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Social initiatives of local self-governance in the years 1998-2004 in the picture by Polish regional press

Resume

The paper presents a politological relationship of two spaces of democratic public life: the involvement of civil society in co-decision on the most important issues of the region and the social function of the regional daily press. The aim of the study was to investigate this phenomenon on the example of two social actions of regional daily newspapers: the campaign „Brońmy swego” [„Let’s defend what’s ours“] – performed by „Nowa Trybuna Opolska“ [“New Opole Tribune“] from January 15 to July 27, 1998 and the action by „Dziennik Bałtycki“ [“Baltic Daily“] under the slogan „Po pierwsze A-1” [“First A-1”], conducted in each edition of the newspaper from August 1, 2003 to September 1, 2004. The subject of the study became the analysis of both actions, in particular components of their driving force: local community initiative centred on key issues affecting the future of the region and editorial policy of regional newspapers serving the interests of the medial audience. This paper attempts to answer the question: under what conditions should the instruments of democracy develop to the local community, supported by regional newspapers, could achieve unprecedented successes.

Analysing the social initiatives of local self-governance – in symbiosis with the activity of regional newspapers and looking for recipes for common success of the instruments of democracy – the author formulated the following research questions: 1. What factors are able to stimulate social initiatives, integrating the medial audience regional newspaper media? 2. Who in civil society can be an effective medial policy creator of the grassroots driven regional social actions? 3. Does the rule of territorial and thematic proximity to the regional newspaper reader affect the impact of the title? 4. What are the conditions for the effectiveness of successful social action by regional newspaper? 5. What methods should be used to manage the social action of newspaper to ensure the effect of the action?

Given the complexity and scope of the analysis of social actions – portrayed against the background of the history of the regional press, the genesis of both press

titles and background of the Polish political scene of the age of transformation – the paper gains cognitive value. It is important, in this respect, the fact that the author was a participant of the actions described below, when directing editorial offices of „Nowa Trybuna Opolska“ [“New Opole Tribune“] and „Dziennik Bałtycki“ [“Baltic Daily“] and supervising campaigns „Brońmy swego” [„Let’s defend what’s ours“] and „Po pierwsze A-1” [“First A-1”]. This allowed for in-depth observation of the course of actions, as well as their effects and social repercussions. The empirical research presented in the work comes from a direct source and is devoid of distortions resulting from the stories told by third parties. This advantage also applies to the historical layer of the paper which discusses the processes of transformation of the Polish medial reality after 1989, of which the author was a participant.

The cognitive value of the paper is presentation of an editorial workshop of the regional newspaper, including the anatomy of the creation of actions and their results. In this area of research the paper can provide benefits to both the medial animators of public life and the authors of scientific papers dedicated to the local community, the phenomena of its self-governance and participation in decisions about the present and future of the region.

Initiatives of the local self-governance, reflected in the action „Brońmy swego” [„Let’s defend what’s ours“] and reactivated by the campaign „Po pierwsze A-1” [“First A-1”], were presented in two historical pictures: the genesis of both titles resulting from the history of Polish regional press and domestic political scene after 1989. This period should be considered as the time of initiation and flowering of civil society and its activity phenomena discussed in the paper. Significantly important for the research hypotheses is a political background on which there were presented the instruments of political, social and participatory democracy, self-organization and self-governance and the role of the social potential in the processes of local transformations.

In view of the facts presented in the paper the above-formulated hypotheses have been verified:

H. 1. *Guarantors for effective social activities are grassroots initiatives pursuing the social interest, while the latter is separated from other (e. g. political or economic) contexts.*

This hypothesis was verified positively. Research analysis of the genesis and inspiration for both campaigns presented in this paper shows that one of the key factors of their success was the subordination of the action to social interests. The action

by „Nowa Trybuna Opolska“ [“New Opole Tribune“] managing the civil initiative, as well as the campaign by „Dziennik Bałtycki“ [“Baltic Daily“] were apolitical, which made them gain the support of all local MPs and party officials, as well as a wide social sympathies. They have also not served economic interests – apart from the parent, economic welfare of the region, thus they were safe from the suspicion of particularism. This proves the fact that the approval of the campaigns conducted by civil society in the name of social good is possible only if the initiative is devoid of context. Purity of intention in this case is directly proportional to the scale of support and social participation, which in turn is directly proportional to the efficiency.

H. 2. *In civil society the factor shaping medial policy of social initiatives is the perspective of the reader, not the publisher.*

The “think like a reader” principle formulated by prof. Buck Ryan of the University of Kentucky and repeatedly cited not only determines an effective strategy of editorial policy, but also positively verifies the second hypothesis of this paper. If social action initiated and performed by the regional newspaper is oriented to the benefit of the medial audience of the title, and not the interests of its publisher (increase in copy sales, gaining the favour of advertisers interested in the effectiveness of the action) – the support of readers is automatically increased. Purity intention phenomenon has the same meaning as in the process of verification of the first hypothesis.

H. 3. *Greater power of creative social impact belongs to regional press, not central press.*

This hypothesis was verified positively. The range of regional newspaper, distributed on a particular administrative area, is also limited by the readers’ scope of interest. As shown in numerous studies carried out by media experts for the local press publishers – its thematic priority are strictly local news and issues. Information needs of readers related to the field of global and national news are met by TV. Current journalistic issues (the commented problems) are most sought after in the national press, especially in the central dailies and opinion weeklies. Both fields if needs apply to the minimum level of interest, coming mostly to the basic “*it behoves me to know what’s going on*” function.

Local news and problems are considered by respondents with a much larger share of excitement. It results from numerous factors, among which should be mentioned the following: local patriotism and a sense of belonging to the regional community, but also instruments resulting from the process of democratisation: the need

for participation in public life and co-decision on the most important issues of the region, as well as the imperative to actively participate in shaping its present and future.

An important role is also played by the phenomenon of emotional relationships with regional newspaper, often referred to in the study as “*mine*” or “*ours*” newspaper, which defines a sense of connectedness. It is connected to the fulfilment of social expectations by the editors: dedicating proper attention a place in the pages of and commitment to the most important issues of the region – preferably in the form of an uncompromising judging persons responsible for solving the problem. Regional newspaper disposes of much more specified interests and needs of readers than central newspapers, which directly translates to creativity and effectiveness of social action management. The determining factors are the limits of public space in which it operates, as well as its knowledge.

H. 4. *The efficiency of the impact of regional press in social actions is related to the duration and methods of this impact.*

As the research process shows – the power and effectiveness of social campaign are in direct relation to its duration and methodology of action, which consists of five principles for success:

1. Social action should be carried out all the way into effect, regardless of its duration.

2. Despite the temporal duration of action, carrying the risk of reader’s boredom, the editors should keep the temperature of the action by its new creative views, such as self-inspired events involving the medial audience or enrichment of the means of persuasion by introducing original editorial concepts.

3. The overriding principle of the social campaign carried out by the newspaper is constant interaction with readers.

4. Connection with participants of the action, and therefore social support, is facilitated by visualization of the action, its distinct layout or permanent place on the pages, allowing emotional identification.

5. Social action requires a high level of journalistic workshop and extensive photographic and infographic documentation. As the research carried out in this paper shows – the respect for these principles is in direct relation to the effectiveness of the campaign.

The phenomena of local self-governance were shown in the picture of Polish political reality after the constitutional transformation and the resulting social

transformations. It is shown in the spectrum of the rules of democracy, paying particular attention to the instruments of operation of the civil initiatives in the public space.

The process of correlation of the civil initiatives with the social function of the local media was verified in the research. The directions and conditions of these activities, as well as recipes for their effectiveness, were shown using the analysis of the two largest social actions of regional newspapers in the history of Polish local press of the age of democracy. The reasons included in their analysis and conclusions are useful: they allow not only benefiting from the experience of the authors and animators of the action, but also better understanding the role of local media in meeting the needs of citizens, especially in a role of a partner to local self-governance.