

Climate change coverage on online media sites in Poland

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Introduction

An important, and dynamically growing, portion of climate information worldwide, is now being communicated via online sites. These include the websites of legacy media, new players and niche players. In this paper, we examine the process of dissemination of climate information on online sites in Poland. Specifically, the focus is on the coverage of the 21st Conference of Parties (COP21) of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) held in Paris in December 2015. We analyze how online media in Poland, both general news providers and specialized outlets, conveyed information on the climate summit. Four Polish websites were selected for detailed analysis. First, we give the national context on energy and climate policy in Poland, a large coal-dependent member state of the European Union. Information on the representation of the Polish media at the COP 21 is then given, followed by the results of our research, based on the coding of coverage of COP 21 over a four week period in the autumn of 2015.

Energy and Climate Policy in Poland

Poland is the largest hard coal producer in the European Union,¹ and is one of the nine largest coal producers in the world. In Poland, coal has been mined since the mid-seventeenth century, while the period of highest coal production lasted from the end of the World War II until the 1980s. During this period, the communist government of the Polish People's Republic regarded coal as the backbone of the economy and the foundation of its international trade, which made it possible to gain much needed convertible currencies. The expansion of Polish coal mines and the gradual increase of coal production at that time was of considerable interest to the Soviet Union, the de facto ruler of Eastern Europe. According to an agreement struck in February 1945 in Yalta, the Soviet Union held Poland in its sphere of influence. In the 1970s, the Polish-Soviet friendship was enshrined in the Polish Constitution. Mining received considerable attention during the communist regime and the miners at that time gained considerable privileges not replicated in any other industry in Poland (Kundzewicz, Matczak, 2002; Kundzewicz et al., 2016).

¹ GUS: International Yearbook of Statistics, Warsaw, 2015, <http://stat.gov.pl/obszary-tematyczne/roczniki-statystyczne/roczniki-statystyczne/rocznik-statystyki-miedzynarodowej-2015,10,3.html>

Coal production in Poland peaked in 1979 at nearly 180 million tons. Since then, it has been on a downward trend. In 2015, the Polish Geological Institute estimated remaining coal resources in Poland at 56,220 million tons, and lignite resources at 23,516 million tons. Although in 2013 only 68 million tons were excavated in Poland,² coal has remained a strategic resource. Some 75% of the country's energy is generated from thermal power plants burning coal or lignite (52% and 23%, respectively in 2014).³ It is estimated that coal satisfies approximately 60% of the overall energy requirements of Poland. The development of infrastructure is a consequence of the long-standing dominance of coal in the Polish energy market - an extensive commercial network for coal and a modest (outside major urban centers) network of natural gas distribution. Coal prices are still low and this is one of the main reasons why any withdrawal from coal in businesses and households takes place very slowly.

These facts are clearly visible in the climate policy of consecutive Polish governments. The Polish government signed the 1992 Kyoto Protocol, but mainly because the protocol included a commitment to reduce carbon dioxide emissions by 6% from the level for the base year of 1988. Poland chose, conveniently, the year 1988 instead of 1990 (as did most countries) because Polish CO₂ emissions in 1990 were 20% lower than in 1988, due to an economic crisis related to the systemic transformation and rapid decline of industrial production. Changes in the structure of the economy that occurred after 1991, overhauling the inefficient communist economy, automatically resulted in a reduction of emissions by 33% by 2001. So in fact, the Kyoto Protocol was not a new commitment to reduce atmospheric CO₂ emissions, but rather a great opportunity for Poland to benefit from emissions trading, since the country had a large emission reduction surplus.

In 2012 Poland vetoed the plan of the European Commission, which envisaged a reduction in CO₂ emissions throughout the European Union by 40% until 2030, by 60% until 2040 and by 80% until 2050. In 2013, in parallel with the climate summit (COP19) held in Warsaw, a coal summit was also organized in the same city. This could be regarded as an ironic coincidence, if it were not for the official patronage of Polish authorities for the coal summit and the declarations of the government leader. The then Polish Prime Minister, Donald Tusk (from the center-left party Civic Platform), said: "Coal and lignite, and soon shale gas, will remain for us the most important sources of energy. Each country builds its energy independence as well as industrial independence, based on its own resources of raw materials."

² Polish Geological Institute - State Research Institute, <https://www.pgi.gov.pl/docman-dokumenty-pig-pib/docman/publikacje-2/bilans-zasobow/3845-bilans-zasobow-2015/file.html>

³ Energy Market Agency SA, <http://www.ere.uaw.pl/index.php?dzid=300&did=1875>

Beata Szydło (from the ruling Law and Justice party, PiS), who was appointed to the post of Prime Minister in November 2015, represented Poland at the climate summit, COP 21, held in Paris in December 2015. The official Polish delegation to COP 21 included professors of the AGH University of Science and Technology who lobbied for clean coal technologies developed in Poland. Professor Jan Szyszko, Minister of Environment, praised afforestation as the best way to neutralize the carbon dioxide in Poland. The President of Poland, Dr. Andrzej Duda, declared during the summit that 'decarbonisation' was an anti-state heresy. The Polish government delegation in Paris declared their success by stressing the fact that the word 'decarbonisation' was removed from the final version of the agreement. Based on multi-year observations, a general observation can be made that regardless of the political orientation of the Polish government, Polish politicians may support climate protection, as long as it does not mean any resignation from coal.

Media representation at COP21

Only two journalists from Poland applied for accreditation at the climate conference in Paris. They were Tomasz Ulanowski from *Gazeta Wyborcza*, and Radosław Pietruszka from the Polish Press Agency. Mr. Ulanowski is a science editor at *Gazeta Wyborcza* with a strong interest in the environment, including the climate. He has written numerous articles on climate change. He was also present at previous UN climate conferences and IPCC report launches where he reported for his newspaper. In 2013, Mr. Ulanowski received the first prize in a contest entitled "Journalists for Climate" organized by the Club of Journalists for Environmental Protection ("EKOS") and the German federal foundation *Deutsche Bundesstiftung Umwelt*. Radosław Pietruszka is a photographer for the state organization, Polish Press Agency, specializing mainly in photographing politicians. The departure of the Polish delegation to Paris was the principal justification for his presence in Paris. Before participation in the climate summit in Paris, Mr. Pietruszka also took part in the climate summit in Warsaw in 2013, also focusing on photographing politicians.

The presence of only one reporter and one photographer is clearly a very modest representation of the Polish media at such an important international event. The situation can be interpreted as follows. Firstly, climate change is not a particularly popular topic for most of the media in Poland (Kundzewicz et al., 2016; Painter, 2015a). Moreover, the financial conditions of Polish media are restrictive, as compared to media in other European countries. Hence, the costs of travel and subsistence for a journalist during COP21 were deemed prohibitively high in relation to the expected press material by the vast majority of Polish media executives. Mr. Ulanowski of *Gazeta*

Wyborcza stated in an interview that his publisher is aware of the interest of the readership in articles about climate change. In contrast, Mr. Pietruszka, as a photographer, was not aware of how much information about climate change is of interest to his employer. Mr. Pietruszka also said that in addition to himself and Mr. Ulanowski, there was a group of Polish journalists who arrived in Paris on the government plane, accompanying Mrs. Beata Szydło, the Prime Minister of Poland. However, it was not clear to Mr. Pietruszka to what extent these journalists were interested in the COP. It may well have been that accompanying a government delegation was perceived as an opportunity to have access to up-to-date information on the political events happening in Poland at that time.

Selection of websites

Four online sites in Polish were analyzed for this study. Among the legacy media were the portals *gazeta.pl* and *rp.pl*. *Vice.com/pl* and *naukaoklimacie* can be regarded as representatives of the categories ‘new players’ and a portal niche.

The portal *gazeta.pl* is published by Agora SA as the internet arm of *Gazeta Wyborcza* (literally the ‘Election Newspaper’) - the legendary Polish daily newspaper, which was founded during the political changes in Poland in 1989. Its title recalls the first semi-free elections of 4 June 1989. In 2015, the newspaper had average daily sales of 177,697 copies,⁴ which ranks it in second place among the most widely read newspapers in Poland and in first place among non-tabloids. The most widely read newspaper in Poland is the tabloid *Fact* with a circulation of 307,000.⁵ The internet version of *Gazeta Wyborcza*, *gazeta.pl*, has a readership of 3,423,000 a month,⁶ and also holds third place among information portals. The most popular information service in Poland are *Onet.pl* and *wp.pl*, with an audience of 7,224,000 and 6,210,000, respectively.⁷

Gazeta.pl is quoted on the Warsaw Stock Exchange. Its significant shareholders are three pension funds run by PZU, Nationale Nederlanden and Aegon. Adam Michnik, a well-known advisor to the Independent Self-Governing Trade Union Solidarity SOLIDARNOŚĆ has been the Editor-in-chief of the newspaper since its very beginning. This fact illustrates the stance of publication of the entire Agora group that can be categorised as centre-left. Agora has introduced a system of pay-per-view,

⁴ Press Distribution Control Association, <http://www.teleskop.org.pl/zkdp/>

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Megapanel / PBI for January 2016, <http://www.wirtualnemedial.pl/wiadomosci/internet/megapanel-pbi-gemius>

⁷ Ibid.

whereby one can only access up to ten articles a month for free. Access to each article in excess of ten is available only after having paid a monthly fee. Articles analyzed in this study (except for two) were not covered by the paywall, i.e. they were accessible to everyone, without restrictions. In the opinion of Tomasz Ulanowski, the *Gazeta Wyborcza* is a daily whose approaches to the subject of climate and, in general, texts on science are most the serious in Poland. Mr. Ulanowski believes that articles on climate are valued by editorial staff and readers.

The portal rp.pl, published by Presspublica sp. z o.o., is the internet arm of the newspaper *Rzeczpospolita* (Republic) printed intermittently, and by different publishers, since 1920. Average paid circulation in 2015 was 56,433,⁸ and this ranks it as the seventh most read newspaper in Poland. The portal available at rp.pl was visited by 1,249,230 people in October 2015,⁹ and it is also the seventh most used news service on the Internet. The company Presspublica, the publisher of the portal, belongs wholly to Grzegorz Hajdarowicz, an entrepreneur investing in Poland and Brazil, among others, in real estate. By 2011, the Polish State Treasury was a significant shareholder of the company. Since 2013 Bogusław Chrabota has been the Editor-in-chief of *Rzeczpospolita*. The newspaper has a long national tradition and today it presents mainly centre-right views. The founder of *Rzeczpospolita*, in 1920, was Ignacy Paderewski, a world-class pianist and a politician. Before Poland regained independence in 1918, Mr. Paderewski used the opportunity of public appearances at international concerts to state the Polish case. In Poland, he was a hero of independence (recognized among the champions of liberty in the USA), and in 1919 he became Prime Minister of the government of the newly formed Republic of Poland. There is free access to a part of the content available on the rp.pl site, while another part of the content is available only to paid subscribers. All texts on COP 21 were available for free.

The portal Vice.com/pl is the Polish edition of Vice.com. Most of the articles published there are translations of the content of editions from other countries, but [Vice](http://Vice.com) also employs several journalists in Poland and, on average, it publishes about two articles a day, written especially for the Polish edition. There was only one article on COP21 in the Polish edition, which was a translation of the English text. The largest Polish internet research company Megapanel / PBI does not publish data on visits to Vice.com/pl and this probably means that the service does not have a significant audience in Poland (i.e. it is not within the top 100 Polish web portals). The profile of the Polish version of Vice.com on Facebook has 8,680 fans, and this is not much in comparison to 538,983 and 69,971 fans, respectively, for gazeta.pl and rp.pl.

⁸ Press Distribution Control Association, <http://www.teleskop.org.pl/zkdp/>

⁹ Megapanel / PBI, <http://www.wirtualnemedial.pl/wiadomosci/internet/megapanel-pbi-gemius>

There is no Polish version of BuzzFeed or Huffington Post, so that vice.com/pl was the only representative in the category of 'new players'.

The portal Naukaoklimacie.pl (science about climate) is a non-profit news service that is the most important (and the largest) source of scientific knowledge about climate on the Polish Internet. It was founded and run by Professor Szymon Malinowski. It operates under the aegis of the Foundation of the University of Warsaw. The portal publishes information on climate prepared, in the vast majority, by scientists, so that the frequency of publications is not high (about two texts a week). The portal naukaoklimacie.pl, like vice.com/pl, is not tested by Megapanel / PBI and most likely the size of its audience is below that of vice.com/pl. However, the Facebook profile [naukaoklimacie.pl](https://www.facebook.com/naukaoklimacie.pl) contains 6,160 people who like it. In the category of scientific profiles in Poland this is a very good result.

The Findings

In the period of analysis, 64 articles on climate change were published in the monitored media titles in Poland (see Figure 1). [Naukaoklimacie](http://Naukaoklimacie.pl) published two authored articles. On the portal gazeta.pl, there were 44 articles, of which 35 were agency based and nine were articles produced by their own journalists. Due to the strong representation of material published in *Gazeta Wyborcza*, every second text was coded, arranged according to the date of publication, giving a total of 22 articles coded (see Figure 2). The Polish edition of Vice published one translated article from the American edition of Vice. *Rzeczpospolita* published 17 articles, including two agency based items. Out of the total of 64 published articles, 37 were agency-based reports, while 27 of them had an original character (See Figure 1).

Fig. 1. Distribution of 64 articles on climate change in the monitored web media titles in Poland.

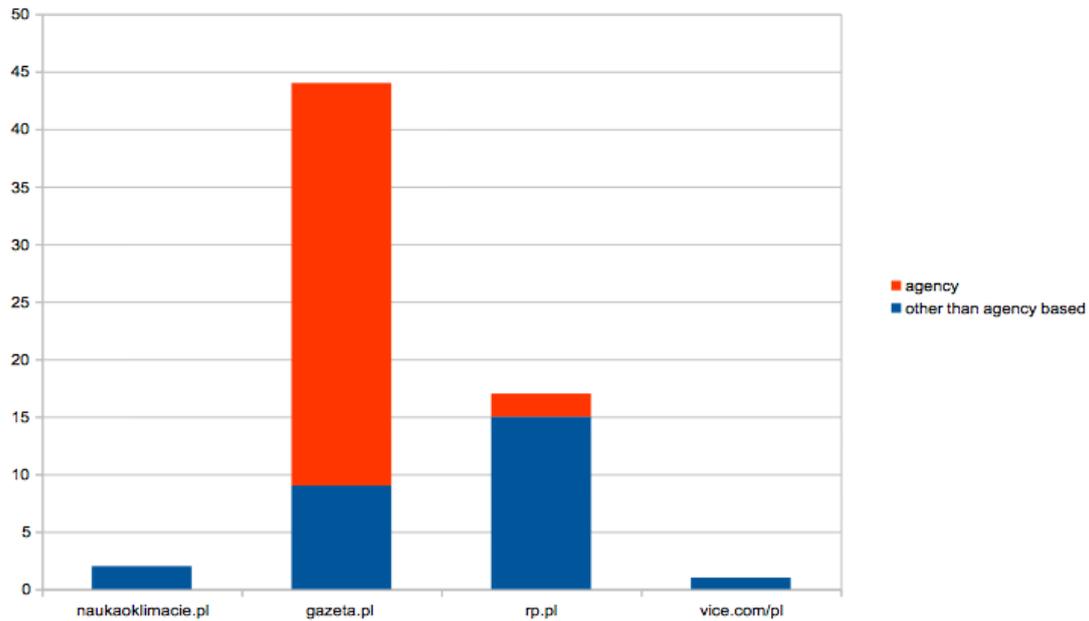
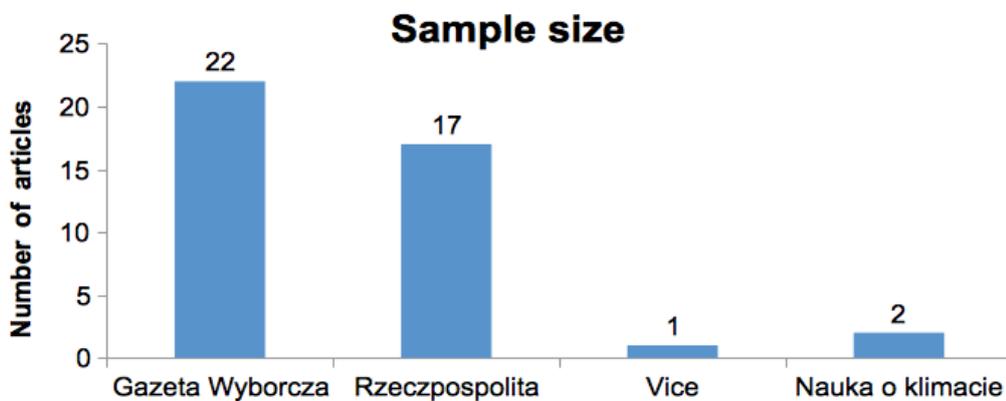


Fig. 2. Number of articles coded by online site

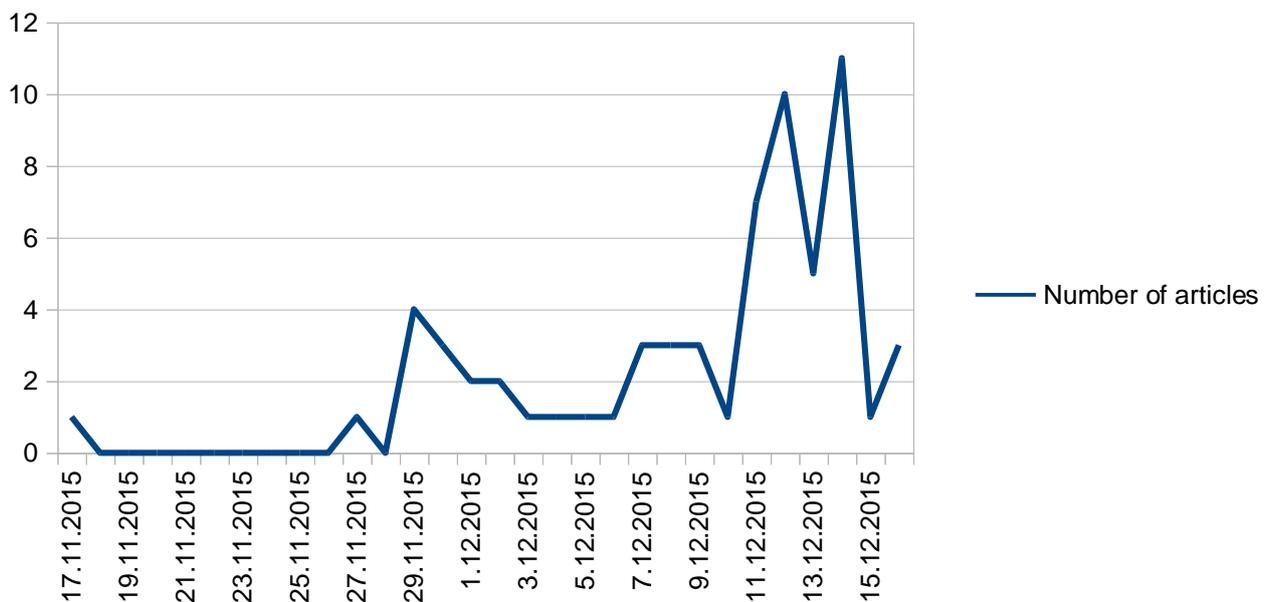


These low numbers should not be surprising in the light of the very low number of accreditations for the Polish media at the COP. It is important to stress that the vast majority of published articles (58 out of 64) were authored by persons who were not accredited. Pictures taken by Mr. Pietruszka from the Polish Press Agency in the vast majority of cases were used to illustrate material documenting the visit of Polish politicians, including the Prime Minister, Mrs. Szydło, rather than illustrating climate issues. During the period of COP 21 in Paris, there were very strong political tensions in Poland between supporters of the ruling Law and Justice (PiS) party and the followers of the social movements of the Committee of Defense of Democracy; many statements of Mrs. Szydło in this period, including those delivered in Paris, did not concern the climate. Agency news from the

COP 21 in Paris were mostly accompanied by photographs related to climate, usually illustrations of the effects of climate change. Less numerous were photographs taken by Mr. Pietruszka in Paris.

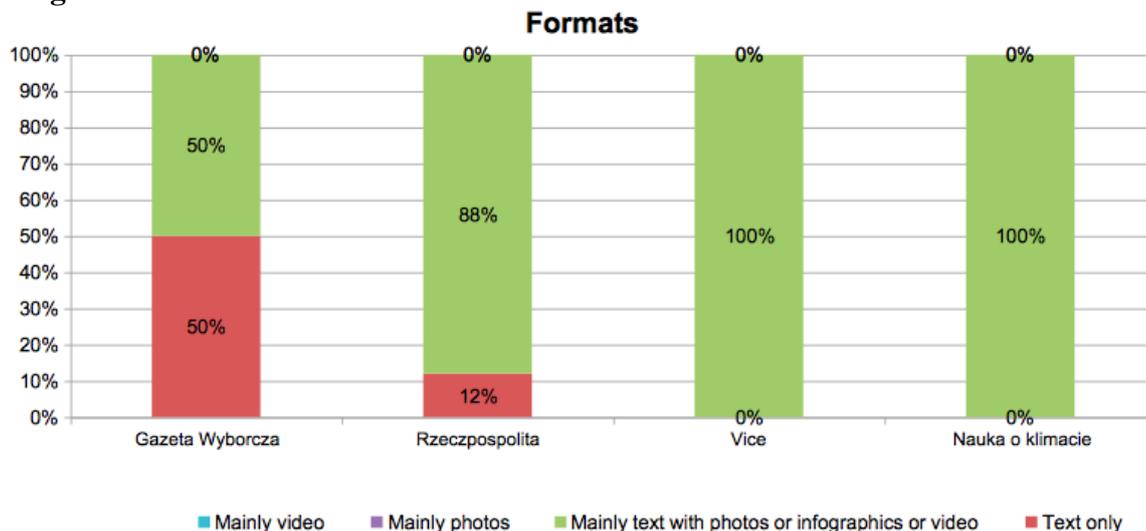
The vast majority of the articles in Poland were published in the final stage of the climate summit (see Figure 3). The majority (61%) of articles about the COP in Paris were published on the main page of the analyzed portals. In other cases, they were aggregated on a collective list of 'messages' or 'dispatches' of the Polish Press Agency. None of the analyzed portals prepared a special index for this event, like 'COP 21' or similar.

Fig. 3. Temporal distribution of articles about the climate summit in the period of analysis.



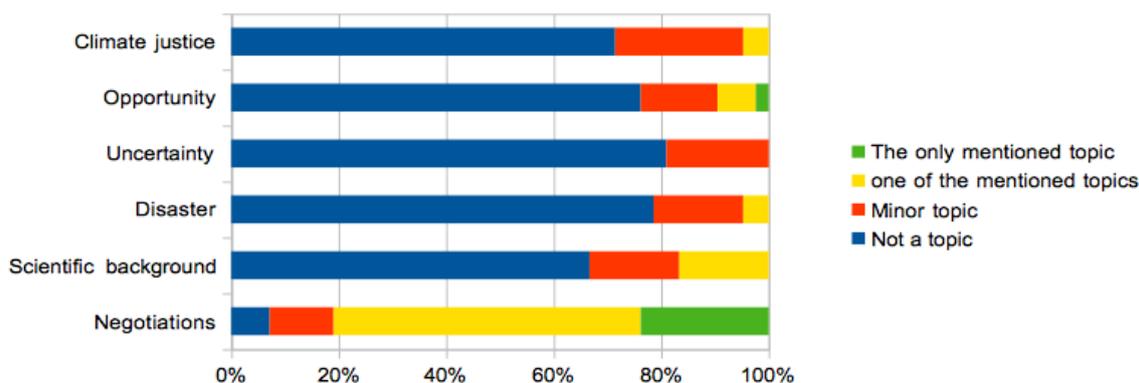
All the analyzed materials in their basic form were text materials (see Figure 4). This agrees with the statement made by the journalist accredited to the COP, Mr. Ulanowski, who said that while preparing the materials he was most interested in text, because the daily newspaper rather than the website is the most important recipient for material. Mr. Pietruszka said that, generally, the Polish Press Agency prepares most texts, while images are less numerous and video materials even less. As many as 29 analyzed articles included a photo or photos, six articles contained video material, and three articles had infographics. None of the articles contained audio material. This format is not popular on Polish websites.

Figure 4 Formats of articles



The way climate change is framed in the media is significant to public understanding. (Painter, 2013, 2015). Our analysis demonstrates that ‘negotiations’ were the leading topic, covered most often in the articles. In 97% of the articles, negotiations were at least a minor theme, and often a major one (see Figure 5). The remaining subjects - climate justice, opportunity, uncertainty, disaster, and scientific background - were covered with a similar frequency; each of these topics was dealt with in about 30% of the articles.

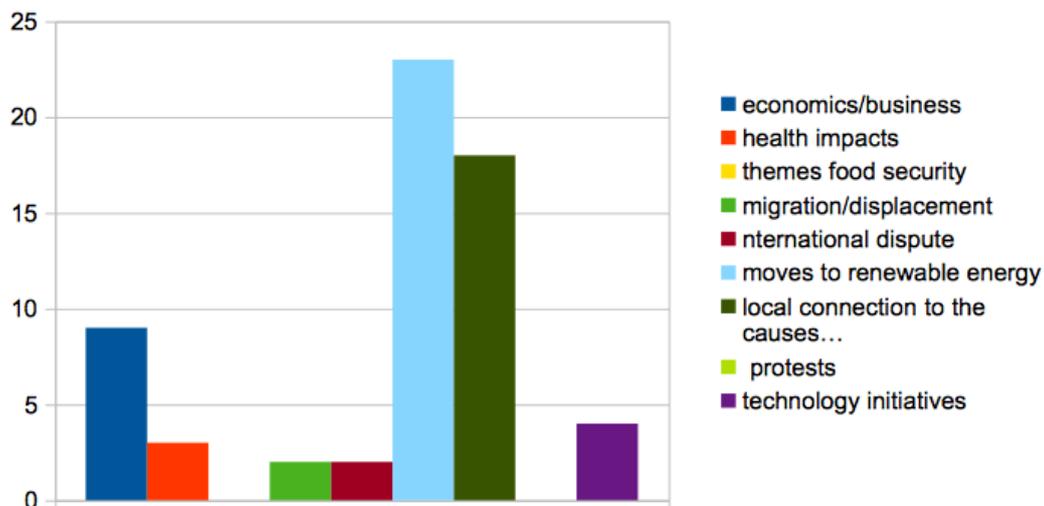
Fig. 5. Frequency of topics covered in the articles



It is unsurprising that negotiations were the main topic of articles from the COP 21, because over nearly two weeks, the meeting included talks, consultations, and discussions, i.e. forms of negotiation. Among the articles published after the announcement of the Paris agreement, there were six articles that rated the agreement as a success. Only one article viewed COP agreement as a failure, while six articles rated the agreement as a mixture of success and failure.

Among other themes to emerge from the analyzed articles, the modernization of the energy sector, in particular regarding renewable energy, was the most common topic, appearing in 23 of 44 articles (See Figure 6). Many articles (18 of 44) referred to local connections to the causes of climate change. None of the articles analyzed contained information about the protests or food security.

Fig. 6. Frequency of minor themes covered in the articles.

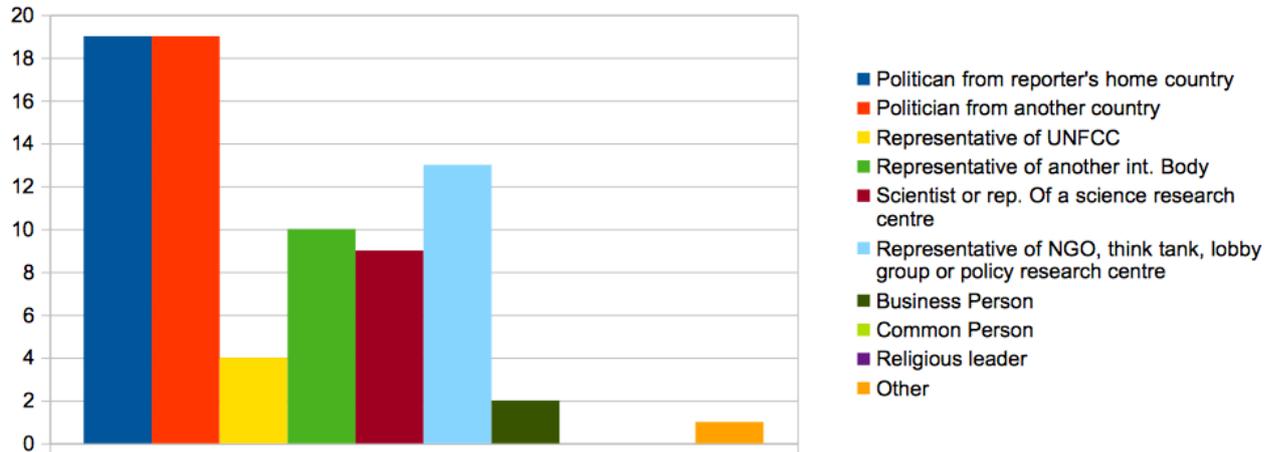


Among the people cited in articles about the COP, politicians appeared most frequently (See Figure 7). Quotations of domestic and foreign politicians were equally frequent (19 in each category). A strong presence was also found for NGO representatives (13 people cited). There were no voices of religious leaders and celebrities.

All the analyzed articles had a serious tone. There were no elements that could be called entertaining or shocking headlines. Mr. Ulanowski, the journalist from *Gazeta Wyborcza*, said that for his newspaper, positive and negative information on climate change are just as interesting. As a serious medium, they are not looking for sensational coverage, nor resort to entertainment when presenting texts. The vast majority of articles (43 of 44) were written by people who can be

regarded as neutral journalists. In one case, the author was a person committed to environmental issues.

Fig. 7. Distribution of background of people cited in the articles



Reactions to published articles were also subject to analysis. The number of readers' comments was counted, as well as the number of “like” / “share” on the Facebook portal (See Figure 8). By far the greatest activity of readers was recorded on December 14, i.e. the date of announcement of the climate agreement. That day, articles about the climate summit received 779 like-marks and 33 comments. In the interviews with Polish journalists accredited to the COP, they both said that they do not follow the reactions to their work after publication. They do not keep track of comments, do not follow the emotions of readers expressed via emoticons, nor examine who shares the article and with what commentary. They do not know well how their publishers use social media channels to popularize their products, or other articles, including those about climate change.

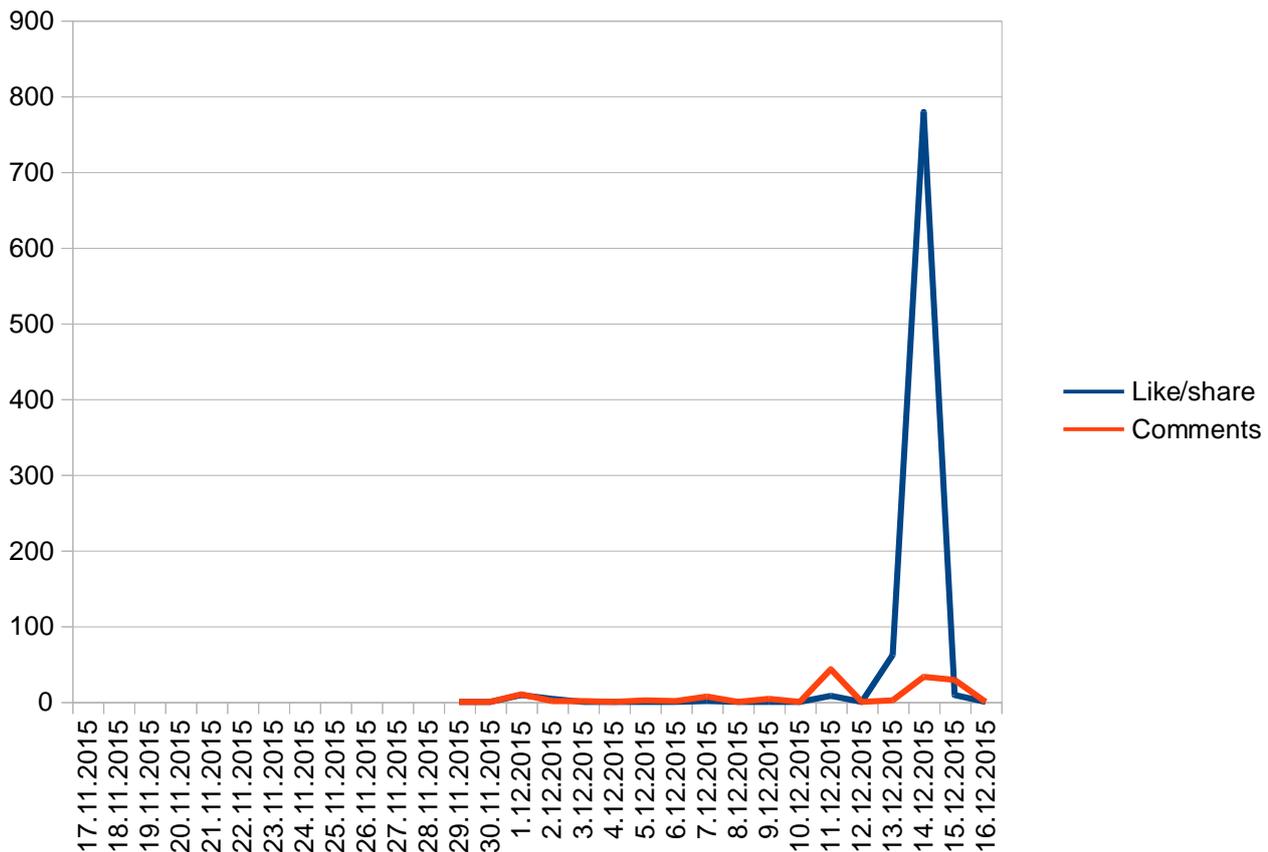


Fig. 8. Temporal distribution of comments and like/share marks on the Facebook

Conclusions

The new media belonging to global players are too weak in Poland to notice significant differences between them and legacy media. There is no doubt that online sites are on the rise. This trend is clearly visible at any spatial scale, from global to national to local, and Poland is no exception. An important, and dynamically growing, portion of climate information is now being generated and conveyed by the web media, including legacy media, new players and niche websites.

The online sites in Poland, both general news providers and specialized outlets, conveyed a major share of the overall information on the recent climate summit. However, in comparison to other countries examined the volume of coverage is very low, in part due to the very low level of Polish journalists accredited for the summit.

Negotiations and their results were the main topic of messages from the COP21. Among the articles published after the announcement of the Paris agreement, 46% rated the agreement as a

success. The same percentage of articles rated the agreement as a mixture of success and failure, while only 8% of articles viewed it as a failure. In summary, the final COP 21 document, which did not formulate specific obligations on countries to decarbonize their energy, was well received in Poland. This is because Polish politicians of varying political leanings only support taking action to mitigate or adapt to climate change as long as they do not have to withdraw from coal.

References

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