’ information about the apocalyptic threat brought by the asteroid is a stimulated hysteria (*Don’t Look Up!* 2021: 43:51–56). At the end of the meeting the editor states: “We’re closing the topic for now. I wish you a successful end of the world” (*Don’t Look Up!* 2021: 42:57–43:10). This situation reflects the ignorance manifested by the media world against the threat and the journalists’ sense of power over the reality in which words and images are supposed to affect the solution to the impending disaster.

## Science, power and media

The second discourse relevant to the culture of the third decade of the 21st century, present in the plot of McKay's film, concerns the place of science and scientists in the modern world. Who does the viewer of content in the world of mass media consider an authority? What is fake news and what is factual? Why is science to be believed rather than understood?

Frames with photos of the space, animals and plants interspersed with successive film stills distance the viewer from journalists, politicians and scientists who have yet to realise that the man-made world as a system is not superior to the Universe and Nature in the broadest sense. The crisis of human identity is highlighted in McKay's film by the inert communication between people. The multiplication of media worlds intensifies man's quest for omnipotence in the spheres of science, art and religion, which are treated as tools to maintain power, to win the next election.

The director and writer of the film *Don't Look Up!* particularly highlights the inertia of scientists in the face of the world of media and politics. What matters in these cultural spaces is not data, facts or information, but the realm of visual appeal and the way information is presented, as well as the 'clickability' in the sphere of social media. This multiversality of modern man translates into the fact that, ultimately, the humanity in McKay's film will not be saved because it has lost the ability to distinguish between lies and truth, greed and humanism. Man has developed ways of communicating that do not improve at all the quality of dialogue, but rather hinder it, providing only the opportunity to speak, without contributing to the development of the competence to listen and understand the interlocutor's message. At the end of the film Dr Mindy shouts to the cameras in despair: "Please forgive me, but not everything has to be pleasant and sounds nice! What has happened to us? Have we lost the ability to talk to each other? What has gone wrong with us? How to fix this? [...] Our greed will finally kill us" (*Don't Look Up!* 2021: 43:40–44:26).

Ahmed, member of the HANDY science project, states that the histories of other civilisations (Maya, Romans, Guptas, Egyptians) provide evidence that usually, the disasters – unless they are cosmic, meteorological and partly natural phenomena – mostly resulted from the elites failing to respond to symptoms that foretold misfortune, and even more often were caused by a disregard for indications of danger, leading to disaster. Sadly, scientists on the HANDY team have dashed the hopes held by some people in the saving power of modern technology or science. In their view, they will only allow the efficient use of natural resources, but technology requires the exploitation of energy sources, making it a factor degrading

the natural resources and the environment, while the enlightenment model of research removes the possibility of a holistic perspective on the world.

These conclusions are probably shared by the director of *Don't Look Up!*, who chose such a title for his film to illustrate man's omnipotence complex and highlight that Anthropocene will be the last phase of the *Homo sapiens* species presence on planet Earth. As proved by McKay, technology will not be used at all to save people and life on Earth, but will be used to save a select few richest and most influential members of the 'good rich' species (*Don't Look Up!* 2021: 1:43:16), who will be evacuated to another planet. Media representations of the 'end' of the world today are still dominated by a pessimistic and gloomy vision of a man who lost the real possibility of influencing the future of the world and his fate, and the conviction that this atmosphere makes emerge another endist discourse based on the assumption that the end of the world is inevitable.

This view is manifested in the film's plot. Even if some technology that could be used to stop the apocalypse exist, it will not be used because of the government and economic interests, while the well adapted media rhetoric is able to convince voters that the catastrophe is just collective hysteria and there is nothing to worry about, as reflected in President Orlean's slogan, which she shouts herself at her political rallies to her admirers: "Don't look up!"

In the film *Don't Look Up!* the viewer face a combination of multiple disasters. McKay paints a picture of a stupefied society manipulated by politicians, journalists and even academics who have succumbed to 'media training' and are complicit in creating this message, as Dr Mindy did for a time, seduced by the glamour of TV celebrity and showbusiness.

One of the problems of modern science and scientists, which *Don't Look Up!* expose is the too hermetic, incomprehensible and boring language that the scientists use to communicate with the world. Hence the question: can the scientific way of communicating content change, become more simplified, without losing its value? When Mindy, Doctor of Astronomy, explains to the president and other authorities what the danger discovered by his PhD student is all about, we see the exasperation on the faces of his interlocutors, their gestures express boredom and ignorance. We hear: "Speak more clearly!" (*Don't Look Up!* 2021: 18:53–19:03).

The statement by the director of the Office of Interplanetary Defence, a little-known government entity, is more suggestive: "Madam President, this is an object classified in the 'planet killer' category" (*Don't Look Up!* 2021: 19:52–56). This message is secret and fits into the discourse of unreliable fake news. The category of post-truth is nothing new to the president or her advisers, however the academics were not yet aware of it. The entanglement of the media and politics in the omnipotence complex makes the outlook for the future of the human species look less than optimistic. The catastrophe of interpersonal misunderstanding makes the words

of the author of *21 Lessons for the 21st Century* sound like an illustration of the plot of the McKay's film:

People rarely realise their own ignorance because they lock themselves inside something like a reverberation camera with only like-minded friends and self-affirming news feeds. In such an environment, their beliefs are rarely challenged [...]. Academics hope that misconceptions can be eradicated through better education. [...] Such hopes are based on a misunderstanding of how people really think. Most of our views are formed through collective, group thinking rather than through the rationality of individuals towards the group (Harari 2018: 283).

Yuval Noah Harari, in his book *21 Lessons for the 21st Century*, states that for millennia, much of what passes for 'news' and 'facts' in human social networks was actually fiction and therefore 'some fake news remains forever' (Harari 2018: 314).

This may be the reason why people lose the ability to distinguish between truth and lies, as the boundaries between these categories are fluid. This collective fiction produced by various forms of communication means that, in McKay's film, the rationality represented by political opponents and academics in the view of supporters of the president and her political staff becomes a lie promulgated by political enemies of the ruling and working class.

### Capitalism and the comet

In the film *Don't Look Up!* government plans to change the trajectory of an asteroid are abandoned due to the interference of an influential businessman, called a visionary, and, of course, a "platinum donor of the (presidential) campaign". Owner of BASH, he represents many figures from the world of business, but is closest to Elon Musk and his ambition to conquer space with SpaceX. The cinematic figure of Sir Peter Isherwell is a grey eminence in politics and the economy, reflecting the discourse on the relationship between corporations and governments.

We learn from the story of 'the end of the world' filmed by McKay that even the apocalypse can be a commodity. Due to the owner of BASH, it was decided to take advantage of the unique minerals that can be extracted from the asteroid. Influenced the altruistic businessman, the President of the United States, played by Meryl Streep, who is an amalgamation of the worst qualities of American presidents, finds further arguments to convince the government and then the nation that it is right to change decision related to the deadly comet. This change in government policy has polarised society into two groups: those looking down and those looking up.

The antagonistic camps began to wage a media war, organising events under the banner of 'last': concerts, news programmes, social media posts, in which

scientists also played an active part, attempting to get the word out about the deadly threat to people. This film thread resembles the desperate efforts of some scientists creating non-scientific forms of media to reach the audience's consciousness, for example with science-fiction books such as *The Collapse of Western Civilization: A View from the Future* (Oreskes, Conway 2018). Authors of this work, having lost faith in the effectiveness of governments or politicians, direct an alarming message to the audience of popular culture texts, believing that they can be the energy that would save the world from destruction. Climate change caused by the global warming, the ozone hole, migration for water and living space are not fiction, but real problems of people who are not politicians or journalists.

The authors of the essay, who, at the same time, are scientists, describe the future of the Earth around 2090 in the 'twilight age': a time of denial, negation and ignorance. This story is narrated by historians who describe the 21st century as the era of the second 'Dark Ages'. This Neo-medieval reality is to take place in the years 2073–2093 and is divided into the time of the Great Collapse and the dramatic era of Mass Migration. Drawing a dystopian vision of the future, the two researchers outline the reasons for the decline of the Western civilisation, one of which, in their opinion, would be the lack of a real impact of science on the economy:

Although, in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, billions of dollars were spent on climate research, the resulting knowledge had little impact on fundamental economic and technological policies based on maintaining the use of fossil fuels (Oreskes, Conway 2018: 78–79).

McKay's film raises question about the meaning of technological progress, which even in a situation of mortal danger is used to multiply the capital of already wealthy people rather than to solve problems; this shifts the viewer's attention to another issue raised in the film: climate change and the lack of real action in the policies of the richest countries that could be implemented to prevent an imminent catastrophe.

### Denialists rule!

The issue of climate change is another discourse present in McKay's film; the issue of attitude towards this phenomenon, called denialism, is represented in the film by the 'looking down' camp led by the US president and her officials. The term 'denialism' refers to scepticism about the scientific evidence for climate warming and environmental catastrophe. Denialists are not convinced by the researchers and do not acknowledge the scientific evidence of the destructive effects

of human activity the related environmental degradation. Representatives of denialism attribute the negative effects of the exploitation of planet Earth to age-old natural processes. Norwegian researcher of this phenomenon, Per Espen Stoknes (2015), confirms what Dr Mindy shouted into the camera in the film: the existence of denialists is the result of a communication failure between scientists and the rest of the world.

Analysing the problem of ecological stalemate, Ewa Bińczyk claims that the reluctance to take pro-environmental action is caused primarily by psychological issues; she uses for that purpose terms such as ‘denial’ or ‘ecological nihilism’ (Bińczyk 2018: 51). Ignoring scientific data on global warming relies on a narrative conducted in terms of abstract phenomena whose probability of occurrence is highly unrealistic (Rifkin 2019). In the film, this attitude is present in the US president’s speech to Kate Dibiasky and Dr Randall Mindy.

The president was told by astronomers invited to the White House that the force of the impact would be equivalent to the explosion of a billion atomic bombs at Hiroshima. The head of USA then asks the scientists: “Is this information certain?”. Hearing from the researchers that there is no one hundred per cent certainty in science, the president disregards Dr Mindy’s response and authoritatively states that the probability level for the scientists to be right reflects seventy per cent. “We will engage our scientists to deal with this case. No offence, but you’re just some couple” (*Don’t Look Up!* 2021: 23:15–45).

In the dialogue that follows, the president and her advisers begin a political calculation, trying to determine to what extent information about the apocalypse is a threat to the president’s re-election. “How many ‘end of the world’ meetings have we already held? Economic crisis, nuclear threats, killer smog, killer AI, drought, famine, pestilence, alien invasion, overpopulation. ozone nonsense” (*Don’t Look Up!* 2021: 23:15–45). The term ‘ozone nonsense’ was inadvertently uttered by the chief of President Jean Orleans’ political cabinet, Jason, who is also her son. This is a clear allusion to President Donald Trump and the government he appointed who denied the findings of the 21st United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (COP 21) held in Paris in 2015 (Pavone 2018). In the film, the president is unhappy with her son’s statements, which betrayed her denialist views on climate change and exposed an attitude of weariness with the relevant issues of the modern world. Instead of solving these problems, she covers them up, appease or ignore them, which reflects the real attitudes of the leaders of the major world powers, who are also the biggest polluters of the Earth (Meadows et al. 1972).

The president from the film *Don’t Look Up!* perfectly illustrates the attitude described in Stephen Gardiner’s article *A Perfect Moral Storm. The Ethical Tragedy of Climate Change* (2011), in which the author states that the problem of climate destabilisation is denied due to the necessity of changes to be implemented by

the highly developed civilisations – mostly responsible for this climate change – which would put them at a disadvantage and would force them to change in the field of economic wealth distribution and to eradicate poverty in the countries that are polluted in the process of the production of consumer goods. Arguments denying the issue of climate change, as well as other problems provoked by large corporations or companies owned by influential people, are cited. As Bińczyk writes, there is a certain policy of ‘defending products’ or ‘manufacturing doubt and ignorance’, which is implemented with the support of experts, scientific institutes, consultancies, professional PR companies whose job is to invent arguments against the harmfulness of products or solutions (Bińczyk 2018: 198).

The intersecting political, scientific and social discourses on climate change are reflected in the plot of McKay’s film by the division of citizens and audiences into two camps in conflict with each other. The director of *Don’t Look Up!* exposes the mechanisms of this dispute, showing that, at a certain stage, facts and the common good do not count at all and people – hidden behind the screen of dignity, prosperity and community and overwhelmed with greed and pride – are unable to understand what is being communicated to them. This communication blockade can be spotted at every level of society, from the crowd of voters on the street to the offices of the leaders of the world powers. Audiences immersed in worlds created by technology do not perceive real threats because they are too boring, serious, scary. Audiences shaped in this way share the opinions of those who speak with the voice of their fears: do not be afraid, as climate change is invented by the opposition and constructed into the environmental narrative by critics of Anthropocene (Bińczyk 2018: 194).

“We keep our eyes wide closed for what is coming”...

Artistic or scientific creativity in the subsequent years and decades of the 21st century was focused on a critique of previous human achievements with particular focus on the condition of the Western culture and its anthropocentricity. This tendency is particularly highlighted by activities in the field of ecological humanities (Domańska 2013) emerging from the wider field of ecology as a way of describing the world and as the effect of criticising the Western world. The ecological discourse influences and shapes other discourses from the areas of economy, politics, art and mass media.

Ecology in contemporary culture is promoted by the new humanities as an invigorating value of human creativity and a sign of the end of the era of Anthropocene. It is an umbrella term for human initiatives taken to protect what has survived the plundering activities of humans in nature (Bińczyk 2018: 66).



There is no hope for the human species in McKay's film. The wealthy and influential passengers on the spaceship designed by the visionary from BASH represent the ideas of transhumanists working for the evolution of the human species using cutting-edge technology and scientific innovations; these eulogists of progress in many dimensions of human life turn out to be cowards driven by narcissism, who may forget – like President Orleans – taking their children with them, focused on their own sake and comfort. “The good rich” do not take responsibility for their actions, fleeing disaster to another planet. Upon landing, it turns out that, on the new planet, humans are not at all at the top of the ecological hierarchy, which is quickly evidenced by the example of the president devoured by an animal of unknown species. Director and writer of *Don't Look Up!* (2021) emphasises the anthropocentricity of the Earth as a planet and the narrow framework of human perception.

After the closing credits, McKay leaves no illusions: the other group who survived the apocalypse are people like the US president's advisor. The surviving son of a fugitive head of state, Jason, after crawling out from under the rubble of the world, uploads a social media report with a plaintive comment about the disaster and an appeal to “like his post” (*Don't Look Up!* 2021: 2:17'44–49). The director's cynicism makes the persistent viewer even more depressed and seems to justify the question of the meaning of continued human existence. The authors of the film ask all those who hoped that also someone sitting around the table in Dr Mindy's house could be saved: would you want to live in a post-apocalypse world if people like the survived Jason were building it?

Describing the world of visual culture and of man living in the 21st century, shaped by anthropocentrism, Bruno Latour states that despite millennia of epistemological experience in the world of images shaped by society, education, political views or mass media, the modern man, paradoxically, sees no more and knows no more than his predecessor functioning in the pre-literate traditional cultures (Latour 2015: 153). This ‘looking without seeing’ becomes the cause of catastrophe not only in McKay's film, because looking towards the sky, towards the stars and the Universe, expresses an attitude of reflection, but it is also possible to look without seeing.

### Towards the end...

The combination of religious traditions and secularised visions of the end of the world in numerous popular culture texts results in a secularised depiction of the apocalypse constructed to find constancy in the norms that order the world, as well as to criticise the anthropocentricity of the West, which is explicitly depicted

in the film *Don't Look Up!* Unlike religious apocalypse, the secular apocalypse frames catastrophes not only at the level of cosmic phenomenon, but at many other levels of reality including human relations, science, values and nature.

The successive crises announced and described in scientific texts turn out to be ignored, covered up, depreciated, as scientists are neither able to change the opinions of those in power and journalists, nor to realistically influence public sentiments and opinion. Scientific work and its results are not a value that would shape opinions, nor is it a factor that would have a real impact on reality. Bruno Latour emphatically describes the catastrophic anthropocentricity with the metaphor of looking: “We keep our eyes wide closed for what is coming” (Latour 2015: 153).

Premièred in 2021, McKay's film exposes the contemporary social problems of the West, presenting a cynical picture of American and Western society, all the more evocative because it is constructed ‘from the inside’: as a critique of American culture by the Americans themselves. McKay seems to assume that the shock level of his film's audience should be great enough to tear them away from their private virtual islands of happiness on smartphones and computers. Even if the success of the film *Don't Look Up!* is temporary and fleeting, it does not change the fact that the history of culture knows few messages that would have the myth-making potential of depicting the world just before its end.

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VARIA



Kaja Klencka<sup>1</sup>

## New Movements and Old Dilemmas. Analysis of the Institutionalisation Processes in the Fridays For Future Movement in Poland

The aim of this article is to analyse the Fridays For Future movement (FFF) in Poland from the perspective of organizational dilemmas faced by social movements. Referring to the concept of institutionalisation, I describe the tension between the practice of democratic principles and the pursuit of effective political protest present in the FFF movement. Based on in-depth individual interviews with FFF activists, as well as the existing data, I describe the organisational dilemmas faced by FFF in four different fields: standardisation of decision-making procedures within the movement (1), establishing relations with traditional, professional organizations of the ecological movement (2), mobilisation of social support (3), access to policy makers (4).

**Keywords:** climate crisis, institutionalisation, sociology of social movements, Fridays For Future

Nowe ruchy i stare wyzwania. Analiza procesów instytucjonalizacji  
w Młodzieżowym Strajku Klimatycznym\*

Celem artykułu jest analiza Młodzieżowego Strajku Klimatycznego (MSK) z perspektywy dylematów organizacyjnych ruchów społecznych. Odnosząc się do kategorii instytucjonalizacji, pokazuję obecne w MSK napięcie między realizowaniem założeń demokratyczności a dążeniem do efektywnego protestu politycznego. Opieram się na pogłębionych wywiadach indywidualnych z działaczami MSK i analizie danych zastanych, aby opisać dylematy organizacyjne tego ruchu na czterech różnych polach: unormowania struktur decyzyjnych wewnątrz ruchu (1), nawiązywania relacji z tradycyjnymi, sprofesjonalizowanymi

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<sup>1</sup> University of Warsaw, Faculty of Sociology, DELab UW, k.klencka@delab.uw.edu.pl.

\* The article was published in 2022.

organizacjami ruchu ekologicznego (2), mobilizowania poparcia społecznego (3), związków z aktorami polityki instytucjonalnej (4).

**Słowa kluczowe:** kryzys klimatyczny, instytucjonalizacja, socjologia ruchów społecznych, Młodzieżowy Strajk Klimatyczny

## Introduction

The year 2019 was exceptional in terms of the unprecedented scale and coordination of social mobilisation around the climate crisis. The youth protest movement Fridays For Future (FFF), launched with the strikes by Swedish activists in August 2018, gained huge recognition. Young Swede, Greta Thunberg, became the face of the new climate movement, and FFF offshoots rapidly spread to other European countries. The Youth Climate Strike (Młodzieżowy Strajk Klimatyczny, MSK), Polish offshoot of the FFF movement, launched in late 2018, quickly spread to the country's major cities and gained media visibility. In the following months, thousands of young Polish men and women took part in climate strikes.

In 2020, the pandemic halted the rapid growth of the movement, and the reduction in opportunities for street protest prompted MSK to seek new forms of action. These recent events provide an excellent opportunity to reflect on the circumstances surrounding the creation, formation and possible future of MSK. I would like to look at these issues from the perspective of the organisational dilemmas of social movements. Treating organisational structure as a field for negotiating norms and values (Jasper 2015), I will examine the organisational assumptions of MSK, paying particular attention to their impact on the potential effectiveness and sustainability of the movement's activities.

In the present paper, I will discuss selected aspects of the MSK, pointing out how its nature as a youth, informal movement, operating outside the realm of institutional politics, influences the processes of formalisation of norms and organisational structures taking place within it. Keeping the right balance between ensuring the movement's independence and identity and its effectiveness is an ongoing dilemma, which all social movements have to face: I see this tension as an almost defining part of a social movement. In this view, even a grassroots movement such as MSK cannot avoid some degree of formalisation or institutionalisation of norms in order to increase its efficiency. I will be studying this tension in four different fields: standardisation of organisational and decision-making structures within the movement (1), establishing relations with traditional, professional



organizations of the ecological movement (2), mobilisation of social support (3), access to policy makers<sup>2</sup> (4).

## Methodology

The research material includes a review of the literature on the subject, content provided by MSK on its website and the movement's social media profiles, as well as ten individual interviews conducted with the MSK members: high school students and university students (two interviewees from each of five different cities in Poland).

All interviews took place in January–February 2021 and were conducted in the video conference mode due to the ongoing pandemic. Respondents were aged between 16 and 20 years<sup>3</sup> and recruited with the use of the snowball method following contacts obtained through social media. They came from four voivodeship cities, including Warsaw, and one medium-sized city. All respondents joined the MSK between March and October 2019, which is when the movement was formed.

Such a selection of respondents does not allow for a full characterisation of the MSK's activities at the local level, but it does allow for a broader view of the movement as a national organisation from the perspective of those who are familiar with the specifics of their city and the ways in which the local MSK group operates. The majority of respondents have an important role within their local group: they were involved in the establishment of the MSK in their city or stand out with their activity at the local or supra-local level.

## Social movement institutionalisation theory

In the present paper, I draw on the achievements of the resource mobilisation theory, as well as the cultural and identity analyses to see what organisational dilemmas accompany the processes of emergence, formation and eventual formalisation of the MSK movement. I therefore consider the organisation and organisational structure as an important resource of social movements, which is,

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<sup>2</sup> I would like to thank Dr Jakub Bazyli Motrenko for his supervision of my thesis, on which the present article is based, and for his help in preparing the publication, as well as Professor Renata Włoch for her valuable comments leading to the final form of my paper.

<sup>3</sup> In the case of two minors, consent to participate in the study was given by their parents in addition to the subjects themselves, in accordance with the recommendation of the Code of Ethics for Sociologists adopted by the Polish Sociological Association (see *Kodeks etyki socjologa* 2012).

at the same time, a field for negotiating meanings and values, which significantly influences the effectiveness of the movement.

Many researchers, especially representatives of the resource mobilisation theory, attributed the effectiveness of the social movements to the development of structures with a greater degree of formalisation of norms and centralisation of decisions. The resource mobilisation theory analyses the organisational structures of a social movement in the context of the benefits and successes it can obtain or achieve. First formulated in 1977 (McCarthy, Zald 1977), it initiated research into the characteristics of specific social movement organisations, focused in particular on their degree of formalisation and professionalisation (Caniglia, Carmin 2005: 202–203). This perspective focuses on the analysis of the organisational structures and processes taking place within the social movement and the groups that constitute it. Furthermore, it indicates that effective forms of collective action are enabled by the availability of adequate resources to transform initial political discontent into an active social force. Different types of organisation and formalisation allow the mobilisation of different resources and have impact on their effective use.

In classical terms, institutionalisation is understood as a change within the organisation of a social movement leading to internal formalisation and the transformation of the movement into a specialised structure. Institutionalisation represents here the final stage in the development cycle of a social movement (della Porta, Diani 2006: 190) and is a way of adapting to the environment, increasing the likelihood of sustaining continuity of movement during periods of lower mobilisation (Staggenborg 1988: 597–599). Detailing the history of the environmental movement in Poland up to the mid-1990s, Piotr Gliński sees the success of the movement precisely in the structural changes leading to increasing formalisation and professionalisation of activities. This development is necessary if only because of the need for financial resources, thus the need for legal personality, or the need to maintain contacts with the institutional environment, above all with public administration institutions of various levels (Gliński 1996: 333).

However, the formalisation of structures can also bring negative aspects, including the phenomenon of co-optation, when the adoption of formalised or bureaucratic structures within a social movement is associated with a shift towards conservative views and strategies. When movements become institutionalised in the sense that their framework, rhetoric and goals are adopted by mainstream organisations, this can be seen as a kind of the movement's co-optation. On the other hand, it can be a sign of its success in spreading the ideas it promotes (Staggenborg 2013).

It should be noted, of course, that the effectiveness of the social movement's actions can be understood in different ways. Gliński (1996: 29) lists a number of objectives that the movements can pursue. For the purposes of my research, the most important indicators are: the achievement of the movement's directly articulated

goals, ensuring its stability and continuity, the ability to resolve internal divisions, the ability to mobilise public support, and the ability to establish beneficial relations with the movement's environment. Effectiveness depends on the nature of the movement and the goals it wants to achieve, but also on the socio-political context in which it operates.

It should be noted here that analyses in the field of the resource mobilisation theory tend to focus exclusively on the professionalised social movement organisations. This is clearly a limitation, as most social movements are not institutionalised in the sense outlined above: some of them disintegrate or radicalise their goals and forms of action (della Porta, Diani 2006: 191), others consciously reject formal structures. However, Frank den Hond et al. (2015: 291–292) argue that the organisational theory is applicable not only to the analysis of these professionalised entities, but also to movements or initiatives with a loose structure. These researchers propose the use of the category of partial organising (see Ahrne, Brunsson 2011) to analyse the presence of selected elements of formal organisation in a movement, which may change over time and be subject to internal conflicts and tensions (den Hond et al. 2015: 292–293). In this perspective, institutionalisation will therefore not be understood as the final stage of the movement's evolution, in which it takes the form of a professionalised organisation, i.e. a limited entity with formal rules, but as a non-linear process.

Gliński proposes a similar understanding of institutionalisation defined as “not so much the construction of hierarchical organisational structures, stifling any spontaneity in the movement's activities and fostering the processes of its oligarchisation, but rather a dynamic and generally conscious process of structural change in the organisation of the movement” (Gliński 1996: 331–332). In Gliński's view, the constant tension between the degree of institutionalisation and the dynamism and vitality of the movement is the essence of the formal identity of the social movement. There are many patterns to this relationship, and spontaneity does not preclude the existence of formalised structures and vice versa (Gliński 1996: 27–28).

This view is useful for the study of a movement such as MSK, where the values associated with its informal and democratic nature shape its organisational structure. This perspective allows us to look at the movement's organisational structures from the perspective of the tension between the effort to make operations more efficient and the effort to sustain value. It is worth emphasising here that while partial organisation may result from an inability to mobilise sufficient resources, it may also be a conscious choice resulting from ideological or strategic considerations (den Hond et al. 2015: 300).

In the case of a movement such as MSK, both the movement's goals and its organisational structure are determined largely by the values relevant to the movement's very identity. They also directly affect the nature of the relationship with

the institutional environment and the way external resources are sourced. This relationship between values and organisational forms is captured very well by the theory of new social movements. Supporters of this theory point to the relevance of organisational forms, stating that they are themselves a contested terrain because they express and represent the demands and values common to the movement. In this view, organisation is not only an instrumental resource for maximising utility, but also a resource for legitimising the practice of protest, as well as expressing collective identities and goals (Lahusen 1996: 36).

Summarising the different theoretical approaches of classical theories of new social movements formulated since the 1980s, Steven Buechler (1995: 448) states that one of the distinguishing features of such movements is “the combination of ideological bonds and political style”. This means upholding a particular identity or value within the movement and a style of political action that involves distancing oneself from institutionalised politics. New social movements generally operate within a bottom-up, informal organisational structure and adopt anti-hierarchical principles. A structure of this kind strives for the democratic participation of all members in the decision-making process.

Of course, in some respects MSK is far from the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s described by the early theorists of the new social movements. It would be more accurate to consider it as a global movement (Wieviorka 2011: 85), which is characterised primarily by a focus on global challenges not limited to the nation-state framework – in this particular case, the problem of climate change. However, MSK is also characterised by the attitude of distancing itself from institutional politics, which is derived from the tradition of the new social movements, and the appreciation of the value of direct democracy.

### MSK as a new climate movement

MSK is an example of a social movement that came about as a result of spontaneous collective action, inspired by similar activities taking place simultaneously in other European countries. The first MSK strike took place in September 2018 in Warsaw, and the movement quickly spread to other cities as well. In September 2019, demonstrations took place in 68 cities. In March 2019, some 6,700 protesters took part in the largest event in Warsaw; this number reached 12,000 in September (Davies et al. 2020: 187). The emergence of MSK is part of a broader wave of grassroots social mobilisation in favour of the fight against climate change, which began to develop particularly intensively in Poland in 2018.

In 2018, the transnational Extinction Rebellion (XR) movement began operating in Poland and the Camp for Climate (Obóz dla Klimatu) initiative, inspired

by similar actions undertaken in other European countries, including the German Ende Gelände camp, was launched. MSK can be considered as part of a wave of new climate activism in Poland that stands out from the entire environmental movement (Císař 2022: 38–40). The groups mentioned are inspired by or part of transnational activist networks sharing similar values and forms of action. The new movements declare an interest primarily in issues related to the state of the climate, ignoring other environmental struggles and particular environmental concerns. They are demanding systemic solutions – above all the energy transition and a giving up coal – and a profound social change leading to the emergence of a low-carbon society.

MSK is in a sense an ‘imported’ movement, inspired by foreign initiatives rather than the professionalised environmental groups that have been active in Poland for years. The first MSK strikes were organised without relying on the previous organisational structure of the Polish environmental movement. A research team analysing participants in the MSK strikes in Warsaw in March and September 2019 found that the events were mainly attended by minors, with little involvement of members of environmental organisations, the Green party or other supporting institutions (Kocyba et al. 2020: 88, 92).

According to the researchers, this participant structure distinguishes MSK from other FFF events which took place at the same time, where young people were more often accompanied by adults. On the one hand, this testifies to the success of MSK, and the FFF as a whole, in mobilising so many young people, for whom participation in a strike is often their first experience with activism, potentially setting them on a path to further political engagement (de Moor et al. 2021: 621). On the other hand, it may show the weakness of institutional support or the marginality of the topic in the social consciousness of Poles (Kocyba et al. 2020: 92).

MSK describes itself as a grassroots democratic movement, “emphasizing the importance of the full participation of all members involved in the decision-making process” (*Nasze wartości* online). In doing so, it fits with the trend of movements that pay considerable attention to internal democratic practices and the value of horizontalism. This mode of operation, typical of contemporary social and protest movements, involves the presence of horizontal, decentralised structures that function on the principle of direct participation of all individuals in the decision-making process. These structures, along with the resignation from the appointment of formal leaders and the great importance attached to inclusivity, aim to actively reduce inequalities (Berglund, Schmidt 2020: 45).

I will therefore be analysing MSK as a grassroots and informal initiative that, in the course of its development, has taken on organisational characteristics with varying degrees of formalisation. I attach particular importance to the tension between these formalised norms and the ecological and democratic values essential to the identity of MSK as a new climate movement.

## Between efficiency and democracy

The organisational structure of MSK reflects the fact that the movement operates at three different levels: international, national and local. Supralocal projects are undertaken within working groups. These groups are formed to carry out a specific task, often of a long-term nature, and bring together interested individuals from all over Poland. Moreover, activists are active in autonomous local groups usually concentrated in large or medium-sized urban centres. According to the MSK website, the movement is currently active in 57 different localities (Młodzieżowy Strajk Klimatyczny online; at the time of the interviews, there were 66 of them).

Activists emphasise that local groups are characterised by considerable freedom in the choice of the actions they take, as well as the way in which they carry them out. The coherence of these decentralised undertakings is ensured in several different ways. This function is primarily performed by a nationwide communication and information network centred around the Facebook group Młodzieżowy Strajk Klimatyczny – Polska (Youth Climate Strike – Poland, which has 651 members; at the time of publication of the article, MSK had abandoned the use of this group in favour of communication on the Slack platform). Private contacts between activists also play an important role, as do the national meetings, usually organised once a year, to which local groups can send representatives. These meetings provide an opportunity to discuss key issues for the movement; the results of these discussions are made public on the movement's Facebook forum.

This organisational structure underpins the decision-making system of the MSK, the emergence of which provides the clearest example of the occurrence of institutionalisation processes within the movement. MSK is currently making decisions that require the acceptance of the entire movement using a preferential weight system. Each local group casts a separate vote, and its weight depends on the number of people active in a given city. In each group, one person is responsible for informing the other members of the vote. This person presents others with questionnaires with options prepared by a nationwide working group on the basis of previous discussions, and subsequently communicates the decision made within the locality back to the nationwide level. The votes of all the local groups are counted, after which the final decision is made.

However, most of my interviewees were unable to explain in detail the rules according to which this final result is formulated. One activist only mentioned that for various issues there are specific qualified majorities necessary to pass changes. Decisions made this way concern issues such as changes to the principles of the movement operation, e.g. changes to the decision-making system itself, but also the acceptance of funding or cooperation with external organisations,

media or companies. It therefore applies to decisions on the issues of essential aims and values of MSK, as well as on defining the scope of its activities as a movement.

The circumstances of setting up this decision-making system are interesting on their own, because it has not been in place since the beginning of MSK, but was developed and implemented in the first year of the pandemic. The pandemic-induced reduction in the possibilities of the movement's previous modes of action and expression was a significant challenge for MSK. In some cities, the lockdown caused a halt in local activity – the frequency of meetings of local group members decreased, previously planned projects were suspended, and the mental condition of young activists also suffered. The nationwide operations were not affected to such a significant extent: it is worth noting that in this area, works were regularly carried out in the remote mode even before the pandemic.

Although respondents faced numerous difficulties during the pandemic, this time was also an opportunity for MSK to reflect on the internal practices and organisational dynamics of the movement as a whole. For MSK, the pandemic period was a time of revision of the initial, largely spontaneous assumptions that accompanied the formation of the movement in late 2018 and early 2019. Interviewees saw these changes in terms of a natural consequence of MSK's growth, the increase in the number of its members and local groups, and the resulting greater diversity of opinions, which created a demand for a new decision-making system. One activist stated that the main issues and discussions that take place within the movement are precisely on how to make decisions well in such a large group. Interviewees judged the introduction of a standardised voting system as necessary due to the fact that the completely informal nature of the movement did not allow for effective action and conflict resolution.

The decision-making system is thus a field of negotiation between the pursuit of operational efficiency and the preservation of the values that constitute the movement's identity. The most important values declared by MSK include the democratic and full participation of all activists in the decision-making process and the rejection of a vertical hierarchy of members. This is also the rationale behind the aforementioned standardised voting system used by MSK: every member of the movement is supposed to be able to express their voice and influence the decisions that MSK makes as a whole.

In practice, the implementation of these values of democracy and transparency presents several difficulties. The decision-making system used within MSK has specific rules, which all interviewees were able to at least generally approximate. However, the mode of conducting discussions and formulating options that appear in the questionnaires sent to activists is much less standardised and widely known, and consequently non-transparent. Every member of the MSK's nationwide

Facebook group has the opportunity to express their opinion there, yet one activist admitted that he was unsure about how the final decision was ultimately made.

It should also be noted that, while MSK has no formal hierarchy or leader, there are informal positions of authority within it, held by members who have longer experience, extensive networks within and outside the movement, as well as knowledge of both the details of organisational action and the factual aspects involved in setting the movement's very goals. Most of the surveyed activists play just such a role within the movement or their local group. They are people who have been involved in setting up a MSK local group in their city or town, have experience working at local, national and international level, or are active or have been active in the past in other movements or organisations in their cities.

In addition, the preferential weight system adopted by the MSK, which makes the value of a given local group's vote dependent on the average number of people on strike in that city, may lead to the voice of small cities and towns – which are not able to mobilise as many people as larger urban centres – not being fully represented. One respondent from a large city referred to this problem as follows:

The discrepancy isn't that great. In such cities, it certainly depends on how many people are active; a small city or town doesn't necessarily has to have one vote. It also depends on how many people came to the strikes: if there are a lot of them, the city or town has more people, which translates into the number of votes. We know very well that this system isn't perfect. It's very difficult to find a system that works fairly, that would reflect everyone's voice. Yet, this system has allowed – although it hasn't worked for a long time yet – to somehow evaluate how we make decisions.

Several interviewees similarly emphasised that the system has been introduced only recently and is therefore in a kind of testing phase and at the same time stated that it took a lot of time to develop this system and its implementation made the work much easier.

Changes in the organisational structure of MSK show above all the development of information and communication networks, as well as the standardisation of certain procedures, the most important of which is the process of decision-making and conflict resolution within the movement.

### Rise of the youth versus traditional structures

The functioning of the movement and its development opportunities are influenced by the movement's institutional environment and the establishment of favourable relationships with the actors operating in this environment. It is worth it



to examine MSK through the concept of the organisational field (Minkoff, McCarthy 2005: 291), understood as a collection of interest groups – in this case the organisations and initiatives that make up the environmental movement – directed towards similar issues and goals, operating in a single field together with other actors. These actors can include government institutions, sponsoring institutions, scientific institutes, NGOs or the media. In this perspective, MSK is a group operating in the same field with other climate and environmental movement organisations and political institutions, whose actions influence each other. In this section, I will focus on the relationships that MSK establishes with other environmental movement organisations.

As I have already mentioned, MSK refers in its activities primarily to foreign models and other branches of the FFF movement, but does not cut itself off from existing structures of the wider environmental movement in Poland. For example, it cooperates with various organisations affiliated with the Climate Coalition (Koalicja Klimatyczna), which is an alliance of 27 NGOs involved in climate action. Organisations such as Greenpeace provide MSK with expert resources, offering advice and expertise on the practical and legal aspects of public activity through training or private contacts. For some time, Greenpeace also served as a funding body for MSK.

As an informal social movement, MSK has no permanent funding – most of the resources needed to organise strikes are obtained by activists through private contacts or existing local activism networks. Funds are also gathered through fund-raising initiatives organised by local MSK groups for the given strike. In the past activists also benefited from external funding, including from the aforementioned Greenpeace, which involved reimbursing the costs of organising strikes.

However, MSK has since decided to accept no financial support. On the one hand, it stems from a desire to be consistent with its own demands by entering into partnerships only with organisations or companies that represent values that are in line with those of MSK and ensuring that funding sources are fully ecological. On the other hand, in this example we can clearly see the tension between the movement's desire for autonomy and the dependence on institutional actors or other organisations from the climate movement field, as well as the infrastructural support they can provide.

This desire for autonomy may indicate an opportunity for the development of a new climate movement in Poland, which will not be absorbed by traditional professionalised organisations and will represent a new quality in the environmental movement. However, the survival and success of MSK seems uncertain without sufficient infrastructural support to maintain the continuity and effectiveness of the movement reaching beyond the spontaneous phases of mobilisation. Ensuring such continuity is also difficult due to the youthful nature of the movement

and the resulting transient type of participation. This problem is recognised by the respondents themselves:

It seems to me that the membership in the Climate Strike, although it's not any formalised group, that the people who are active are in some way transient, because, basically, among those of us who started the strike, there are only a couple left, because people left to start their studies, or they said they needed a bit of a break or something like that. But then, new members join in. [...] I myself think I'm going to slowly withdraw, because I'm studying and it's a bit different now. I also think everyone has their time and now it's time for the younger ones to act. Maybe someone will start an environmental group for seniors, then I'll join in.

Activists currently active in the movement are usually students in the final grades of primary and high school, sometimes also university students. MSK activities are characterised by a low entry threshold, meaning that members can easily both join and leave the movement, with the new, inexperienced people taking their place. In many cases, MSK activities come to a natural end with the end of high school education, which marks a new stage in the life of young adults and often involves moving to another city. In such a situation, it can be difficult to accumulate experiences within the movement and create a coherent and precise message. On the one hand, this poses a challenge to the continuity of the movement, while on the other hand, it naturally inhibits the professionalisation and institutionalisation processes.

### Mobilising public support

To ensure the sustainability and effectiveness of the movement, in addition to access to specific resources, an appropriate interpretive framework is needed to mobilise new members and ensure public support. Interpretive frameworks are narratives that indicate to audiences “who or what might be the cause of a problem, the relevance or importance of the issue, and what should be done in terms of policy or personal actions” (Nisbet 2011: 361). They are particularly important as MSK seeks to achieve social and political change primarily by influencing public opinion.

Eugene Nulman (2015: 128) distinguishes in this field five possible strategies for achieving political change: disrupting the regular functioning of society through methods of protest or rioting (1); attempting to change public opinion (2); gaining formal political access (3); entering into a legal dispute (4); and exerting pressure on domestic politics through reference to international politics (5). The strategy for influencing public opinion adopted by the MSK involves making the movement's

message convincing to as much of the public as possible, by presenting climate change as an important social problem.

Interpretive frameworks are used by social movements to convincingly justify their claims, which in the case of MSK means presenting climate change as a relevant social problem. In order to achieve that, MSK, similarly to other climate movements, refers in its demands to the institution of science and the authority of the scientific community. It is one of the factors from which MSK draws its credibility and is the basis for making the movement's claims universally relevant.

The second important factor, specific to MSK, is a kind of universalism of its messaging. MSK describes itself as an 'non-party' movement, i.e. not involved in political disputes between different parties. In this context, activists very often invoke the slogan of 'climate beyond divisions', pointing out that the consequences of climate change will affect everyone regardless of political divisions and so the climate crisis cannot be subject to ideological disputes and requires universal commitment regardless of political affiliation:

We often try to talk about it as a thing that is beyond divisions, because a person may not respect me, but it doesn't change the fact that we'll all be affected. Whatever one can say, we're all equal in the face of this issue. We all need to act, to equally feel this kind of responsibility, this duty to demand something from the authorities.

The activists are trying to reach as wide audience as possible and therefore avoid presenting views that could discourage support for the MSK:

We simply want as many people as possible from all backgrounds to take an interest in climate, which is why we don't have specific political or any other views. We don't define ourselves as a right-wing, left-wing or centrist organisation. We want to bring everyone together, so we don't have specific views.

The drive to win over as much support as possible also means that MSK does not have a defined position on economic issues, and for a long time it also did not have a position on the energy source that was supposed to become the basis of the fair energy transition advocated by the movement<sup>4</sup>. Furthermore, MSK does not undertake any open critique of the capitalist system, an issue that is highly controversial within the movement. References to large corporations and industry as addressees of claims or actors responsible for climate change were also very rare in the interviewees' statements.

MSK is also rather limited in its intersectionality. The support given to non-climate movements, such as feminist or LGBT activists, is controversial within

<sup>4</sup> In early 2022, MSK formulated a position on this issue, opting for mix of renewable energy sources and nuclear energy.

the movement, despite the fact that many activists, including the respondents themselves, undertake social activism of this nature. In this respect, MSK diverges from initiatives such as XR or Climate Camp, which openly declare intersectionality. This rule had an exception, when MSK as well as some other pro-climate movements joined in the protests held in December 2020 by the Polish Women's Strike (Ogólnopolski Strajk Kobiet, OSK). Marches under the slogan 'Walk for the Future' were meant to be a short-term alliance related to the European Council summit taking place at the time.

However, MSK's official involvement with the OSK has caused controversy among young activists:

MSK doesn't take action with movements, doesn't take part in actions that involve civil disobedience. All activity should be legal because we're young people. This strike was a good option, but not for MSK, who wants to keep the entire activity legal. This later badly backfired in the media and damaged MSK's image as a movement that is non-partisan, isn't anti-government. This legality is supposed to show that we aren't yet another militant group or political youth organization, so that we don't alienate people from us. You can probably admit yourself that if someone does something illegal, such a person is immediately perceived with mistrust. It's very important for us to de-ideologise the topic of climate so that everyone can feel that it involves them.

MSK stresses that it only takes legal action and does not use more radical methods such as the strategy of civil disobedience. Participation in the action taking place during the lockdown was a deviation from this rule and some respondents felt that it had not been sufficiently discussed. There were also doubts among activists about giving support to a movement that does not address climate change:

I didn't care much about the questionable legality issue, although it's quite important, because of course everything in our PR has to be perfect. The problem was actually that we aligned ourselves with an organisation that, let's be frank, doesn't give a damn about us. What have they done for the climate? Well, nothing. And I'd argue that they shouldn't do anything about it because they're a *women's* strike. And they're fighting for something entirely different.

Other respondents in turn pointed to the benefits of cooperation with OSK, which allowed MSK to reach a larger audience.

Some activists see limiting the field of interest of the MSK solely to climate change issue as the right thing to do, in line with the idea that commitment to only one issue contributes to the uniqueness of the movement and helps to avoid unduly diluting its goals. This position of the movement allows for an openness to people with differing beliefs and a plurality of individual attitudes to be maintained

without the need to definitively resolve controversial issues. MSK thus aims to avoid conflicts both outside and inside the movement. The threat, however, is the low mobilisation potential of the movement related to the lack of demands appealing to strong controversy and social emotions.

Additionally, the young activists emphasise that they do not try to propose their own specific solutions, e.g. in the field of energy transition, because they distance themselves from the role of experts. They instead refer to existing scientific knowledge, understanding their own role as publicising the position of science. Moreover, MSK calls for the adoption of a law by the Polish Parliament that would establish a Climate Council composed of independent experts and scientists. Its task would be to develop a pathway for Poland to achieve climate neutrality by 2040.

Activists thus accumulate a certain amount of expertise that allows them to formulate policy demands and participate in the public debate, while also benefiting from the substantive support of the scientists themselves. However, they avoid professionalisation and give up their own legitimacy to propose solutions. The strength of MSK's message is to be found in the young age of the activists and their authenticity, not in their authority as experts in climate science. However, this approach may be linked to a phenomenon that Oscar Berglund and Daniel Schmidt in their book on the Extinction Rebellion movement call a "solution agnosticism" (Berglund, Schmidt 2020: 67). The authors point out that the citizens' assembly advocated by XR that is supposed to develop binding climate policy solutions within the principles of deliberative democracy, actually limits the debate on these solutions within the movement itself. Activists focus on discussing tactics, actions or media messages, spending surprisingly little time trying to answer the question of what kind of lifestyle and vision of society is needed to deal with the climate crisis (Berglund, Schmidt 2020: 68–69).

Such a phenomenon also occurs in the case of MSK and has important consequences for the operation of the movement, as MSK argues that it lacks the legitimacy to develop climate policy solutions, assigning a significant role in this matter to the state government, as the actor that ought to take actions necessary to respond to climate change.

### Policy makers – towards the state and the city

Recognising the state as the main addressee of MSK's political claims raises the question of the movement's ability to influence key state actors. Regulated access to policy makers is, in some accounts, one of the manifestations of the institutionalisation of the social movement (Thörn, Svenberg 2016: 594–596). As a grassroots protest movement, MSK operates outside the realm

of institutional politics and does not seek political positions or functions. It also lacks regulated channels of access to decision-making spheres in the sense of democratic institutions, such as public consultations that are held with NGOs. This is partly due to the peculiarities of the Polish political context, in which the influence of NGOs on policy-making and administrative decisions is often dismissed by policy-makers as unnecessary (Szulecka, Szulecki 2019: 23).

Still, the state remains the most important actor to which MSK addresses its demands, and the movement's strategy is to focus on the national and local politics and to appeal to politicians at these levels. It is worth noting that this strategy leaves out other potential actors such as international institutions, the fossil fuel industry or major industrial corporations – the latter were very rarely identified by respondents as addressees of demands or actors responsible for climate change.

Some scholars consider this attitude towards the state as a marker of the FFF's particular identity as a new climate movement – Joost de Moor et al. (2021: 622) state that while in previous years climate activism has focused on grassroots forms of protest and taking direct action against the fossil fuel industry, FFF and XR represent a 'return towards the state'. However, the researchers emphasise that this renewed focus on the state should not be attributed to a blind faith in the politicians' ability to act, as very few FFF activists actually believe that politicians can be relied upon to solve the climate crisis. While FFF activists demand that politicians "listen to the science" and "follow the Paris Agreement", they stress that it is the protesters themselves who are forcing decision-makers to act (de Moor et al. 2021: 623).

However, the Polish government remains unambitious in terms of meeting climate policy goals (Wrona, Czyżak 2021: 14–19). The lack of interest of the authorities on this issue is also indicated by the respondents themselves:

We're operating on difficult terrain; we have a government that was ready to veto the climate packages and the EU budget for the next years. Others didn't have to fight for such fundamental things as we did. What sets us apart is the activist field, we have more work to do on mobilising the government, the society. It seems to me that in other EU countries governments are pro-climate and the activists there are mobilising the government to implement solutions faster, while we're still at the stage that we're mobilising the government to develop these solutions at all.

In this situation, the activities of other political actors – cities or regions – are also gaining increasing importance for the climate movement. Listing the challenges of assigning responsibility for climate policy governance to actors at different political levels, Daniel Farber argues for a polycentric approach to governance in the face of climate change. He notes that smaller units of government can be a valuable source of innovation and local knowledge in the process of creating regulations and mitigation or prevention measures, and in the case of adaptation

measures, they are in fact the most appropriate decision-makers (Farber 2011: 487). This trend is expressed, for example, in the form of climate alarms, urban adaptation plans or citizens' climate panels introduced in various cities around the world. This turn to local administration and local activism is not specific to the Polish climate movement alone – the situation is similar in Turkey, where activists also have to face an unfavourable socio-political context (Wiktor-Mach 2021: 31–32).

It is at the local level that some activists see an opportunity to work with public institutions and further develop MSK within autonomous local groups. The problem is the lack of regional demands within MSK, the elaboration of which would be the next step in the development of the movement. Demands tailored to specific regional conditions would make it possible to work with local governments in addition to the civic panels or climate crisis declarations that already exist in some cities. This development is, however, significantly limited by the fact that MSK local groups operate autonomously only in a few cities.

## Conclusions

The current organisational structure of the MSK is the result of the movement's orientation towards democratic and horizontal values as well as deliberate attempts by activists to increase efficiency during the pandemic. These attempts are a manifestation of the institutionalisation processes taking place within the movement, understood as the dynamic creation of formalised structures and standardised processes. The best examples of this are primarily the decision-making system developed during the pandemic and the development of communication networks. The lockdown and the consequent restriction of the possibility of street protest provided an opportunity for young activists to devote time to reflection about the organisational structure of the MSK and in this sense was conducive to the processes of institutionalisation within the movement.

As the MSK grows and the number of its members increases, the tension between upholding the movement's principles and values, such as democratisation, horizontalism and autonomy from external actors, and the pursuit of efficiency becomes increasingly clear. Efficiency, understood here not only as the achievement of the movement's goals – it is worth noting here that the realisation of the movement's direct goal, which is, after all, to change social consciousness, is difficult to be measured – but also as ensuring its duration, the mobilisation of support and favourable relations with the institutional environment.

The challenge for ensuring the continuity of the movement lies in its youthful nature and the transient type of participation associated with it. On the one hand, the young age of the activists may pose a threat to the movement's continuity, but

on the other hand it is a testament to the potential of MSK as a school of activism: a movement that has mobilised young people, including those from small towns, for whom it is often the first experience of activism or social action. The lack of sufficient institutional support to maintain the continuity and effectiveness of the movement beyond the spontaneous phases of mobilisation may also be a challenge to the survival of the MSK. The organisational base in the form of adequate resources and structures is important because, in addition to ensuring the sustainability of protest actions, it also enables certain cognitive practices (Bostrom 2004: 81): primarily the pooling of expertise, the development of interpretive frameworks or the design of political change.

These cognitive practices within the MSK are significantly influenced by the fact that young activists are to a large extent consciously withdrawing from developing climate policy solutions. MSK activists legitimise their general claims by referring to existing scientific knowledge, understanding their role primarily as publicizing the position of science and proposing their own solutions only to a limited extent. In doing so, they avoid raising controversial issues that provoke conflicts both within the movement and in its surroundings.

While the degree of mobilisation of members and participants in the MSK protests is undoubtedly high, it remains a challenge to mobilise wider public support, which is ultimately one of the most important goals of the movement. The strategy of action in accordance with the slogan 'climate beyond divisions' may make it difficult for MSK to propose a positive vision of the future that, in line with the movement's ambitions, would be convincing to a large part of society, while actually challenging the current ways of thinking that contribute to exacerbating climate change. There is not much reason to speak of the movement being co-opted by mainstream organisations, but it is worth pointing out that the case of MSK shows that the formalisation of structures and participation in institutional politics are not the only processes that can lead to more conservative views. The movement's broad inclusivity and the desire to win over as large an audience as possible may therefore be inextricably linked with low mobilising power.

The internal reforms introduced during the pandemic are a step towards ensuring the stability and sustainability of the movement, but they do not eliminate all the problems related to the lack of transparency and conflicts within the it. MSK activists also face the constant challenge of the lack of responsiveness of the Polish state to the demands put forward by climate activists. Faced with the lack of favour from the authorities when it comes to implementing climate policy, it may become increasingly important for the climate movement to work with political actors at the local level. MSK now seems to be in a phase of transition both in terms of organisational dynamics and formulating demands. What



role will MSK play in the future as part of the wider climate and environmental movement remains to be seen.

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