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USE OF TRADITIONAL AND MODERN INFORMATION CHANNELS USED BY POLISH AGRICULTURAL PRESS

Abstract. This paper analyzes the role of agricultural press as an important component of the agribusiness information network. While emphasizing its importance for the knowledge transfer processes, this paper also focuses on the need to develop modern, innovative ways to reach out to today's farmers. Based on data on the circulation of leading magazines (monthly, weekly newspapers etc.) and their online equivalents offered to Polish farmers, this paper analyzes the changes in the popularity of traditional and modern information media. The conclusion emphasizes the need to develop online communication projects, however without overestimating their role. This paper also addresses the issue of sustained credibility and trust from farmers which requires compliance with CSR principles.

Keywords: traditional and modern communication, agricultural magazines, corporate social responsibility

INTRODUCTION

Modern economies are characterized not only by growing demand for information on current operating conditions but also by a network of information flows enabled by IT (Szpunar, 2007). This is true for the entire economy, including agriculture which has been progressively narrowing the knowledge gap since the political transformation in Poland. The changes are continuous and pose a challenge to the agriculture sector which must adapt to its environment. The technological and organizational systems supporting the production processes are changing and so is market and economic knowledge, an essential condition for business development (Walaszczyk et al., 2012, pp. 875–883). Access to knowledge is vital for the effectiveness of decision-making in

the knowledge economy (Skrzypek, 2011, pp. 270–271). As a consequence, farmers – forced by external circumstances – make more or less active attempts to explore the surrounding information networks. Usually, they do so indirectly by using known institutional solutions, consultancy services or online resources (Kozera, 2013, pp. 170–174; Krzyżanowska, 2013, pp. 182–186). However, in the developing information network, farmers continue to look for traditional agricultural magazines which have provided them with knowledge, information and efficient education for many years (Kania et al., 2011, pp. 22–28).

The purpose of this paper is to analyze the changes in information channels used by today's agricultural press. This paper assumes that agricultural press provides knowledge and information to farmers on a largely

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commercial basis. Another assumption is that in order to effectively sell their work, commercial publishers must comply with corporate social responsibility (CSR) principles which make them more credible and contribute to maintaining customer trust (Marzec and Kotas, 2014).

MATERIAL AND METHOD

The analyses assume that specialized agricultural press is a dynamic medium which adapts to economic realities while offering a broad range of communications. Therefore, both a literature search and a review of online information are required. The analysis covered theoretical works and research reports of other authors and institutions. Source materials used in this study also included data obtained from a business intelligence company, SimilarWeb Sp. z o.o., and information retrieved through its tool for a rough comparison of websites. Also used was information from the reports of the Press Distribution Inspection Association on specialized agribusiness press (including magazines related directly to agriculture). A factual analysis of the information served as the basis for conclusions and references presented in the relevant part of this paper.

TRADITIONAL AND MODERN PRESS

Just like other entrepreneur groups, farmers take measures to improve their economic efficiency by continuously deepening and enhancing their knowledge. This determines a constant, though slowly growing, demand for knowledge and intellectual capital which, by enabling a more efficient use of physical production inputs, contribute to improving the farmers' situation (Kozera, 2010, 17–24). The opportunity to provide the agricultural sector with intangible information resources is effectively seized by modern agricultural press which delivers an essential set of relevant knowledge on an increasingly comprehensive basis, and with an ever-greater awareness of needs, while also providing feedback (contact with the editing team, hotlines, Web forums etc.).

The agricultural press has been a part of publications of crucial importance to the development of Polish rural areas and agriculture during the Partitions of Poland, in the independence era, during the economic transformation and in recent years (Solon, 2014, pp. 273–291). The current condition of the Polish agricultural press market was largely affected by the accession to the EU and by

commercialization processes which resulted in opening the domestic market to commercial (including foreign) companies. According to the literature, as many as 37 out of 47 countrywide magazines started to be published after 1989 (Sasińska-Klas, 2014).

As a medium, agricultural press is welcomed by both readers and organizations in charge of knowledge and innovation transfer to the agricultural sector, including agricultural consultancy centers, agricultural chambers, industry associations and even the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development. These favorable opinions are also reflected in surveys which rank agricultural press in the top five sources of information on the evolution of rural areas and agriculture and on the available agricultural funds (and more) for rural areas (Polish rural areas and agriculture 2015).

The progress – which is particularly marked in the IT industry – and the social developments, including the generational shift in farming, make it necessary to modify the existing channels to reach the target audience. The generational transformation of agriculture is the reason for the increasing share of Millennials (people who have spent their entire life in a digital environment) in the group of farmers and their successors (Gołąb-Andrzejak, 2016, p. 140–151). Unlike their predecessors, they are increasingly less influenced by traditional media. This has specific implications for agricultural press publishers, including the need to rely on digital media as a communication channel for the next generation of farmers. In Poland, “Millennials” refer to people born in the 1980s. The relevant literature is more specific and sets the birth year to 1989: the time of political transformation which resulted in changing the population's lifestyle and consumption models (Robak, 2017, pp. 515–526). An additional reason for the development of digital communication is the growth of social media whose role in information processes, especially in making decisions on product selection and purchase, cannot be overestimated (Kaczorowska-Spychalska, 2012, pp. 113–130). In 2017, 81.8% of Polish households had access to Internet from a fixed device. In less urbanized areas, that rate was slightly lower (79.0%). Nearly 11.0% of the Polish population aged 16–74 read an e-book within the last 12 month, with the group aged 25–54 being the most active e-book readers (irrespective of gender). However, these rates were also affected by education levels. The share of e-book readers in the group with primary or junior secondary education was 49.6%.

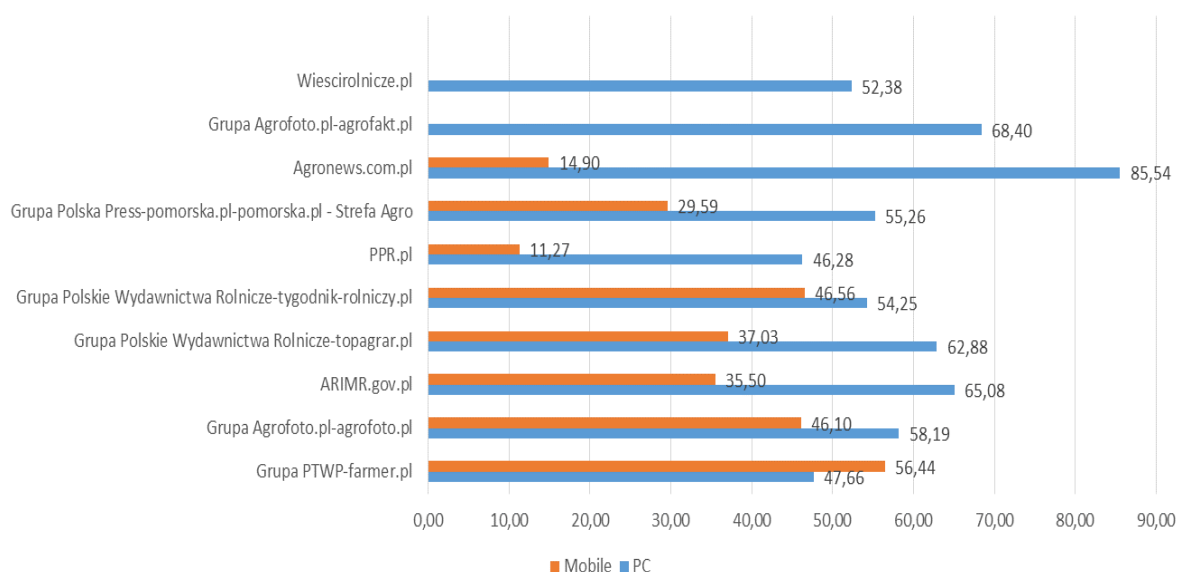


Fig. 1. Different web channels used by selected groups of Polish publishers
Source: 2017 competition inquiry based on the SimilarWeb method for PWR <https://www.similarweb.com/>

A slightly higher rate was recorded for the population with secondary education (51.4%) while the highest level (85.4%) was reported for holders of a university degree (Polish information society in 2017). It may be assumed that online channels used to reach the farming population with an educational message will not drive the readers away from traditional printed agricultural magazines. Nevertheless, the development of digital media is one of the reasons why hardcopy magazines include links to online releases which, in turn, offer an extended access to online services. Publishers of traditional agricultural press become increasingly efficient in using Web portals and online applications. Nearly all of the Polish major agricultural magazines have their own websites which attract more and more visitors. The sites most frequently visited by farmers include topagrar.pl, igit.pl, rolnictwo.com.pl, rolnicy.com, wiescirolnicze.pl and wrp.pl (2017 competition inquiry based on the SimilarWeb method for PWR). While the top portals are owned by publishers with a large and quite diversified website portfolio (Farmer.pl together with 14 other portals is owned by the PTWP¹ Group; Topagrar.pl is

one of the eight portals owned by PWR; Agropolska.pl and 6 other portals are published by Agencja Promocji Rolnictwa i Agrobiznesu APRA Sp. z o.o.), the Online Agricultural Stock Exchange (Internetowa Gielda Rolna i Towarowa, igit.pl) is a separate operator acting as a modern broker who establishes a link between suppliers and customers and provides them with information on the current market situation. Generally, on a countrywide basis, websites which are an online equivalent of specialized agricultural magazines are ranked relatively low in terms of the number of visitors. However, they are ranked high enough to considerably contribute to combating the stereotypical perception of agriculture as a sector with low levels of knowledge absorption.

When analyzing the development prospects for digital customer interaction channels (especially as regards millennial farmers), attention should be paid to the accessibility of Web portals from fixed and mobile devices (Fig. 1). It turns out that fixed devices (PCs) continue to be the predominant tool, although active access from mobile devices becomes progressively more popular. One of the portals considered (farmer.pl) is already

¹ The Group publishes the following magazines: *Miesięcznik Gospodarczy Nowy Przemysł*, *Rynek Zdrowia*, *Farmer*, *Rynek Spożywczy*. The Group's specialized business portals include: *wnp.pl*, *rynekzdrowia.pl*, *portalspozywczy.pl*, *dlahandlu.pl*,

rynekapteki.pl, *propertynews.pl*, *portalsamorzadowy.pl*, *farmer.pl*. The Group organizes business events, conferences and trainings, notably including the European Economic Congress (EEC), one of the most prestigious events hosted in this part of Europe.

more popular with mobile users than with desktop devices (56.4% of visitors used a smartphone or a phone to access information on that portal).

The Internet proved to be an information channel which runs across administrative state borders and contributes more than any other information medium to knowledge dissemination and to shifts in public opinion (Nowakowski, 2008). Also, it has become an incentive for the establishment and development of networks and a driver of interactivity for individuals and groups of people who turned from traditional information consumers into co-authors (Goban-Klas and Sienkiewicz, 1999, pp. 9–41; Sasak, 2007, pp. 109–117). For agricultural press publishers, the Internet has become an additional highly efficient way to increase the total circulation while providing nearly instant feedback from the target audience. A positive effect of using the online distribution channel is the smooth adjustment of agricultural press to the realities of the rapidly changing information market. As a consequence, agricultural press provides more than just real-time monitoring of the environment; it is also one of the factors driving the farmers' response to changes which are presented against a background of social and cultural heritage of rural areas and are put in a historical context. According to H. Lasswell, the above makes it necessary to include the social responsibility concept into the measures taken to disseminate knowledge (McQuail, 2007, p. 23). This is because CSR is a guarantee of trustworthiness and reliability of today's agricultural press. The multiple aspects of social responsibility include ones which have specific implications for, or are unique to, the media sector. The latter are decisive for the quality of relationships with the audience (Roszkowska-Śliż, 2011). Impartiality, a balanced message, a transparent and responsible publishing policy and independence are factors that become increasingly important. They are reflected in the content published, in communication methods and in functions delivered by the media to the society. Any mistakes in that area are harmful to the publishers' credibility. In turn, any irregularity of basic functions of media (informative, correlative or entertainment function) may not only distort the media's social role but may also entail numerous abnormalities (Stankiewicz, 2004, pp. 407–415; Nowakowski, 2008).

Until recently, public radio, press and public television have been considered the most socially responsible media. If commercially driven, the same media have

been considerably less trusted (Nowakowski, 2008). The relevant literature indicates a growing crisis of public confidence in most media, whether modern or traditional (Roszkowska-Śliż, 2011, p. 257–270; Brodzińska, 2013, p. 79–86). In that context, specialized agricultural press and related farming portals remain relatively stable in terms of public trust they enjoy (Krzyżanowska, 2013, pp. 182–186). The commercialization of agricultural media, especially including the press, does not mean a shift away from CSR principles. However, it means that CSR moves into a slightly different dimension. In line with the stakeholders' expectations, whatever the communication channels may be, today the agricultural press is supposed to be a reliable engine for the exchange of information between suppliers and customers, including millennial farmers.

CONCLUSION

When looking at the realities of the Polish agriculture 14 years after Poland's accession to the EU, it is important to remark the contribution of specialized agricultural media to the promotion of, and education on, integration processes. Though largely commercialized, their activities focusing on the advancement of knowledge among the Polish rural population yield visible positive results which, however, are difficult to gauge. While the general progress and generational shift make it necessary to seek new digital communication channels to reach the audience, agricultural magazines in their traditional form continue to be among the most popular sources of knowledge and information for Polish farmers. The agricultural press specializes in providing extensive insights intended for a narrowly defined audience. The fact that agricultural press has for many years been among the most credible providers of information on agriculture and rural areas is the reason why commercial publishers must comply with CSR principles. Otherwise, their credibility would be ruined, resulting in a loss of customers and of a large group of internal stakeholders.

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WYKORZYSTANIE TRADYCYJNYCH I NOWOCZESNYCH KANAŁÓW INFORMACYJNYCH STOSOWANYCH PRZEZ PRASĘ ROLNICZĄ W POLSCE

Abstract. W artykule analizowano rolę prasy rolniczej jako istotnego elementu sieci powiązań informacyjnych agrobiznesu. Podkreślono jej znaczenie w procesach transferu wiedzy, zwracając jednocześnie uwagę na konieczność rozwijania nowoczesnych, innowacyjnych form docierania do współczesnego rolnika. Badano zmiany popularności tradycyjnych i nowoczesnych nośników informacji, wykorzystując w tym celu dane dotyczące nakładu wiodących wydawnictw (miesięczników, dzienników itp.) oferowanych rolnikom w Polsce oraz ich odpowiedników internetowych. W konkluzji podkreślono konieczność rozwijania elektronicznych form przekazu informacyjnego, nie przeceniając jednak ich roli. Wskazano także na problem utrzymania wiarygodności i zaufania rolników, co jest możliwe przy zastosowaniu zasad społecznej odpowiedzialności biznesu.

Słowa kluczowe: tradycyjna i nowoczesna komunikacja, czasopiśmiennictwo rolnicze, społeczna odpowiedzialność biznesu