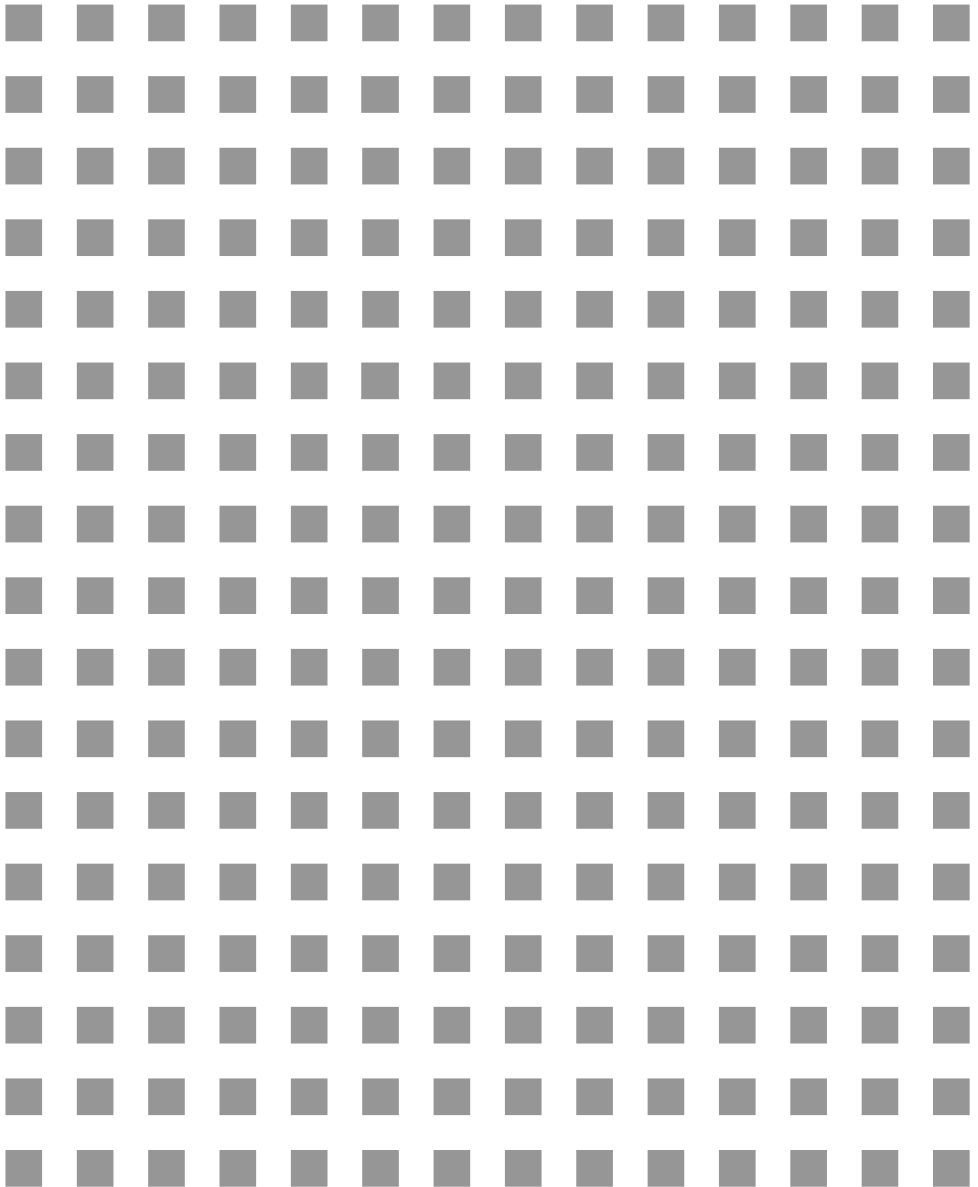




## Book reviews



**Bernard Poulet (2011), Śmierć gazet i przyszłość informacji (The End of Newspapers and The Future of Information). Wołowiec: Wydawnictwo Czarne, pp. 269, ISBN: 978-83-75362-37-4.**

This is a detailed report, the registration of newspapers' agony and an expressive and visionary comment on media reality in the Google era. The text of Bernard Poulet, a French academic and journalist, is a precisely-composed mosaic which includes issues of history, anthropology, economics and new technologies. The period of chaos and interference of the latest developments in the world of mass media is, according to the author, a time of experiment and not the time of illusions.

Using reports, research results, statistics, with the passion of an explorer, Poulet looks for new points of reference, attempting to answer the basic question: What is information and journalism in the twenty-first century and what is their future? Reflections in *The End of Newspapers...* are based on two solid foundations: the first one is formed by technological development and economics and the second one consists of dynamic changes in society. The presented study is based primarily on observation of traditional media up to 2008, even before the global economic crisis, however, the forecasts that Poulet formulates go far into the future.

The death of printed media is not a process that takes place in a vacuum, but rather a visible consequence of overlapping phenomena: the changing nature of advertising and promotion, modification of the public scene and evolution of modern society. Poulet finds the resultant force of these changes and leaves us in no doubt: the era of public interest in traditional newspaper journalism inevitably and rapidly is coming to an end.

The starting point for reflections of the French researcher is an alarmist report from 2008 prepared by Jean-Marie Charon — regarded as overly pessimistic and ignored even by customers. The general denial of press agony process indicates an attempt to protect the social ritual, an intention to save a multigenerational practice and comfortable, tamed concept of civilization.

As Poulet wrote, "Actually, three new revolutions perform almost simultaneously: digital recording is widespread, the new generation's interest in the written word and information is declining and information ceases to be the most important tool of advertisement, which drastically reduces its primary source of income." Opening the Washington museum of news and journalism, called the *Newseum* in 2008, in the context of this kind of hyperrevolution turns out to be an ironic prophecy: perhaps the press and print media will soon require protective measures, inscribed in the nature of museums. Steve Ballmer, the president of Microsoft, announced the transfer of all media to the Internet, and Steve Jobs, the mythical Apple co-founder, goes several steps further, announcing that in the recent future, reading of newspapers and books will disappear almost completely.

As suggested by content of *The End of Newspapers...*, their forecasts are not only Cassandra dilemmas — they are a reasonable request relating to collapse of the

economic model on which the European press has been building its success for decades. The data provide a reliable and systematic knowledge about the crisis of the printed press, on the example of France: a decline in sales of newspapers from 3.8 million in 1974 to 1.9 million in 2007, low levels of advertising revenue, increasing costs of production and distribution and loss of interest of the readers — especially young people — in print media.

According to Poulet, the solution does not lie in rigorous management, savings, recovery programs, homogenization of content — he called it worse than the disease itself. In this way, newspapers and other traditional media are losing credibility, their image, the quality of information decreases and spreads tabloidization, which turns out to be a deadly poison. In addition, loss of confidence in the press is, in a sense, a part of loss of confidence in government in any form and the price that the media pay for the position of the Fourth Estate.

The background outlined by the French academic is Zygmunt Bauman's liquid modernity in a more accurate scale, the scale of information, "To prove one's market value, one needs to show flexibility, readiness to respond to every call and starting everything from the beginning," writes Bauman, but in this case a new beginning requires a change in the whole consciousness.

Advertising, the main source of funding for newspapers, disappears from old media. Google Inc. and its expansion appoint a new era in the dissemination of advertising and information — it is the most powerful Internet search engine in the world, recording 65 million visits per hour and assuming 25% of all investments in advertising on the Internet!

Using AdSense,<sup>1</sup> Google has dominated the ground of "contextual advertising," linking advertising appearing on websites with their content — in this way a close relationship between text and meaning is formed. At the same time, according to Poulet, the owners of Google confirm that a giga-search engine aims to become the largest advertising agency in the world, excluding any intermediaries. Registering behavior of Internet users, Google determine their interests and directs the most appropriate advertising to them — and becomes a perfect tool.

The other elements: mass consumption — mass advertising — mass media, are inextricably linked. Through advertising, the journalism of high quality, unprofitable in terms of economy, was possible for decades; this advertising allowed to maintain the price of the newspaper, and to reach many receivers. According to this, the author suggests that information is the same product as any — in the context of information economics, this statement is entirely appropriate.

Following this logic: information-product requires a specific medium-space of distribution; by that means expand the concept and boundaries of the medium

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<sup>1</sup> AdSense is a program created by Google Inc. that permits publishers of content sites in the Google Network to serve automatic text, image, video, and other media adverts that are targeted to site content and audience, called also the most international and interactive advertising agency.

and the boundaries of journalism. Poulet underlines the profound difference between the journalist-presenter, providing entertainment, and shows the journalist submitting thoughtful and deeper content. Nevertheless, in recent years, the concept of “infotainer” (from: information and entertainer), invented in 1980 in the United States, has been very commonly used. The line between commentary, news and entertainment blurs, which also affects perception: our knowledge about the world is not expanding; according to the polls we have a difficulty with understanding the processes and logical information linking.

According to Dominique Volton, new information technologies, social networks and mobile phones will lead to fragmentation of information and consequently to the state unprecedented in history, in which each individual will have their own media! At the same time, information is not only received, it is also processed, used and modified, therefore basic expectations are mobility and availability of the medium.

Information’s life does not end with its disclosure. Information in the digital era has few lives, some variants of transformation. However, this is an optimistic assumption, because Poulet warns of other consequences of digitization with the words of Michael Wolff: “The consumption of news, this slightly fetishistic practice, more or less treated as an entertainment experience, which defined a large common and collective area, begins simply to disappear.”

Gratuitousness, commonness, modernity — these are three words which could be a manifesto for New Media, the processes that enable full democratization of information. Owing to digitization, everyone can be a journalist, which on the one hand can lead to devaluation of information and on the other can fulfill the utopia of free speech and unlimited debate — two foundations of the Indymedia.<sup>2</sup> As Poulet put it: “Nothing else is talked about now than about freeware [...] about open source, open office [...] about civil journalism, intelligence of crowds, collective creativity, questioning of expert opinion [...] about free and open community, and finally about technology that is the engine of democratic development.”

Bernard Poulet compiled nearly three hundred pages of facts and data with which he was completing, observing the transformation of individual media, as well as the entire media market structure and their interactions over the past ten years. Analyzing the French press market, he drew conclusions relevant to the entire European press. He developed a comprehensive vision of the media world, prepared with surgical precision, from the perspective of a researcher and journalist, a vision from the outside and from the inside, absolute for broadcasters, surprising for the audience.

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<sup>2</sup> Indymedia, also known as Independent Media Center is a global network of independent journalists (using open publishing process) that report on political, social and cultural issues, established during the Seattle anti-WTO protests in 1999.

The imminent change of information and the press leave several possibilities. One of them is creation of the so-called *News Factory*, which will distribute the same brand with multiple media — in this way the cost of issuing press will be shared between different media. Another possibility is that, like German *Bild* press issue will be united with other services such as sales of electronic equipment. An alternative variant, the most eccentric of today's points of view, is the transformation of the press into a high-end, elitist product.

The French researcher also suggests experimenting in all directions: free newspapers, e-papers, new forms of advertising, link-journalism and civic journalism. First of all, however, the author leaves us with the consciousness of a quasi-ethical paradox: Is it possible to combine high quality information with its mass distribution?

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**Dorota Piontek (2011), *Komunikowanie polityczne i kultura popularna. Tabloidyzacja informacji o polityce (Political Communication and Popular Culture. Tabloidization of Information about Politics)*. Poznań: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Wydziału Nauk Politycznych i Dziennikarstwa UAM, pp. 238, ISBN: 978-83-62907-13-7.**

Dorota Piontek has been conducting research at the Department of Press Systems and Media Law at Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań (Poland) for many years. It is worth emphasizing this fact at the beginning, because her new book is an obvious continuation of her work. What is more, it may be called a valuable *resumé* of an important part of her academic research. This dissertation published at the end of 2011, entitled *Political Communication and Popular Culture. Tabloidization of Information about Politics* is the next step in popularizing broadly-understood communication-knowledge, correlated with ideas of political marketing, social engineering and media, contained in her previous books and articles. These considerations lead the author to research located between popular culture and political communication. These two concepts constitute the main part of this book. It is worth emphasizing that it is probably the single most comprehensive depiction of these two categories in Polish literature. Undoubtedly, it expands the discourse about mass media communication in Central European literature. Despite the fact that more and more titles are being published in this field, there are still many “unexplored areas” left. Popular culture is surely one of them. What is more, it is often described by many researchers with a pinch of salt. While English and European

literature is rich with interesting books (it is proven by the author, who quotes many of them), this area seems not to have yet been discovered in Polish discourse. Here, we can only find some works in the fields of literature, education, political marketing and media studies. There are also some valuable concepts featured by Małgorzata Lisowska-Magdziarz, Wiesław Godzic, Marek Mazur and Mariusz Kolczyński, some articles published in “*Studia Politologiczne*” (“Political Science Studies”) and books published by Wydawnictwo Akademickie i Profesjonalne (Academic and Professional Publishing House). It is also worth emphasizing that Dorota Piontek refrains from voicing emotional opinions on the idea of *tabloidization*, as many researchers have failed to do before. She takes this matter on its own, analyzing its effects and consequences insightfully. Undoubtedly, the holistic depiction of this problem in the new book, written by the media researcher from Poznań, is the synthesis of theories, which have been scattered across many previous publications.

The subtitle of Dorota Piontek’s newest book reads: *Tabloidization of information about politics*. It shows the reader the direction in which argument presentation will proceed. As the author rightly noticed: “this notion [*tabloidization*] has as many followers, as it has enemies. The latter group takes it as a tabloid-topic on its own — as non-informative and aimed at attracting our attention.” Additionally, it is not the only area, which seems to be avoided because of its “insufficient scientific value.” Therefore, it is only fair to pay tribute to someone like the author, who goes against the grain and takes up this important topic, which may be unpopular but concerns all members of society.

Dorota Piontek suggests that her research fills a gap in Polish literature related to popular culture and she calls it a “political science & media studies approach.” The second part of this notion is surely much more emphasized in the book, although the author does not avoid an analysis of many categories as a political scientist. For example, when she writes about post-politics, she gets involved in one of the hottest disputes in Polish political science discourse in the last few years, about the subject of study. It seems to be a step both courageous and risky. Except for political science & media studies perspectives, Dorota Piontek tries to look at many dilemmas from a sender-actor-person’s (political marketing), as well as a receiver’s point of view. In this second aspect, the problem is analyzed from the feminist perspective. First of all, it is evidenced by the selection of materials, which include women’s magazines. Secondly, the presentation is based on foreign literature, especially *feminist media studies* elaborations.<sup>3</sup> On the one hand, it is an important value of this book (this perspective is almost unknown in Polish scientific discourse), but on the other — it deprives some of the publication’s themes of their versatility.

The book consists of seven chapters. The first one is a theoretical background of political communication research. It is divided into two parts — about new and

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<sup>3</sup> Especially, the author quotes Liesbet van Zoonen’s research, whose concepts are noted several times in the book.

traditional media, with an evolutionary approach to the problem. The second chapter, entitled *Mediatization of politics*, is the analysis of many media theories, including their connotations with mass culture. Media functions are described scrupulously in the third chapter. As for the fourth chapter, which is the key issue of this book, Dorota Piontek analyzes the notion of popular culture from Pierre Bourdieu's and Georg Gerbner's points of view.<sup>4</sup> The next chapter includes the author's concept of *intimization of political journalism*. However, this new notion is here only outlined, while the main concept revolves around *political celebrities*. The sixth chapter tells us about the relationship between politics and media, including thoughts on the development of *spin doctoring*. The last part is of empirical character. It explores the concept of *tabloidization* even further, backed by media content research results. The research was based on two news programs: *Wiadomości* [News] in TVP (Polish Television Channel) and *Fakty* [Facts] in TVN (TVN Channel).

Undoubtedly, the main values of this book are the rich theoretical background and wide conceptual framework, which is an essential collection of the most important notions in mass communication theory. Many of its fragments could well be an academic textbook for those who are interested in this subject. Concepts such as *tabloidization*, *celebrities*, *framing*, *media positioning*, *spin doctoring*, *agenda setting*, *permanent campaign* and so on, are only a few of the notions described in *Political communication...*, which we can call "an indispensable set of any mass media and communication researcher." The fact they are described on a basis of Polish, English and European literature, makes this book even more valuable. It is also important to note that the theoretical part of this dissertation is supported by empirical data, which gives it even more reliability. In fact, mass media research is still not a strong point of media studies in Poland. I can even state that there is some kind of an inexplicable resistance towards it. Research findings contained in two chapters could be really useful and tell us a lot about the direction in which Polish media may follow.<sup>5</sup> Thanks to this synthesis of theory and empiricism, the new book may be located outside of the European-American dispute between sociology of knowledge and sociology of mass communication. This antagonism, best expressed in sentences like: "We don't know if it is true, but at least it is important" and "We don't know if it is important, but at least it is true," does not exist in Dorota Piontek's new publication.

Additionally, many references to political & media reality since 1989 in Poland can be noticed in this book. This *exemplum* seems to be another advantage of this publication. Unfortunately, a lack of distance to political reality is felt in some cases.<sup>6</sup> Besides this, *Political communication...* is a comprehensive source of knowledge

<sup>4</sup> According to Pierre Bourdieu's field theory and Georg Gerbner's cultivation theory.

<sup>5</sup> Some of these studies have not been finished yet.

<sup>6</sup> But on the other hand, a specific attitude towards political reality makes this publication attractive to the reader, especially when it comes to the style of writing. For example, D.P. writes about an alleged marriage between Jarosław Kaczyński and Joanna Szczypińska: "only a firm denial of facts

about Polish media functioning and political reality creation, especially against a background of democratization.

*Political Communication and Popular Culture. Tabloidization of Information about Politics* by Dorota Piontek is recommended both to young researchers (here they will find a conceptual framework supported by many examples) and recipients with a deep insight on media (they will be happy to discover theories so far unknown in Polish literature). Therefore, it could be recommended to political scientists, sociologists and media researchers, who are interested in the contact point of popular culture and mass media. At some points the book holder may be dissatisfied, especially when reading “it is quite commonly said...” or “there is something to it...” But on the other hand, considering this subject is still an unsurveyed area in Polish discourse, these doubts seems to be reasonable and excusable. Therefore, this dissertation should have a wide range of readers interested in media, culture and politics.

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voiced by the would-be groom ended these speculations” (Piontek, 2011, p. 145); or about first ladies in Poland: “Jolanta Kwaśniewska’s domination was shattering” (Piontek, 2011, p. 134).