

THE USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN A RELIGIOUS COMMUNICATION STRATEGY: A CASE STUDY ON THE EXAMPLE OF POLAND

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Purpose: This discussion focusses on the way in which the Catholic Church in Poland is finding its way, i.e. whether the Church is making its presence felt through the use of the Internet including social media as instruments for communicating with the faithful.

Design/methodology/approach: In the analysis, the research procedure of Robert K. Yin's case study was applied, and it was assumed that the mere fact of having an online presence (website) and maintaining a profile on a given social network has the potential to increase the scope of social influence. The article analyzed social media profiles of Catholic dioceses in Poland.

Findings: It would seem that as social media becomes more popular and widespread, interactivity will become natural (commenting, sharing, posting posts, photos, videos), as it is as natural for the youngest generation of users as television or radio for Generation X. Meanwhile, 12 out of 41 dioceses and archdioceses in Poland do not have social networks at all. In conducting research to answer the research questions posed in this study concerning the extent to which archdioceses and dioceses in Poland use the Internet, including social media, it was found that a relatively high percentage, 93%, have websites and 71% of dioceses maintain social media accounts. This percentage seems quite high, but in an era of social media dominance, the fact that 29% of archdioceses and dioceses do not use this communication channel greatly narrows the scope of social impact, especially for young people, for whom these media are the primary form of communication.

Research limitations/implications: The profiles on TikTok are decidedly missing from the Internet-related communication strategies that are being developed, and it is in the Top 10 used in Poland. In summary, the following conclusion can be drawn, the Catholic Church in Poland is making up for its lack of presence on the Internet, including social media, but as stated, the communication strategies built do not fully reflect the social trends existing at the time.

Originality/value: These issues are relatively poorly researched and seem important from the point of view of shaping social influence, including reaching groups for whom digital media are the only medium they use.

Keywords: social media, religious communication strategy, media technologies, agenda-setting.

Category of the paper: research paper.

1. Introduction

Today's civilisation is based on the circulation of information, in which modern communication technologies, especially social media, play an essential role. The development of Web 2.0 platforms has revolutionised the online functioning of individual users, companies, and institutions, including the NGO sector. The main advantage, but also the goal of Web 2.0 is that the Internet offers users the greatest possible opportunity for interaction and integration.

The development of media technologies and the new communication possibilities associated with them is not only a change at the technical level, but technology has had and continues to have an impact on the shaping of society. The most important changes in media technologies are related to: a new way of representing the world through immersion in a virtual environment; new relationships between user subjects and media technologies; a change in the way time and space are experienced; a move away from traditional distinctions between artificial and the natural, human and technical, real and virtual; the globalisation of media production and culture, new definitions of ownership, the media broadcaster (Lister et al., 2009; Koszembar-Wiklik, 2017; Osika, 2016).

Social media grew out of the technological foundations of Web 2.0, enabling the creation and exchange of content generated by the users themselves, and has become the main communication channel across generations (Kaplan, Haenlein, 2010, p. 61; Guzek, 2015). Social media is currently the fastest growing medium in the world. They were initially created to satisfy the need for interpersonal communication and entertainment, but over time they have taken on many more roles, e.g. in the marketing of companies and organisations. The development of social media has caused significant changes in marketing communication (Buczyńska, 2018, pp. 1-2). Social media communication is the cornerstone of marketing, its strategic nature is emphasised, and it is an important prerequisite for creating the image of any organisation and for interacting with the audience, which is so crucial nowadays (Pluta-Olearnik, 2018).

Therefore, it is important from the point of view of the communication of entities such as Catholic dioceses, to use these communication channels for pastoral action and to transform communication practises from one-way contact to the interactivity typical of social media. As media theorists point out, interactivity, as the essence of social media, means the ability of the user to directly influence and change the images and texts viewed. The audience of new media is thus becoming more of a user than a viewer or reader (Lister et al., 2009, p. 34). What follows is that Internet users are not passive viewers, but show engagement and activity in content creation. These new communication practises and conditions need to be taken into account by all social actors wishing to integrate their agenda into the opinion-making mainstream, it seems that this is particularly important in the case of religious institutions. From this perspective, it is essential to recognise to what extent the Catholic Church in Poland has this communication potential. The first step to establish this potential is to examine what social media communication channels are available to the administrative units of the Catholic

Church in Poland, i.e., archdioceses and dioceses, which is the main research objective of this study. More specifically, the aim is to answer the following research questions:

- Do Catholic dioceses and archdioceses in Poland have a website?
- Do Catholic dioceses and archdioceses in Poland have accounts on social media sites?
- Which social media channels of communication with the faithful are dominant?

In line with the assumptions made earlier, these findings will provide a preliminary indication of the degree to which the Catholic Church in Poland is adapting to communication trends affecting the building of social outreach. It should be emphasised that the initiation of research on the use of social media in the communication practises of the church seems particularly important given the recognised research gap in this regard. For example, the ScienceDirect research database shows only five publications in the last 4 years (2019-2023) when searching for the keywords 'social media', 'religious communication', and 'social media', 'religious communication' 'Catholic Church' is only one.

2. Method and Results of the Study

The extent of an organisation's impact depends on the communication it establishes with the public (Koszembar-Wiklik, 2016). From this point of view, the existence of information about an organisation in the public consciousness and the methods and techniques of communication that make it possible to design its content are crucial (Sulkowski et al., 2022; Osika, 2008). The communication process itself, in turn, is influenced by technology, which determines the way communication occurs. Consequently, when we want to ask about the meaning and influence of the Catholic Church on society, we must take into account the dominant media and their information potential.

In this sense, a year-on-year increase in the role of social media is discernible, according to Digital 2023: Global Overview Report, currently 64.4% of the world's population uses the Internet (Digital 2023..., 2023), while 60% of the total population uses social media, i.e., 4.76 billion people (Digital 2023..., 2023). Many studies show that, for example, in the age group between 13 and 25, social media are the main media they use, in Poland, between 18 and 34, 100% of the population uses the Internet (Research Communication..., 2022).

Among the top 10 most used social media sites in February 2023 were:

- YouTube – 21 855 906 users.
- Facebook – 21 841 650 users.
- Messenger – 20 493 810 users.
- Instagram – 11 245 554 users.
- TikTok – 10 801 674 users (Polskie Badania Internetu, 2023).

The data cited seem to clearly indicate the need to consider the role of social media in all social influence processes, including the church. From this point of view, to what extent does the Catholic Church use these media to reach the public with its content, thus building its agenda.

Within the scope of one article it is difficult to make a broad study on this topic, therefore, it will be in accordance with the title, limited to one country, and it is proposed to make a study based on the case of Poland. The study will include 41 archdioceses and dioceses according to the administrative division of the church in Poland. The data was collected in April 2023, and the deviations are a result of the dynamic nature of the research subject, so the study is not concerned with measurement precision, rather with the diagnosing a trend regarding the communication strategy used. The following categories were used as criteria for the case study: the fact that the archdioceses/dioceses have a website and social media platform run by the archdioceses/diocese including the most popular ones: such as: Facebook, Twitter; YouTube, and others, which will include the remaining social media accounts. The study assumes that the mere fact of having an online presence (website) and maintaining a profile on a particular social network has the potential to increase the scope of social impact, according to the assumptions made earlier. The analysis followed the case study research procedure of Robert K. Yin (Yin, 2003; Stake, 2005; Lisiecka, Kostak-Bochenek, 2009), i.e.:

- the research problem was defined (introduction); a case (Poland) was selected; a data collection protocol was designed (a categorisation table was developed);
- data were collected;
- analysis was performed and conclusions were drawn.

The main research questions are as follows:

- Do Catholic dioceses and archdioceses in Poland have a website?
- Do Catholic dioceses and archdioceses in Poland have accounts on social networking sites?
- Which social networks as channels of communication with the faithful are dominant?

New media are often intuitively understood as media that apply communication via the Internet in opposition to old media such as radio, television, and the press. More precise seems to be the proposal of G. Weiman and H.B. Brosius, who distinguish three formats of division: traditional offline media, traditional online media, and social media (Weiman, Brosius, 2016, p. 28) or the proposal of Paul Levinson, who defines social media as "new new media" (Levinson, 2010). Many researchers of the social media phenomenon attempt to classify it.

A classification distinguishes:

- social media for sharing resources, e.g., YouTube, Slidshare,
- social media for presenting opinions and views, e.g. blogs,
- social media aimed at building and maintaining relationships, for example, Facebook,

- social media geared towards communication and discussion, e.g., online forums, chat rooms,
- co-creation- or collaboration-orientated social media, e.g., Google Docs, Massive Multiplayer Online Game (MMO),
- current affairs Oriented social media, for example, microblogs (Kaznowski, 2016, p. 89).

Due to the constant development of technology, the boundaries between different types of media are blurred. The various media are evolving, expanding the available functions and media (Osika 2018). Regardless of the type of media, it is difficult to question their importance in communication when generations of young people cannot longer imagine life without them. The characteristics of generation Z or generation Y (*Millennials*), but also of generation X, indicate that social media have become an indispensable tool for communication, entertainment, information seeking and self-expression. The development of mobile devices means that people are constantly connected to the Web.

Social media in the Church's communication with the faithful are also essential in terms of information selection and prioritisation (Campbell, 2005). Based on the premise of the media agenda (Agenda Setting), McCombs and Shaw show that the media create reality by focussing public attention on issues of their own choosing and provide audiences with common reference points (McCombs, Shaw, 1972, pp. 176-187; McCombs, 2008; Wieczorek, 2012; Nowak, 2016; Przybysz, 2018). They exert a significant influence on the directions (scope and hierarchy) of thought. This theory can be applied to the Church's communication with the faithful (community members) and the wider environment. It indicates that the absence of the Church's teaching in the media is its absence from people's thinking. The positioning of information is based on subjectivity and is individual to each medium.

In traditional media (TV, press, including online newspapers and radio), there is a visible hierarchy of content. Due to information overload, the media select the information that 'sells' well in the first place. It is also the editors or owners of the media who decide what it will appear at, in what place, and in what order. That is, there is a filtering of information, since the media are subject to the laws of the market, and the economic factor, which determines the profitability of a given medium, is important in the selection of information for publication. It is not only the media that selects information; the increasing number of means of communication also forces the audience to make a selection, which it calls 'hyper-selection' (Goban-Klas, 2011). The multitude of information flowing from the web forces users to select not only the sources, but also the information itself. In the information society, time becomes an economic good that cannot be produced.

In the context of Agenda Setting theory, communication through social media enables organisations to get their information out to audiences without the intermediation of media such as radio, television, or press. It is true that the Church in Poland has its own traditional media - radio, TV, or press, but these reach a relatively narrow audience. Social media allow institutions

(including dioceses) to freely shape content without the risk of it being distorted by the media, to position the content according to the importance of the information, and to allow dialogue with the audience. Furthermore, access to information by the faithful is possible at any time and from any place on Earth. The multimedia nature of social media increases the reach and provides an opportunity to reach those groups that already consume little of traditional media and traditional media formats.

The Internet, social media, and the two-way nature of communication are forcing the Church to change its methods of evangelisation. The new media have not only become a link between the Church and societies around the world, but also influence the image of the Church. Creating the image of the Church (also at the diocesan level) and communicating using social media is of particular importance today, when in Poland the image of the Church and the image of the priest in the media are often presented in an extremely critical way. "Scandals, scandals, and constant crisis situations – this is how the Church is most often portrayed in the electronic media, in the news services watched in the evening by several million viewers in Poland, but also on the Internet portals" (Przybylska, 2018). Often newsrooms about priests and their abuses become generalised reports about the Church as a whole. The media, or at least most journalists, are not interested in reporting positive information about the Church's activities. It is rare to come across positive or neutral information about the Church; the information selected by gatekeepers is usually already filtered, with ready-made negative commentary. In this situation, social media allows the Church's position to be shown from its point of view (see: Guzek, 2015, 2022; Wiesenberg, 2019, Nabożny, 2022).

The need for the diocese to participate in social media also comes from the fact that it has become an essential place for social relationships. A place of virtual meeting of people where one can realise oneself socially, emotionally, and artistically. They can constitute the third place according to the theory of R. Oldenburg's theory. The author points out that there are three basic places where people perform their activities. The first is home, the second is work or school, and the third is the place where people seek entertainment, take a break from work and everyday household activities, and pursue their passions and interests. In traditional society, these places were religious communities, theatres, cafés, interest circles, hairdressing salons, or sports clubs. In the consumer society, discos, nightclubs, cinemas, or shopping centres have become a Third Place (Oldenburg, 1999). In the era of 'liquid modernity', such a Third Place can be social media, which allows people with similar interests to 'meet'. And in this sense, the Church, as traditionally understood, is being replaced by social media.

The ease of access to social media and at the same time the pressure to be online, the 'imperative to be connected' (Zacher, 2015), also have its negative effects. The rapid pace of change means that even web generation is showing fatigue from technology (Osika, 2018). It is becoming increasingly difficult for young people to switch from active to rest mode. This peculiar speed culture can be particularly destructive for the older generations, but also in the online generation there is a problem with defining one's own identity or separating virtual

and real life. The dangers of participating in social media can also be looked at from the point of view of the organisations that run their profiles; they are mainly related to the possibility of negative comments. However, an institution like the Church (represented by dioceses, among others) should be based on trust and on receiving feedback from the faithful, which the church understands as a community form. It is the openness, the handling of criticism, and the skilful management of the relationship with the faithful that is a prerequisite for creating the bond of the Church as an institution with the faithful.

Data analysis research conclusions – Catholic Church presence on social media using the example of Poland

According to the research assumptions and indications of the 'Theoretical framework', answering the research questions required the collection of data according to an agreed categorisation key. The first reconnaissance was relatively straightforward; it was a matter of investigating whether archdioceses and dioceses had websites that allowed them to contact their faithful through this communication channel. The results of the data from the website are shown in Figure 1 below.

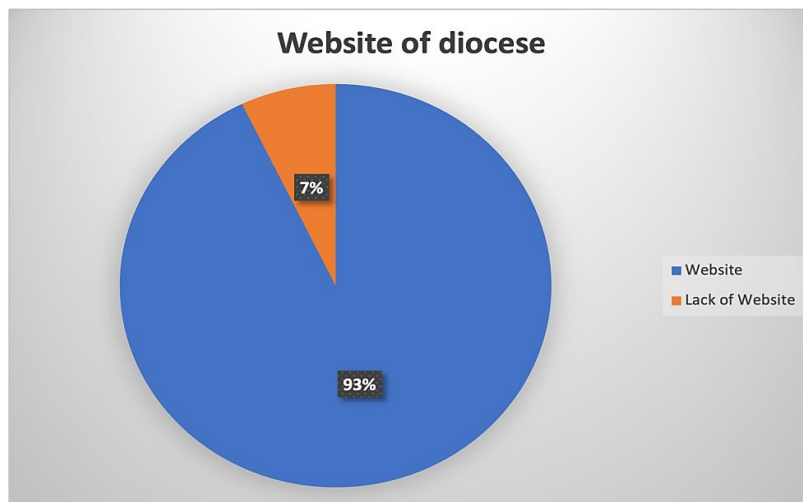


Figure 1. Website of the diocese.

Source: Own elaboration based on data downloaded from the Internet.

Such a high percentage of archdioceses and dioceses running their own websites demonstrates a high awareness on the part of church authorities of the need to use the Internet as a communications channel today. This takes into account both the worldwide media trend and the importance of broadening the possibility of reaching out to their message, especially to age groups for whom the Internet is the primary medium they use.

Having a website opens up the possibility of attaching social media accounts to it, but the use of this communication potential appears to be quite limited; the results obtained are presented below (Figure 2).

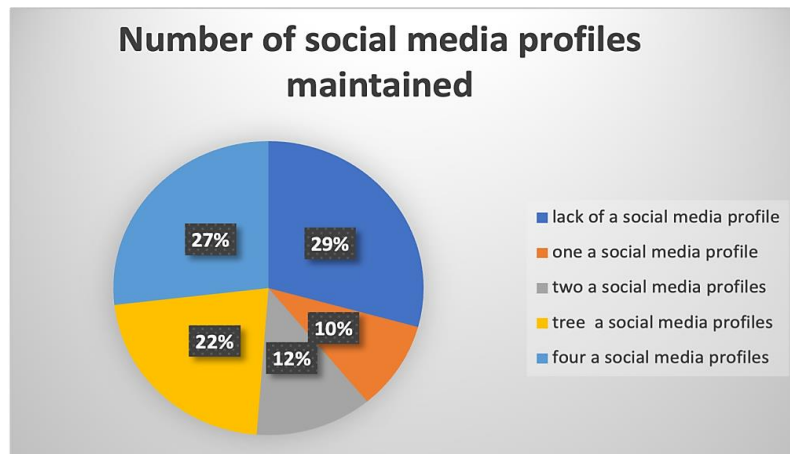


Figure 2. Number of social media profiles maintained.

Source: Own elaboration based on data downloaded from the Internet.

According to the analysis, up to 29% of archdioceses and dioceses do not have accounts on social media and 10% have only one, which means that around 40% of them make very little or no use of this communication channel. Taking into account the data on media preferences, it is apparent that a large proportion of potential faithful are excluded from the communication circuit; this is particularly true of young people. At the same time, it should be noted that more than half of the archdioceses and dioceses have several social media accounts, which are mainly Facebook (Meta), Twitter, and YouTube. Thus, those dioceses where there is a high awareness of the role of social media in building social outreach are not limited to one channel. It can also be inferred that in these dioceses, care has been taken to develop the media competence of those responsible for communication strategies.

Based on the information collected during the investigation, the distribution of the use of the different social networks by archdioceses and dioceses was also established, and therefore the Facebook (Meta) profiles are the most popular in this regard, the graph below (Figure 3) shows the data obtained.

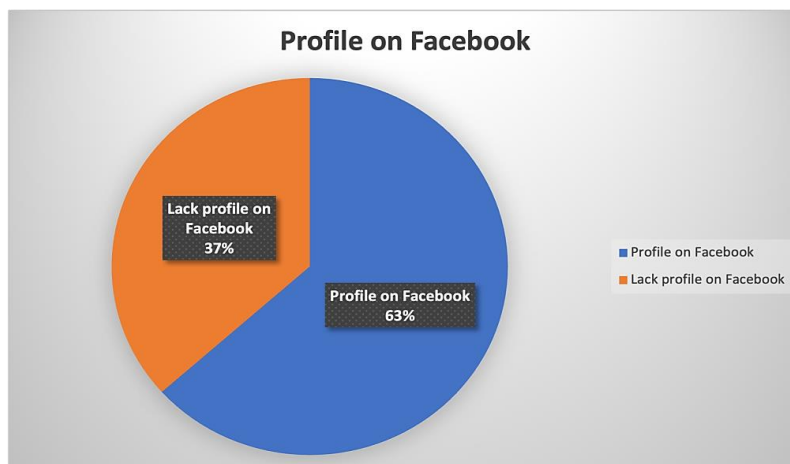


Figure 3. Profile on Facebook.

Source: Own elaboration based on data downloaded from the Internet.

According to the research, 63% of archdioceses and dioceses have a profile on Facebook (Meta), which indicates a relatively high participation in contemporary communication trends. The use of this profile, which has the highest percentage of users in Poland, is also important, i.e., it provides opportunities to build relationships with the faithful. At the same time, in this context, 37% of dioceses who do not have an account on the most popular social network should also give thought in terms of untapped communication potential.

On the websites hosted by archdioceses and dioceses, the second frequently appearing social media profile is Twitter; the results obtained are included below; see Figure 4.

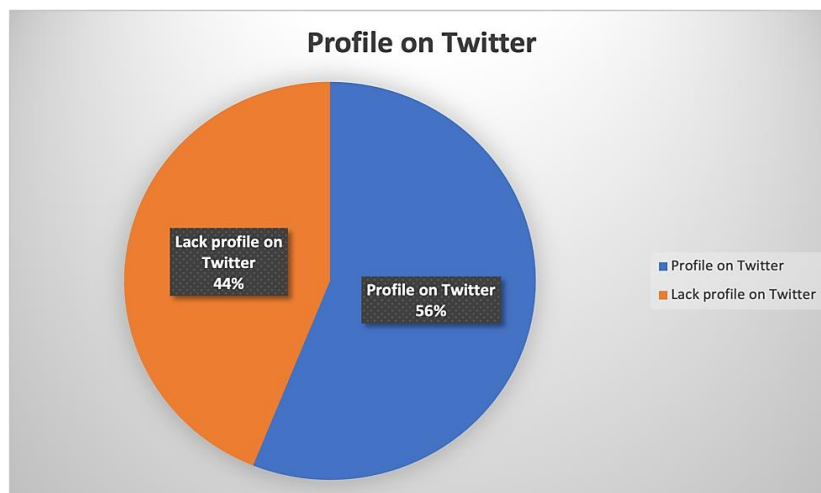


Figure 4. Profile on Twitter.

Source: Own elaboration based on data downloaded from the Internet.

As established, 56% of archdioceses and dioceses having Twitter accounts seems to be a quite a good result; however, in this case, the fact of the rather low popularity of this service in Poland is significant. As the results obtained in the Polish Internet Research, February 2023 show, Twitter is not among the 10 most popular social networks in Poland. Therefore, having a Twitter profile does not contribute to reaching the faithful more widely, as it does not build a social impact. From this point of view, it is important not only to have an account but also to be aware of the general communication trends we face in the community. At the same time, it was found that those archdioceses and dioceses that have Twitter profiles also have accounts on other social networks, so this may be a conscious decision to build a communication strategy aimed at reaching a diverse audience/believers to build a wider social network reach.

The third most frequent appearance on archdiocesan and diocesan websites is the YouTube profile, the graph below (Figure 5) shows the data received.

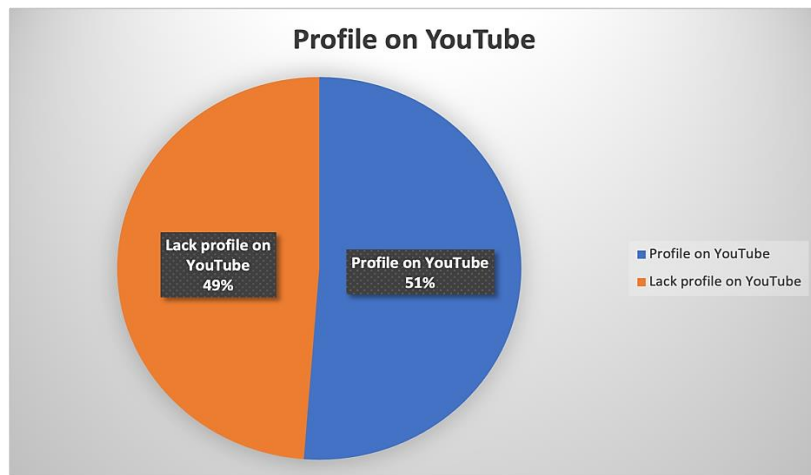


Figure 5. Profile on YouTube.

Source: Own elaboration based on data downloaded from the Internet.

Taking into account data from the Polish Internet Research, February 2023, stating that the most popular social network in Poland is YouTube, and the fact that 51% of archdioceses and dioceses have accounts on this portal, one can conclude that there is a relatively high awareness of the channels with which to communicate with the faithful. But at the same time, 49% of archdioceses and dioceses without established YouTube profiles must raise questions about ideas for reaching worshippers, especially the younger generation. It is probably not possible to conclusively link the neglect of this channel for building relationships with the faithful to the decline in the number of young-age believers, but according to the tenets of agenda-setting theory, the absence of the church in 'media' is an absence in their minds. And from the point of view of the church as an organisation, the potential for social impact in communicating with its stakeholders is neglected.

In line with the categorisation assumptions, it was also investigated whether archdioceses and dioceses have profiles on other social media than those listed above. The results obtained are presented in the following (Figure 6).

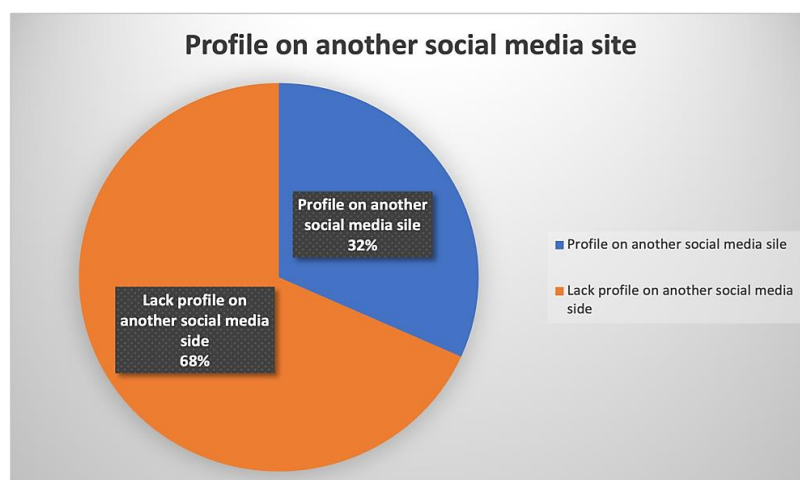


Figure 6. Profile on other social media sites.

Source: Own elaboration based on data downloaded from the Internet.

As found, only 32% of archdioceses and dioceses have accounts on social media other than those listed above. In most cases, these are those dioceses that have 4 social media profiles, only the Diocese of Gliwice was an exception to this rule. From this, it can be concluded that the fact of building relationships with the faithful through social media encourages further development of social networks. Among the most popular social media other than Facebook, Twitter, or YouTube is Instagram (9), which is among the five most popular sites in Poland according to data from Polish Internet Research, February 2023, followed by Flickr (3) and Spotify (1), see Figure 7 below.

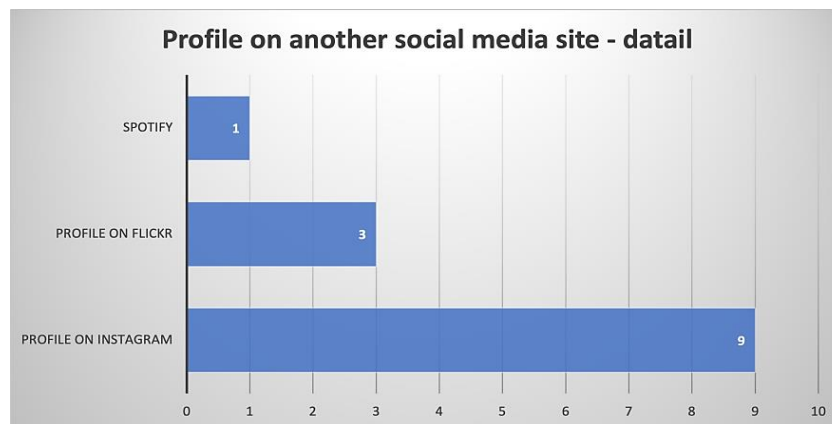


Figure 7. Profile on other social media sites – detail.

Source: Own elaboration based on data downloaded from the Internet.

Both Flickr and Spotify can only be seen as an insignificant attempt to diversify ways of building relationships with the faithful. And while the expansion of social media channels with Instagram can be seen as an apt idea to expand social impact, the strategy employed shows a lack of a methodical approach based on network trends. For example, *Polish Internet Surveys*, February 2023, show that a very thriving portal in Poland is TikTok, while none of the archdioceses and dioceses have taken this into account.

3. Conclusions

Media based on the platforms of Web 1.0, Web 2.0, and subsequent web technologies (Benioto-Osario et al., 2010; Król, 2020; Bajdak, Spyra, 2021) have changed the way people communicate with each other, as well as between organisations and their stakeholders. The features of digital media highlighted by many authors (Lister, 2009; Adamski, 2010; McQuail, 2012; Zacher, 2015; Koszembar-Wiklik, 2016; Osika, 2016) are digitalization, i.e. the ability to record all input data by means of digits, resulting in and dematerialisation of media texts (Lister, 2009, p. 42); convergence, which consists of putting all media into one, digital (McQuail, 2012); hypertextuality referring to the nonlinear nature of the cultural text;

interactivity allowing users to actively use new media, especially social media, and networking create a new media ecosystem (Adamski, 2010) forcing all actors of social life, including religious institutions such as the Catholic Church, to adapt to it.

From this point of view, it is important to recognise to what extent the church is open to the implementation of these new communication trends. This is important insofar as the general assumptions of agenda-setting suggest that failure to use new media solutions results in exclusion, which in turn contributes to the exclusion of one's message from the social space (McCombs, Shaw, 1972, pp. 176-187; McCombs, 2008; Goban-Klas, 2011; Wieczorek, 2012; Nowak, 2016; Przybysz, 2018). And in such a context, adaptation measures, i.e., the expansion of communication channels with new solutions, are necessary. Such measures are being taken (Guzek, 2015, 2022; Przybylska, 2018; Wiesenberg, 2019; Nabożny, 2022) but it is worth investigating what scale they are and whether they are sufficient to ensure contact with the faithful.

In this study, the case of the Polish Catholic Church was analysed in this respect. The degree to which it is present on the Internet, with a particular focus on social networks, was to identify the social potential of the archdioceses and dioceses that form the administrative basis of the Catholic Church in Poland. The presented results show a partial awareness of the importance of adaptation activities, as only 29% of archdioceses and dioceses do not have social media accounts, but only half of them create broader strategies to reach their faithful by marking their presence in several services. Of course, the mere fact of having a profile is not sufficient, as suggestions for further research work would be to undertake in-depth content analyses to determine whether the content posted is able to attract new faithful, i.e., children and young people, and whether it is attractive enough to maintain a relationship with their faithful.

Many market players choose to use social media in their stakeholder communication strategies because the cost of entering and conducting communication on these platforms is relatively small. A prerequisite for good management of social media communication in the strategy of Catholic dioceses is understanding the peculiarities of these media, which are different from the existing one-way media. It is important to treat social media profiles not as a formal communication tool characteristic of an official profile, but to encourage co-creation by the faithful. The challenge facing those responsible for managing this type of communication is not only to encourage people to look at these profiles more often, but also to amplify interactivity and participation. It would seem that as social media becomes more popular and widespread, interactivity will become natural (commenting, sharing, posting posts, photos, videos), as it is as natural for the youngest generation of users as television or radio for Generation X. Meanwhile, 12 out of 41 dioceses and archdioceses in Poland do not have social networks at all.

In conducting research to answer the research questions posed in this study concerning the extent to which archdioceses and dioceses in Poland use the Internet, including social media, it was found that a relatively high percentage, 93%, have websites and 71% of dioceses maintain

social media accounts. This percentage seems quite high, but in an era of social media dominance, the fact that 29% of archdioceses and dioceses do not use this communication channel greatly narrows the scope of social impact, especially for young people, for whom these media are the primary form of communication.

The most popular site is Facebook, which is also in line with national trends in media use, followed by Twitter, which in this case is more a form of differentiation of reach, as Twitter's popularity in Poland is limited. The third portal is YouTube, used by more than half of the archdioceses and dioceses, and this fits in with general media trends in Poland. Among the remaining social media, Instagram dominates, although only nine dioceses have an account on this portal. On the other hand, the profiles on TikTok are decidedly missing from the Internet-related communication strategies that are being developed, and it is in the Top 10 used in Poland. In summary, the following conclusion can be drawn, the Catholic Church in Poland is making up for its lack of presence on the Internet, including social media, but as stated, the communication strategies built do not fully reflect the social trends existing at the time.

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