

## **Intergenerational Dialogue in the Network Society. The analysis of chosen examples from social media**

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### **Abstract**

This article shows the problem of intergenerational dialogue in the postmodern world, dominated by digital media. Representatives of older generations are standing against a serious challenge: they have to tame virtual space, which is the natural environment for young people. Examples of politics-seniors who are active in social media (TikTok, YouTube) presented in this work, prove that in the present days only those people who know the language of network's challenges can influence young generations of potential voters.

*Keywords: intergenerational dialogue; challenge; cyberworld; influencer; social media*

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### **1. Introduction**

Accelerated globalization, mass and popular culture, and above all, cyberculture - these are the phenomena that determine the cultural identity of young people, drifting in the postmodern era. It is the reality of "network society" (Castells 2007), "information society" (Kluszczyński 2002), which is the fruit of the digital revolution. In this society, social relations are marked by virtuality, and what goes with it - transitory and superficial. This new type of society, according to Manuel Castells, functions in a specific culture: transnational and global, democratic and non-hierarchical, and thus - not based on the domination of traditional authorities (Galas 2018, p. 82). Therefore, the contemporary young person "faces the necessity to constantly reconstruct their own identity, to reinforce again and again what they identify with" (Galas 2018, p. 85). Identity appears as a Giddensian "reflective project", a term used by the British sociologist to describe the individual in the times of declining, "late" (or, as Bauman would like: "liquid") modernity (Giddens 2010, Bauman 2006), and it is undoubtedly it is also valid today, in the postmodern era.

As already mentioned, the young *homo postmodernicus* lives in a reality that abstracts from the old authorities (such as teachers, parents or grandparents), without a specific hierarchy of values, and thus in axiological chaos, plunging into problems related to the (without) meaning of life (cf. Bagrowicz 2012). He looks for his own identity in a world offering a multitude of values and goals, lifestyles and creations of (cyber) culture, without (or not seeing) a "teacher and master" who could help him organize the world of cultural, humanistic and spiritual values (Dryglas - Komorowska 2018).

In passing, it must be emphasized that not having a master means, of course, something other than not seeing him, not talking to him. Researchers disagree as to whether traditional "masters" (or traditional authorities) in the modern world have disappeared for good. Some, such as Jerzy Jastrzębski, formulate radical theses: "Both in cyberspace and in real life, there is no room for masters. The masters froze in the past like insects in amber. You can see them only in museum display cases of the virtual world" (Jastrzębski 2018, p. 109). Others, such as Lech Witkowski, point to the fact that it is not authorities, not "great spirits of culture" that have disappeared from this world, but rather people who would be able to establish a critical, creative dialogue with them (see Witkowski 2011).

Regardless of which opinion of the researcher we find convincing, the fact is that in the postmodern reality, full of information noise and hustle and bustle of many, often contradictory narratives, there was, in a sense, great silence - because the excited voices of the masters were already silenced in it. and young adepts of knowledge. Their centuries-old conversation (understood, after Lech Witkowski, as a "serious dispute") has come to an end.

The question remains, has there been anyone in the postmodern world who managed to fill the void left by the former "teacher and master"? It was done by - I think, completely imperceptibly for many traditional authorities, for many parents and educators - an Internet influencer<sup>1</sup>: youtuber, vlogger (much more than a "traditional" blogger) or instagramer. Or rather: a peculiar actor in the theater of the cyber world who very often proposes, instead of an important dialogue or a serious dispute, various epic challenges, massacre pranks, or - still speaking in the language of young people - simply: LOL. Needless to say, some parents and educators may thus encounter great difficulties in communicating with young people - the language of cyberculture<sup>2</sup> will be so foreign and incomprehensible to them.

In this context, it is worth asking whether intergenerational dialogue is still possible in the contemporary educational and cultural reality, which is largely defined by the Internet? And what attitude towards the cyberspace should parents, grandparents and teachers adopt in order to build an intergenerational understanding in the "network society"?

## 2. Digital natives and digital immigrants?

And since we are talking about an intergenerational agreement, we should - at least briefly - describe the characteristics of the generations currently living in Poland (after: Stachowiak 2018, pp. 166-167). In order from the oldest to the youngest representatives of society, these are: 1) people born before or during the Second World War; 2) baby boomers, ie the generation born just after the war, as well as in the 1950s and early 1960s; 3) generation X, including people born

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<sup>1</sup> "Influencer" will be understood in this text - according to the definition taken from the Gallery of the Youth Word of the Year of the Polish Language Dictionary by PWN - as "a person who has gained popularity on the Internet and uses his fame, influencing his viewers / readers, their worldview, taste, etc.". <https://sjp.pwn.pl/mlodziejowe-slowo-roku/haslo/influencer;6368873.html> [accessed on 22/09/2020].

<sup>2</sup> In this area, parents and educators can help, for example, an interesting gallery created on the PWN Polish Language Dictionary website, including words submitted in the plebiscite for the Youth Word of the Year. See <https://sjp.pwn.pl/mlodziejowe-slowo-roku/Galeria-Mlodziejowe-slowo-roku> [accessed on 22/09/2020].

between 1964 and 1982; 4) generation Y (the so-called millennials), i.e. born in the years 1983-1997; 5) generation Z, that is, born after 1997, not later than in the first decade of the 21st century; 6) alpha generations - children born after 2010. Among the six indicated generations, the most numerous groups are baby boomers and generation X (each of these generations covers about 25% of Poland's population), as well as millennials (about 21%); generation Z is about 15%, the youngest citizens - 4% of the society, and the oldest - 10% (Stachowiak 2018).

To what extent do these generations become participants in the virtual world? To answer this question, it is worth recalling three principles that, according to researchers, may shed light on the phenomenon of digital exclusion:

- "1. Everything that exists in the world at the time of birth is ordinary.
2. Anything made up between the ages of 15 and 35 is revolutionary, exciting, and you can build your career on it.
3. Everything that is invented after the age of 35 destroys the natural order of things" (Stachowiak 2018, p. 167).

In this context, it is easy to imagine for the representatives of the indicated groups the specific challenges of the cyberspace may become a problem hindering intergenerational communication. If we recall that the popular social networking site Facebook was founded in 2004, YouTube started its operation in 2005, Instagram - in 2010, and mobile internet applications Snapchat or TikTok (by the way, the latter already has two billion users in the world today). later (in 2011 and 2016), it will turn out that only for three generations - alpha, Z, Y - the indicated social media will be an ordinary or exciting space, while for others, to a greater or lesser extent, a sphere of what is foreign ( in a destructive sense), disturbing the sense of well-being of an individual.

In the literature on the subject, two characteristic terms can be found, with the help of which researchers try to capture the phenomenon of the relationship that exists between new technologies and representatives of different generations, outlined above, namely: "digital natives", i.e. young generations, "always" immersed in the media digital, and "digital immigrants", ie parents and educators, trying in virtual reality to find both themselves and the way to communicate with their charges. This concept has been criticized many times due to the simplifications that this kind of dichotomous division must inevitably evoke (see Ptaszek 2019). And yet, it must be admitted that the proposed terms have an extraordinary metaphorical carrying capacity: after all, most young people really feel at ease in virtual space, precisely because it is their native environment; and in the case of their parents, teachers, and especially grandparents, it is not so obvious. Representatives of older generations become, in a symbolic dimension, "digital immigrants" who, as it were, come from reality and often find it difficult to "inculturate" in a new world for them.

### **3. Seniors on TikTok and # Hot16Challenge**

It is, among others, thanks to the aforementioned attempts of "digital inculturation" undertaken by representatives of older generations (for whom virtual reality is not a natural,

"indigenous" environment) that intergenerational dialogue can take place in today's world. Some of these activities are extremely spectacular and immediately aired by the media.

This was undoubtedly the appearance of Jarosław Kaczyński on TikTok in September 2020<sup>3</sup>. Let us remind you that TikTok, as an Internet mobile application, is currently one of the most popular social media in the world, whose users have the option of sending short (15 to 60 seconds) video materials with hashtags that enable them to be found quickly; movies can be "liked" and shared. According to The Guardian, in the first quarter of 2020, TikTok was the most downloaded application in the world, mostly by young people - 41% of users are between 16 and 24 years of age<sup>4</sup>.

When Jarosław Kaczyński, promoting the PIS law on animal protection, popularly known as the "Five for Animals", appeared on TikTok, all the media informed about this fact. The media hype surrounding this event shows that in contemporary Polish politics, communicating with the youngest potential voters via new social media is still a phenomenon that causes ubiquitous excitement.

There is no doubt that Kaczyński's appearance on TikTok was a great move both from a political and PR point of view - a successful attempt to establish an intergenerational dialogue between a senior, a representative of the baby boomers (undoubtedly thus warming up his image) and youth from Generation Z, with whom, as Kaczyński implied, is worth talking to, because it is this group of voters in the next parliamentary elections that may decide the fate of his party. In addition, the politician showed a good knowledge of the virtual world by initiating the #StopFurChallenge campaign on TikTok, which was aimed at promoting the "Five for animals" among young people in an attractive and understandable way - using the Internet "challenge".

On TikTok, Kaczyński raised a topic previously discussed with the representatives of the PiS Youth Forum, who emphasized in the media that the prepared legal provisions express "the sensitivity and humanitarianism of the young generation"<sup>5</sup>. Thus, an interesting attempt was made to talk a senior politician with Polish youth; a bridge has been built between, as it might seem, generations which, however, as it turned out, can find a common (virtual) space to talk about ecology.

It is impossible not to mention one more famous challenge from 2020, which also absorbed many Polish politicians. Of course, I'm talking about the second edition of # Hot16Challenge, the purpose of which was to raise funds to fight the coronavirus. The Internet action, initiated by rapper Karol "Solar" Poziemski (from the millennial generation), consisted in recording a 16-line verse (to any beat) and nominating more people who would take part in the challenge. Some of the resulting short videos posted on YouTube have gained immense popularity. Among them, two recordings have come to the fore. First of all: the melorecitation of President Andrzej Duda (a

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.wirtualnemedi.pl/artykul/jaroslaw-kaczynski-pojawil-sie-na-tiktoku-promuje-ustawe-antyfutrzarska-wideo> [access 20.09.2020].

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2020/jul/16/tiktok-video-sharing-app-should-you-delete-it> [access 22.09.2020].

<sup>5</sup> <https://wiadomosci.gazeta.pl/wiadomosci/7,114884,26291890,projekt-ustawy-dot-ochrony-zwierzat-trafil-do-sejmu-szef-mlodziezowki.html> [access 22.09.2020].

representative of the X generation), which gained over twelve million views on YouTube, and the famous presidential metaphor "sharp shadow of the fog" became an inspiration for Internet users to create countless memes. Secondly: the rap of the Confederation politician, Janusz Korwin-Mikke, who is a representative of the oldest generation of Poles, born during the Second World War, who in a daring (and also controversial - as befits a politician) took up the Internet challenge<sup>6</sup>. Sixteen lines of his "winder" (as JKM himself described his performance, referring to the language of hip-hop) gained over nine million views on YouTube.

Both indicated politicians undertook to perform a hip-hop piece online, representing the music genre associated with a specific youth subculture (see Prejs 2010, pp. 45–46), while moving efficiently in the world of cyberculture. They both took part in the online challenge using modern media (YouTube). However, Korwin-Mikke referred more directly than the President to the poetics of hip-hop texts, the authors of which often call for violence, using vulgarisms and colloquialisms (Prejs 2010, p. 45). All these activities were undoubtedly meant to serve, apart from the charitable purpose, to establish a thread of understanding with young people, with the Millennial and Generation Z; for them the world of virtual challenges is an ordinary, "native" space<sup>7</sup>.

Certainly, the above-mentioned examples of intergenerational dialogue on the Internet show that many representatives of older generations, even if we perceive them as "digital immigrants", are perfectly able to adapt to virtual reality. The experience of politicians also reminds that in today's world it is impossible to abstract from new media, especially social media, if you are serious about contacting generations of young voters.

#### 4. Director of *Życie* about intergenerational dialogue

It is worth looking at the problem of intergenerational dialogue from another angle - from the perspective of youtuber Daniel Rusin, known on the web as the Director of Life<sup>8</sup>. Undoubtedly, he can be called an internet influencer. Although he cannot boast of over four million subscriptions, such as Blowek or Stuu, who are in the top rankings of Polish YouTubers<sup>9</sup>, but "only" with a

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m0XDcTOxQM0> [access 22.09.2020].

<sup>7</sup> Needless to say, in the case of His Majesty this dialogue with young people must be constantly maintained for political reasons. It is enough to look at the election statistics from the fall of 2019 to realize that the majority of the Confederation's voters are people aged 18-29; similar conclusions can be drawn from the analysis of the results of the last European elections. See <https://oko.press/mlodzi-nie-chca-duopolu-to-oni-dali-mandaty-konfederacji-i-dobry-wynik-lewicy/> [accessed on September 22, 2020];

<https://sonar.wyborcza.pl/sonar/7,156422,24831108,eurowybory-mlodzi-glosuja-na-konfederacje-ci-po-trzy-30ce.html> [accessed on 22/09/2020]. In turn, President Andrzej Duda fought in # Hot16Challenge to increase his image among young people; At that time, polls already showed (in April - May 2020) that as a candidate for the presidency of the next term of office, he enjoyed little support from young people (up to 29 years of age). This was later confirmed by election analyzes. See <https://natemat.pl/314817,kaczynski-o-malym-poparciu-mlodych-dla-dudy-chec-zmian-i-wplyw-mediow> [accessed on 22/09/2020].

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCvetOZCfJRcSjP80FUtu0gg> [Director of Life - YouTube channel; access on 22/09/2020]

<sup>9</sup> <https://apynews.pl/ranking-youtuberow/>; <https://dodob.com/ranking/youtube> [access 22.09.2020].

million subscribers, which places him in the top 100 of the most popular YouTubers in Poland and ensures enormous impact on the Internet. On his channel you can find short films with a plot, dealing with important social problems (in which famous Polish actors often take part), vlogs showing interesting social experiments, as well as occasional films (e.g. "Reduta Ordona" from 2016, created on the occasion of the anniversary of the outbreak of the Warsaw Uprising).

Youtuber himself says briefly about his activity: "life writes the best scenarios"<sup>10</sup>. These scenarios also include the issue of intergenerational dialogue. In this context, it is worth paying attention to, for example, a short, less than five-minute-long film "When the Internet is more important than grandma ..." from 2018 (over 4.6 million views on YouTube)<sup>11</sup>. It tells the story of a young boy, a student who does not have time for his grandmother because he constantly plays on Facebook. In order to find a thread of understanding with her grandson, the old lady decides to familiarize herself with popular social media. Ultimately, she becomes a famous YouTuber and her videos take the internet by storm. When the grandson finally discovers that he has neglected his grandmother, it turns out that he only has the opportunity to visit her grave in the cemetery. The plot of the film is simple, even banal (and could be summed up in the words of a poem by Father Jan Twardowski, which penetrated into mass culture: "Let's hurry to love people ..."), but at the same time - moving, designed to evoke emotions in the young audience.

The director of *Życie* - as an online influencer - sends a strong message to the young viewer related to the world of values: about the respect and care that should be given to grandmothers and grandparents, about the need to conduct a dialogue with them, about staying in a relationship that may turn out to be (sometimes too late ) very valuable. At the same time, youtuber draws attention to the ambivalent importance of electronic media in the modern world. On the one hand, the film senior tries (effectively and daringly) to create an intergenerational bridge, using a language that is understandable to young people - the language of social media. But at the same time, it is the virtual world that draws her grandson so much that he ceases to notice the needs of a real, close person. For the young viewer, the pessimistic ending of the film becomes a kind of warning against the traps of the cyberspace, and at the same time an incentive to build and nurture intergenerational relations - in the "real world".

## 5. Conclusion

The above considerations lead to several conclusions. There is no doubt that parents, grandparents and educators living in a postmodern reality in the "network society" face serious challenges related to new media, and in particular to social media. In order to enter into a dialogue with the youngest generations, they must, like the old lady from the Director of Life film discussed above, tame the space of the cyberspace, which for their children, grandchildren and pupils (but not necessarily for them) is a natural, "indigenous" environment.

Also, politicians representing older generations should realize the importance of social media in the modern world - because only with their help, using the language of Internet challenges

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<sup>10</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/c/Re%C5%BCyser%C5%BBycia/about> [access 22.09.2020].

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xCJQtdnFhnk> [access 22.09.2020].

(like Jarosław Kaczyński or Janusz Korwin-Mikke mentioned in the work) can today influence their youngest potential voters.

All users of social media - regardless of their generational affiliation - through their involvement in the process of creating virtual content, become co-creators of the "culture of participation", a feature of which is, among others, sense of group bond, motivation to share the products of their activities and faith in the effectiveness of joint ventures and their value (Maciejak 2018, pp. 59-50); and of course one of the main problems of this culture is digital media literacy. J. Burgess and J. Green note in this context that "at least in the most technologized societies, the earlier concerns about the inequality of online participation, centered around the idea of digital divide - the issue of access to technology - have given way to the issue of digital inclusion and participation" (Burgess, Green 2011, pp. 106-107).

However, for the intergenerational dialogue to continue, the effort of 'digital inclusion and participation' by older people in the virtual world is not enough. Also, young people should remember the lesson given to them by one of the Internet influencers, and thus one of the "teachers and masters" of modern times: the virtual world should not obscure the needs of relatives, it should not be an obstacle in building intergenerational relations. In short - following the Director of Life - the internet cannot become more important than grandma.

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