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# MEDIA CONSUMPTION DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC AND THE ROLE OF MEDIA SYSTEMS

## A COMPARATIVE STUDY

### ABSTRACT

Global crisis events like the coronavirus pandemic can have an effect on the media and the habits of their audience. The need to find information about the virus and imposed restrictions, as well as the intensity of the COVID-19 coverage and the need to verify the truthfulness of news, make people use many different sources of information. People use media in different ways depending on where they live and the type of political regime and model of media system in their country. This paper aims to analyze whether the model of media system affected people's selection of sources of information on the virus in Poland, Italy, France, Czech Republic, Sweden and the United Kingdom, and if the pandemic could have changed the media consumption. Based on an online survey conducted with 9541 respondents from six countries, and reports on media use in Poland in 2019 and 2020, we argue that the model of media system did not determine the changes we observed in media use. The nature of the pandemic was more important in this respect, and, as our research shows, led to an increase in media use in the studied countries – especially websites and social media. The case of Poland also showed that the use of public service increased, which can be interpreted as the need for the public to learn about the government's opinions and restrictions, and to verify

news found online. The increase in online media and public service use are the most noticeable changes in media consumption in Poland during the pandemic compared to 2019.

**Keywords:** COVID-19, media system, political system, media policy, media consumption, comparative study, media audience

## INTRODUCTION

The way the media functions and, in consequence, how it is used, may depend on the political regime or media system of a given country.<sup>1</sup> Also, the character of certain events may influence the media's behavior and the way these events are covered.<sup>2</sup> Due to differences in the functioning of media systems and national media, which according to Dobek-Ostrowska are the core of the system<sup>3</sup>, the same phenomenon may be presented differently in different countries, and also by different media in the same country. This is also the case for global events, such as the coronavirus pandemic, that affect many states. Differences in communicating about COVID-19 may therefore influence the decisions of an audience seeking information about the virus, and what media sources they use. In this way, the audience's consumption of mass media can influence the media system's functioning and development.

The aim of this article is to analyze media usage during the COVID-19 pandemic in Poland compared to Italy, France, Czech Republic, Sweden and the United Kingdom and to check if and how the model of media system affects the selection of sources of information on the virus. Based on a case study of Poland we also want to investigate if and how crisis events such as the pandemic may change the habits of media consumers. Our analyses are based on the results of online surveys conducted and collected as part of the international research project "Pandemic Emergency in Social Perspective. Evidence from a large Web-survey research" (Pesp-6 Project) in Italy, Czech Republic, France, Poland, Sweden and the United Kingdom in 2020. Although all of these countries represent democratic political regimes, there are some differences at the level of political systems. These countries also represent different models of media systems, which makes them interesting to compare in terms of what media sources were most often used by the audience when looking for information about the COVID-19 pandemic.

<sup>1</sup> D.C. Hallin, P. Mancini, *Comparing Media Systems. Three Models of Media and Politics*, Cambridge 2004.

<sup>2</sup> J. Galtung, M. Holmboe Ruge, "The Structure of Foreign News", *Journal of Peace Research* 1965, vol. 2, no. 1, pp. 64-91.

<sup>3</sup> B. Dobek-Ostrowska, *Media masowe na świecie. Modele systemów medialnych i ich dynamika rozwojowa*, Wrocław 2007.

## CHARACTERISTICS OF MEDIA SYSTEMS

The premise of the article is that the model of media system in a given country may influence decisions of media users and their choice of sources of information during the pandemic. It is therefore important to characterize and describe the differences in the media systems of Italy, France, the United Kingdom, Czech Republic, Sweden and Poland to understand the respondents' choices in that regard (see Table 1).

According to Hallin and Mancini, who described three models of media and politics in Western Europe – Italy is an example of the Polarized Pluralist model (the Mediterranean model), France is a border case between the Mediterranean and the Democratic Corporatist Model, Sweden represents the Democratic Corporatist Model, while the United Kingdom is an example of the Liberal Model.<sup>4</sup> Although Poland was not included in this typology, it shows the most similarities to the Polarized Pluralist model. The Italian media system, which is the most representative example of this model, is characterized by a high degree of political parallelism, weak journalistic professionalism, low press readership rates and close relationship between political and media elites, as well as state interference in the media sphere – in particular in public broadcasting. Elements of this model can also be seen in the case of France, however press readership rates there have always been higher than in Italy.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, the French model includes independent institutions controlling the audiovisual media market, such as le Conseil supérieur de l'audiovisuel (CSA). The distinguishing feature of the Mediterranean model is however the strong position of television in the media market, which is especially apparent in Italy. The British case differs significantly from the Polarized Pluralist model, apart from the press showing clear political sympathies. Press readership in this country is higher<sup>6</sup> and the journalistic style more informative and fact-oriented<sup>7</sup> than in France and Italy. Furthermore, journalistic professionalism and autonomy is higher than in the other analyzed countries. Sweden is an example of the Democratic Corporatist Model. In such media systems, there is both polarization of the press market and strong journalistic professionalism.<sup>8</sup> However, today political parallelism is no longer as clear as several decades ago.<sup>9</sup> Compared to other countries, Swedish press readership rates are still high. Public service has a strong position on the audiovisual media market.

<sup>4</sup> D.C. Hallin, P. Mancini, *Comparing Media...*

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 91.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 205.

<sup>7</sup> J.K. Chalaby, "Journalism as an Anglo-American Invention: A Comparison of the Development of French and Anglo-American Journalism, 1830s-1920s", *European Journal of Communication* 1996, vol. 11, no. 3, p. 311.

<sup>8</sup> D.C. Hallin, P. Mancini, *Comparing Media...*, p. 148.

<sup>9</sup> M. Chacińska, *W służbie ludu i inżynierii społecznej. Media publiczne w Danii, Norwegii i Szwecji w perspektywie historycznej i kulturowej*, Gdańsk 2018, p. 202.

It's independent and its journalistic staff is granted autonomy. Moreover, in Sweden there is a significant influence of professional codes of ethics on the attitudes of journalists and media employees.

The Polish case must be discussed separately due to a different social and economic history and differences in media system transformation compared to Italy, France, Sweden and the United Kingdom. According to Dobek-Ostrowska, who proposed her own model of media and politics relations in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), Poland (until 2015) and Czech Republic were representatives of the Hybrid Liberal Model, characterized by a high degree of democracy and low degree of media politicization.<sup>10</sup> This model also includes media commercialization, tabloidization and relatively low journalistic professionalism. Dobek-Ostrowska notes, however, that from 2015 to 2020 the Polish media system evolved towards the Politicized Media Model characteristic for Bulgaria, Hungary, Croatia, Romania and Serbia.<sup>11</sup> The phenomenon of media colonization by political parties, especially public service, is more common in these countries than others.<sup>12</sup> It is also the case in Poland since the Law and Justice party won the parliamentary elections in 2015 and introduced laws aimed at politicizing the institutions that control public service.<sup>13</sup> The commercial audiovisual media market is more independent, although some of them also show support for certain political forces.<sup>14</sup> Other features of the Politicized Media Model are low standards of democracy, low political culture and strong media politicization,<sup>15</sup> which results in limiting the autonomy of journalists and makes opinion journalism in Poland in particular highly politicized.<sup>16</sup> Although editorial offices in Poland avoid expressing their political sympathies directly, one can observe the biased silence phenomenon,<sup>17</sup> which leads to indirect support for a specific political power by avoiding criticism. This is especially the case for opinion-forming press and opinion weeklies in Poland. Moreover, we can observe a de-professionalization of journalism in Poland, and although the country is not located in the Mediterranean Basin

<sup>10</sup> B. Dobek-Ostrowska, "25 Years After Communism: Four Models of Media and Politics in Central and Eastern Europe", in B. Dobek-Ostrowska, M. Głowacki (eds), *Democracy and Media in Central and Eastern Europe 25 Years On*, Frankfurt am Main 2015, p. 27.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29.

<sup>12</sup> P. Bajomi-Lázár, "Variation in Media Freedom: Why Do Some Governments in Central and Eastern Europe Respect Media Freedom More Than Other Ones?", *Central European Journal of Communication* 2015, vol. 8, no. 1(14), pp. 4-20.

<sup>13</sup> Ustawa z dnia 22 czerwca 2016 r. o Radzie Mediów Narodowych, Dz.U. 2016, poz. 929.

<sup>14</sup> B. Dobek-Ostrowska, *Polish Media System in a Comparative Perspective. Media in Politics, Politics in Media*, transl. by K. Jamróg, Berlin 2019, pp. 201-202.

<sup>15</sup> B. Dobek-Ostrowska, "25 Years After Communism...", p. 29.

<sup>16</sup> D. Głuszek-Szafraniec, "Political Journalism in Poland. The Coverage of Politics and Journalism in Opinion Press", in Z. Oniszczyk, D. Głuszek-Szafraniec, M. Wielopolska-Szymura (eds), *The Elites of the Media versus the Elites of Politics in Poland*, Berlin 2020, pp. 25-43.

<sup>17</sup> K. Brzoza-Kolorz, D. Głuszek-Szafraniec, P. Szostok-Nowacka, „Cóż tam, panie, w polityce?” *Czyli o wzajemnym postrzeganiu dziennikarzy i polityków w mediach*, Katowice 2019, pp. 156-157.

region, it shows more characteristics of the Polarized Pluralist model than the other models distinguished by Hallin and Mancini.<sup>18</sup>

A different typology of media systems in CEE was proposed by Castro Herrero et al.<sup>19</sup> The authors took into account four criteria: political parallelism, public broadcasting, press freedom and foreign ownership. It should be noted that the CEE countries do not represent one common model as many Western researchers think. There are many variables differentiating their systems. The researchers distinguished three clusters: eastern, central and northern. Poland and Czech Republic, along with Croatia and Slovenia, were included in the central cluster. Compared to the eastern and northern clusters, there are lower rates of foreign ownership of media. Public service has a strong position and a fairly stable audience. The state regulates the processes of concentration on the media market very strictly, although there is a relatively large share of foreign capital in local media. Press freedom indicators as well as journalistic professionalism are at an average level.<sup>20</sup>

Another important typology of media systems concerns audience agency.<sup>21</sup> Peruško, Vozab and Čuvalo studied media use in various European countries. They applied cluster analysis based on five criteria: public television quality, newspaper circulation (per capita), party influence and policy advocacy, owner influence and journalistic culture.<sup>22</sup> Poland, France, Czech Republic and the United Kingdom represent the European mainstream model, Sweden is an example of the Scandinavian Model, while Italy represents the South and East European model along with a number of post-socialist countries. The latter model includes the basic features of the Mediterranean model, such as low quality of public service and low readership rates. Poland, the United Kingdom, France and Czech Republic were included in the European mainstream model, with average press readership rates, average journalistic professionalism and average rates of political parallelism and owners' influence on the media.<sup>23</sup> Sweden is characterized by high quality of public service and high rates of press readership, as well as journalistic professionalism and autonomy, while political parties and media owners have much less influence than in other models.<sup>24</sup>

Peruško, Vozab and Čuvalo also suggested models of media use in Europe based on the division of wealth between the countries of the global North and the global South. Poland, France and Italy were thus included into the same Southern model,

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<sup>18</sup> D.C. Hallin, P. Mancini, *Comparing Media...*

<sup>19</sup> L. Castro Herrero et al., "Rethinking Hallin and Mancini Beyond the West: An Analysis of Media Systems in Central and Eastern Europe", *International Journal of Communication* 2017, vol. 11, pp. 4797-4823.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Z. Peruško, D. Vozab, A. Čuvalo, "Audiences as a Source of Agency in Media Systems: Post-Socialist Europe in Comparative Perspective", *Medialni Studia (Media Studies)* 2013, no. 2, pp. 137-154.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 144.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., pp. 148-149.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 149.

where usage rates for radio, printed press, Internet and online social networks were low. The United Kingdom and Sweden represented the Northern model, where Internet and online social networks, and other media usage rates were high.<sup>25</sup> Television was not a significant factor in defining clusters *as no consistencies could be identified*.<sup>26</sup> In our analyzes, we are primarily interested in what sources of information people used during the pandemic and how the analyzed countries differed in this respect. Therefore, the models of media use in Europe proposed by Peruško, Vozab and Čuvalo seem particularly interesting to us.

Table 1. Characteristic features of media systems in selected countries

Country	Hallin and Mancini	Peruško, Vozab and Čuvalo	Castro Herrero et al.
IT	High political parallelism, low journalistic professionalism, strong role of state, low newspaper circulation	Low to medium quality of public service television, low newspaper circulation, high party influence, high owner influence, low professionalization of journalism and independence of journalists, low mean score of media use: radio, printed newspapers, Internet and social networks	does not apply to this country
FR	High political parallelism, low journalistic professionalism, strong role of state, low newspaper circulation	Medium party influence, medium owner influence, medium professionalization of journalism and independence of journalists, low mean score of media use: radio, printed newspapers, Internet and social networks	does not apply to this country
PL	does not apply to this country	Medium party influence, medium owner influence, medium professionalization of journalism and independence of journalists, low mean score of media use: radio, printed newspapers, Internet and social networks	Relatively strong PSB (Public Service Broadcasting), low level of foreign ownership, high level of ownership concentration
UK	Low political parallelism, high journalistic professionalism, weak role of state, high newspaper circulation	Medium party influence, medium owner influence, medium professionalization of journalism and independence of journalists, high mean score of media use: radio, printed newspapers, Internet and social networks	does not apply to this country
CZ	does not apply to this country	Medium party influence, medium owner influence, medium professionalization of journalism and independence of journalists, low mean score of media use: radio, printed newspapers, Internet and social networks	Relatively strong PSB (Public Service Broadcasting), low level of foreign ownership, high level of ownership concentration

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 150.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 147.

Country	Hallin and Mancini	Peruško, Vozab and Čuvalo	Castro Herrero et al.
SW	High political parallelism, high journalistic professionalism, strong role of state, high newspaper circulation	High quality of public service television, high newspaper circulation, low party influence, low owner influence, high professionalization of journalism and independence of journalists, high mean score of media use: radio, printed newspapers, Internet and social networks	does not apply to this country

Source: Hallin and Mancini 2004; Peruško, Vozab and Čuvalo 2013; Castro Herrero et al. 2017.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

The main method we used in the study was statistical description. We used an online panel with people from the six studied countries, and the panel did not have the character of a representative sample. Nowadays this is a recognized method of statistical research,<sup>27</sup> although it did not allow us to carry out typical statistical inference. The legitimacy of panel research as a method of data collecting among researchers is growing.<sup>28</sup> The use of statistical description in research on media consumption and content is characteristic of media and social communication studies.<sup>29</sup>

The data used in the study was collected in six countries: Italy, the United Kingdom, Sweden, France, Czech Republic and Poland. The article presents the results of a survey conducted on a sample of 9541 respondents: 2183 people from Italy, 2014 from France, 1604 from Poland, 1550 from Czech Republic, 1004 from Sweden and 1096 from the United Kingdom. The respondents were selected using the snowball sampling technique, meaning that the respondents suggested other people to join the research.<sup>30</sup> This technique was helpful during the lockdown, because our survey was made online, mainly through social media and e-mail. In this way the survey used interpersonal relationships and connections between different people. The

<sup>27</sup> M. Callegaro et al., "A Critical Review of Studies Investigating the Quality of Data Obtained with Online Panels Based on Probability and Nonprobability Samples", in M. Callegaro et al. (eds), *Online Panel Research. A Data Quality Perspective*, Chichester 2014, pp. 23-53.

<sup>28</sup> Ch.O.L.H. Porter et al., "The Use of Online Panel Data in Management Research: A Review and Recommendations", *Journal of Management* 2019, vol. 45, no. 1, pp. 319-344.

<sup>29</sup> A. Casero-Ripollés, "Impact of Covid-19 on the Media System. Communicative and Democratic Consequences of News Consumption During the Outbreak", *El profesional de la información* 2020, vol. 29, no. 2, pp. 1-11. See also: B. Kalsnes, A.O. Larsson, "Facebook News Use During the 2017 Norwegian Elections – Assessing the Influence of Hyperpartisan News", *Journalism Practice* 2021, vol. 15, no. 2, pp. 209-225; D.C. Hallin et al., "Mediatización de las pandemias: la cobertura sobre la gripe A (H1N1) de 2009 en Argentina, Estados Unidos y Venezuela", *Comunicación y Sociedad* 2020, vol. 17, pp. 1-24.

<sup>30</sup> E. Babbie, *The Practice of Social Research*, Belmont, CA 2004.

selection of people to the sample was voluntary, which makes it not a representative sample. However, it is possible to use statistical description and distinguish features characteristic for the studied group of respondents. As Casero-Ripollés points out, even a case study allows for a collection of observations that can be used to describe and compare the functioning of different countries, characterized by similar political conditions.<sup>31</sup>

The research period covered two months of the lockdown: April and May 2020, when movement restrictions had been implemented in the analyzed countries. The survey consisted of 31 questions and personal details like gender and age. The questions concerned various spheres of human life during the pandemic, such as physical and mental well-being, social contacts, awareness of threats associated with the virus, ways of using sources of information, trust in public institutions. In this study we only use data on the preferred sources of information during and about the pandemic such as websites, social media, TV, radio, printed and online newspapers. We did not take into account such variables as gender or age of respondents. From the perspective of media systems theories, it is not important to differentiate media users in this respect.

Our research has a comparative character, because we consider this perspective to be important in terms of finding differences between media systems and media practices of audiences in certain countries. Comparative analysis is most often used in research on macro structures. Thanks to that we can observe both differences and similarities between different media systems around the world. Comparative analysis is a frequently used research method in media systems studies.<sup>32</sup> It is a part of a wider concept – systems analysis, through which we can study the diversity of media markets and audience behavior. Systems analysis allows for studying a specific part of a media system as well as the system as a whole.<sup>33</sup> According to Klimkiewicz, research on the diversity of perception has rarely been included in the study of media systems, although it is a part of a broader analysis of media pluralism in general.<sup>34</sup> We chose to focus on the sources of information used by people during the pandemic as an example of differences and similarities in media systems around the world.

We also used desk research when referring to the “Reuters Institute Digital News Report” from 2019 and 2020, the Public Opinion Research Center (CBOS) report from May 2019 on the credibility of the media in Poland, and to rankings of media popularity in the country. In the case of the Reuters Institute’s reports, the research

<sup>31</sup> A. Casero-Ripollés, “Influencers in the Political Conversation on Twitter: Identifying Digital Authority with Big Data”, *Sustainability* 2021, vol. 13, no. 5, p. 4.

<sup>32</sup> D.C. Hallin, P. Mancini, *Comparing Media...*, pp. 4-5. See also: B. Klimkiewicz, *A Polyvalent Media Policy in the enlarged European Union*, Cracow 2014.

<sup>33</sup> B. Klimkiewicz, “Analiza systemowa na przykładzie badań pluralizmu mediów”, in A. Szymańska, M. Lisowska-Magdziarz, A. Hess (eds), *Metody badań medioznawczych i ich zastosowanie*, Kraków 2018, pp. 299-323.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 320-321.

was conducted at the turn of January and February in 2019<sup>35</sup> and 2020<sup>36</sup> using an on-line survey on a representative sample of media users. For Poland the final sample size was 2009 respondents in 2019, and 2008 respondents in 2020. The CBOS research was conducted using face-to-face interviews supplemented by CATI in April 2019 on a representative random sample of 1064 adult Polish residents.<sup>37</sup> Desk research was also used in the literature review.

In this article we primarily focused on statistical data on preferred sources of information by people from the analyzed countries. We created three research questions:

RQ1: What sources of information on COVID-19 were used by the respondents and what were the differences between the analyzed countries in this respect?

RQ2: Could the media system model influence people's choice of sources of information during the pandemic?

RQ3: Has there been a change in media usage in Poland during the pandemic compared to before it?

## RESULTS

### Media sources and their use during the COVID-19 pandemic

One of the questions we asked in the survey concerned the main sources of information about COVID-19. Each of the respondents could choose maximum two sources from the list of six types of media: websites, social media, television, radio, printed and on-line newspapers (see Table 2), which gave the sum of 17 502 indications in total from 9541 respondents from six countries. This shows that, indeed, most of the respondents chose two media sources that they used the most during the pandemic. Thanks to this, it was possible to determine whether the recipients used traditional or online media more often during the lockdown, as well as what specific types of media they usually consumed.

The overall results of the analysis show that for most of the respondents (31.28%) television was the main source of information about the virus. Websites were ranked second (25.44%), social media third (18.62%) and online newspapers fourth (16.52%). Interestingly, although television, which is an example of traditional media, was the most popular source of information about the pandemic, the other two types of traditional media – radio (5.69%) and printed newspapers (2.46%) – together obtained just

<sup>35</sup> N. Newman et al., "Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2019", Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, at [https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2019-06/DNR\\_2019\\_FINAL\\_0.pdf](https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2019-06/DNR_2019_FINAL_0.pdf), 7 October 2021.

<sup>36</sup> N. Newman et al., "Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2020", Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, at [https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2020-06/DNR\\_2020\\_FINAL.pdf](https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2020-06/DNR_2020_FINAL.pdf), 6 October 2021.

<sup>37</sup> Centrum Badań Opinii Społecznej, "Wiarygodność mediów", *Komunikat z Badań* 2019, no. 70, at [https://cbos.pl/SPISKOM.POL/2019/K\\_070\\_19.PDF](https://cbos.pl/SPISKOM.POL/2019/K_070_19.PDF), 8 October 2021.

over 8% of all indications. This is half as many as for the fourth in line – online newspapers. Printed newspapers were, for comparison, the least frequently chosen media type by respondents. On the one hand, it could be due to the lockdown and people not going out to buy newspapers. On the other hand, it says something about the respondents' media habits, for example in the context of the popularity of e-versions of media outlets over traditional ones. This trend is confirmed by the difference between the sum of Internet sources – websites, social media and online newspapers, and traditional sources – television, radio and printed newspapers. Online media was the main source of information about the pandemic for 60.6% of respondents, and traditional media for 39.4%. This is a significant difference of over 20 percentage points.

**Table 2.** Main sources of information about the COVID-19 pandemic in the analyzed countries

Country	Websites	Social media	TV	Radio	Printed newspapers	Online newspapers	Total
IT	20.58%	14.54%	36.35%	3.02%	3.55%	21.95%	100%
FR	16.20%	23.53%	7.82%	7.82%	3.50%	16.58%	100%
PL	37.71%	23.54%	24.75%	5.19%	0.84%	7.98%	100%
UK	30.47%	15.72%	30.52%	5.95%	1.67%	15.68%	100%
CZ	28.92%	15.61%	32.54%	6.22%	2.08%	14.63%	100%
SW	25.12%	16.57%	27.67%	6.53%	1.96%	22.15%	100%
Total	25.44%	18.62%	31.28%	5.69%	2.46%	16.52%	100%

$N_{IT}=3940$ ,  $N_{FR}=3939$ ,  $N_{PL}=2970$ ,  $N_{UK}=2035$ ,  $N_{CZ}=2735$ ,  $N_{SW}=1883$

Source: Pesp-6 Project.

The domination of Internet sources over traditional media is also noticeable in each of the countries. Websites, social media and online newspapers are the main sources of information about the pandemic for 56.31% of respondents in France, 57.07% in Italy, 61.87% in the United Kingdom, 63.48% in Sweden, 66.68% in Czech Republic and 69.23% in Poland. As can be seen, online media are especially dominant in Poland.

Despite some similarities between the analyzed countries, it is possible to observe significant differences when it comes to individual types of media (see Table 2). Television is the dominant source of information for Italy (36.35%), Czech Republic (32.54%), the United Kingdom (30.52%) and Sweden (27.67%). Also in the case of Poland, this medium plays a significant role, being the second most frequently chosen source of information (24.75%) after websites (37.71%). On the contrary, for French respondents television (7.82%) is one of the rarest sources of information about COVID-19. In France, Italy, Poland, Czech Republic, Sweden, and the United Kingdom, radio and printed newspapers were the least frequently used media. Italy stands out as having radio (3.02%), and not printed newspapers, as the least popular media type. It

should be noted that in the United Kingdom and Sweden, less than two percent chose printed newspapers, while in the case of Poland it was only one percent (see Table 2).

Considering the role of online media in obtaining information about the pandemic, it is possible to make the following conclusions. Websites are the most popular source of information for Poland (37.71%), while it comes in second for the United Kingdom (30.47%), Czech Republic (28.92%) and Sweden (25.12%), and third for Italy (20.58%) and France (16.20%). Poles were also the people that searched for information about the pandemic on social media most often (23.54%). For this country it was the third most popular source of information. In France, however, social media was the most used type of media (23.53%). For the United Kingdom (15.72%) and Czech Republic (15.61%), social media is the third and for Italy (14.54%) and Sweden (16.57%) the fourth in line of sources used. The last online medium distinguished in the survey is online newspapers. It is the second most popular source for France (16.58%) and Italy (21.95%), third for Sweden (22.15%) and fourth for Poland (7.98%), Czech Republic (14.63%) and the United Kingdom (15.68%).

In summary, for Italy television (36.35%) was the most popular source of information, and radio (3.02%) was the one that was used least frequently. In the case of France, social media (23.53%) was the source most often chosen by respondents, and printed newspapers (3.50%) the least. Poles most often searched for information about COVID-19 on websites (37.71%), and the least often, just like the French audience, in printed newspapers (0.84%). For the United Kingdom, television (30.52%) turned out to be the most important media source, and printed press (1.67%) the least. The Czechs used television most often (32.54%) and printed newspapers the least (2.08%). For Swedes, just like for Czechs, Italians and Brits, the most popular medium was television (27.67%), and printed newspapers the least popular (1.96%), as in the case of five out of the six analyzed countries – Italy being the exception.

### **The use of media before and during the pandemic – the case of Poland**

The results of the survey conducted as part of the Pesp-6 Project show that Poles most often searched for information about COVID-19 on websites (37.71%), on television (24.75%) and on social media (24.54%). The Reuters Institute “Digital News Report” from 2020 seems to confirm this trend. The results presented in the report show an increasing role of the Internet (including social media) since 2016, and a decline for television as a source of news<sup>38</sup> in Poland. According to the Reuters Institute, the use of Internet as a source of news among the Polish respondents in 2020 is at almost 87% (including social media – 66%), while television is at 75% (see Table 3). It can be seen that there is a difference of 12 percentage points between these two media types, while in 2015–2016 it was only three percent in favor of the Internet.<sup>39</sup> A downward trend is also noticeable in the case of printed media, which in the report was described as

<sup>38</sup> N. Newman et al., “Reuters Institute... 2020”.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

the least popular source of news (24%)<sup>40</sup> in Poland in 2020. These results are in line with the results of our survey, according to which only 0.84% of media users in Poland searched for information about the coronavirus pandemic in printed newspapers.

In order to check whether and to what extent media use by Poles has changed before and during the pandemic, we decided to compare the data from our survey and the Reuters Institute report from 2020 with the research on this subject from 2019. According to the “Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2019”,<sup>41</sup> online media (including social media – 60%) was the main source of news for 86% of Poles, television for 76%, and print media for 25% (see Table 3). Data about media sources of information in 2019 is also provided by the Public Opinion Research Center (CBOS) report on media credibility.<sup>42</sup> For 58% of the respondents, the main source of information about national and foreign events was television, including online broadcasts. 27% of respondents chose the Internet, 9% radio, 2% the press and 2% other sources.<sup>43</sup> Although the data from CBOS and the Reuters Institute from 2019 differ in the case of television and Internet consumption, it is clear that Internet use grew in 2020. It is also important that the data from both 2019 and 2020 show printed press as the rarest source of information for the audience. The situation looks similar in the case of radio, which, although rated higher than the press, was one of the rarest sources of information for Poles before and during the pandemic (see Table 2).

**Table 3.** Sources of news in Poland in 2019 and 2020

Type of media	2019	2020
Online (incl. social media)	86%	87%
TV	76%	75%
Print	25%	24%
Social media	60%	66%

$N_{2019} = 2\,009$ ,  $N_{2020} = 2\,008$ .

Source: “Reuters Institute Digital News Report” 2019 and 2020.

Some differences in media usage in Poland before and during the pandemic are also noticeable in the popularity rankings of specific media outlets. In this part of the analysis the three most popular types of media in Poland according to the project’s survey – websites, TV and social media – were taken into account (see Table 2). When it comes to TV stations, one of the most important changes is the increase in public service viewership over private channels. For example, TVP1 (9.63%), which is the main TV channel of the public service company TVP, was in the first half of 2019

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> N. Newman et al., “Reuters Institute... 2019”.

<sup>42</sup> Centrum Badania Opinii Społecznej, “Wiarygodność...”.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

placed second among national TV stations, behind privately owned Polsat (10.19%).<sup>44</sup> In turn, in the first half of 2020, TVP1 (9.68%) was ahead of Polsat (8.36%), becoming the most popular TV station in the country. Certain changes are also noticeable in the case of national TV news stations such as TVP Info, a public service news channel, and TVN24, a channel owned by Discovery. Both stations recorded an increase in viewership in 2020, but TVP Info, which in 2019 was ranked lower than TVN24, in 2020 overtook this station in the viewership ranking.<sup>45</sup> This also says something about the popularity of public service as a source of information about the pandemic in Poland.

Similar trends to those of TV stations can be noticed in the case of websites, especially news portals such as Onet and Wirtualna Polska (WP). According to CBOS,<sup>46</sup> WP was placed first in the ranking of online sources of information in the country in 2019, just before Onet. However, in the Gemius/PBI research from 2020, Onet is ahead of WP in the popularity ranking, having almost 1.5 million more users than WP and gaining over one million users compared to 2019.<sup>47</sup> Similar results are shown in the Reuters report.<sup>48</sup> A significant increase in views is also noticeable in the case of other news portals. For example those connected with traditional media, such as tvn.24.pl, fakt.pl, gazeta.pl and polsatnews.pl,<sup>49</sup> which publish content similar to that in their traditional counterparts. An increase in the number of users in 2020 compared to 2019 also occurred in social media.<sup>50</sup> Although Facebook and Instagram still remain the most popular media of this type in Poland, the third in line, Twitter – used mainly by journalists and politicians in the country<sup>51</sup> – grew by almost 1.5 million users in 2020.<sup>52</sup> It should be noted that the increase in users of online media – both websites and social media – as well as the increase in viewership of TV news channels, reflect the results obtained from the project's surveys, where websites is the most popular source and TV comes second (see Table 2).

<sup>44</sup> M. Kurdupski, „TVP1 i TVN nowymi liderami w I półroczu – rekordy TVP Info, TVN24 i Polsat News. »Teleexpress« hitem”, *Wirtualne Media*, 7 July 2020, at <https://www.wirtualnemedial.pl/artykul/ogladalnosc-telewizji-i-polrocze-2020-tvp1-lider-teleexpress-hit>, 8 October 2021.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Centrum Badań Opinii Społecznej, „Wiarygodność...”.

<sup>47</sup> “Onet wyprzedził WP.pl w informacjach i publicystyce, mocno w górę Polsatnews.pl i Wyborcza.pl (TOP10)”, *Wirtualne Media*, 21 September 2020, at <https://www.wirtualnemedial.pl/artykul/onet-wyprzedzil-wp-pl-w-informacjach-i-publicystyce-mocno-w-gore-polsatnews-pl-i-wyborcza-pl-top10>, 8 October 2021.

<sup>48</sup> N. Newman et al., “Reuters Institute... 2019”.

<sup>49</sup> “Onet wyprzedził...”.

<sup>50</sup> N. Newman et al., “Reuters Institute... 2020”.

<sup>51</sup> T. Aleksandrowicz, “Twitter w polityce – jak ćwierkają lokalni liderzy? Wykorzystanie serwisu przez dwadzieścia największych polskich miast i ich prezydentów”, *Zarządzanie Publiczne* 2016, no. 2(34), pp. 99-108.

<sup>52</sup> “Rośnie popularność platform społecznościowych. Liderem wzrostów TikTok, w dół Wykop, Fotka mobile i NK.pl”, *Wirtualne Media*, 28 September 2020, at <https://www.wirtualnemedial.pl/artykul/rosnie-popularnosc-platform-spolesnosciowych-liderem-wzrostow-tiktok-w-dol-wykop-fotka-mobile-i-nk-pl>, 8 October 2021.

## DISCUSSION

In all countries it is possible to observe a diminishing role of the printed press, caused by technological changes in the media market and the strengthening of the online press, which has been a general trend in the world for several years.<sup>53</sup> However, during the pandemic, the printed press crisis became even more apparent due to problems with distribution and the ability to reach potential readers. This issue is all the more important as in most of the analyzed countries the printed daily press is not subscribed. Subscription plays an important role in distribution and stable funding sources of the media. The case of Poland is not surprising, as the readership rates in this country have been dropping dramatically for many years. According to Mielczarek, the commercialization of the Polish press market, for example the launch of advertising and free newspapers,<sup>54</sup> has led to fewer people buying newspapers. The digitalization of the press and the growing popularity of e-editions of newspapers also adds to this trend.<sup>55</sup> The low readership of the press and its weak position in all the studied countries (Table 2), may indicate a pan-European trend in media consumption during the COVID-19 pandemic, with differences in media systems having little effect on people's choices. While in the case of Italy and France the low press readership corresponds to the characteristic features of their media systems as defined by Hallin and Mancini,<sup>56</sup> in the case of Sweden and UK, where press circulation should be high according to researchers,<sup>57</sup> we find no such correlation. Usage of printed newspapers in Sweden turned out to be surprisingly low, even lower than in the countries belonging to the Polarized Pluralist model: France and Italy.<sup>58</sup> However, it should be taken into account that press readership in Sweden is not so much declining as it is changing form. Based on the data collected, we saw the highest percentage of online newspaper use in this country.

As in the case of the press market (Poland, Italy, France), certain expectations with regard to the use of audiovisual media in some of the analyzed countries were met. One example is Italy, where the dominant position of television during the pandemic was to be expected given the theories about the country's media system.<sup>59</sup> Television is still one

<sup>53</sup> D. Ahlers, "News Consumption and the New Electronic Media", *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, 2006, vol. 11, no. 1, pp. 29-52. See also: C. Sparks et al., "The Impact of Digital Media on Newspapers: Comparing Responses in China and the United States", *Global Media and China* 2006, vol. 1, no. 3, pp. 186-207.

<sup>54</sup> T. Mielczarek, "Dlaczego Polacy nie czytają gazet?", *Rocznik Bibliologiczno-Prasoznawczy* 2012, vol. 4, no. 2, pp. 14-30.

<sup>55</sup> J. Dzierżyńska-Mielczarek, "Zmiany na rynku prasowym w Polsce pod wpływem nowych technologii i Internetu", *Rocznik Historii Prasy Polskiej* 2017, vol. 20, no. 4, pp. 5-28.

<sup>56</sup> D.C. Hallin, P. Mancini, *Comparing Media...*

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*; Z. Peruško, D. Vozab, A. Čuvalo, "Audiences as a Source...", pp. 137-154.

of the main sources of information about the world for many Italians,<sup>60</sup> and that is why this medium was most often used by the Italian respondents (Table 2). However, in some cases our results did not match our expectations based on the typologies of media systems previously discussed (Table 1). The audiovisual media in the United Kingdom had a strong position during the pandemic, although this is not a typical feature of the Liberal Model to which, according to Hallin and Mancini,<sup>61</sup> this country belongs to. In France, the weak position of the audiovisual media also does not correspond to the characteristics of the Mediterranean model<sup>62</sup> (see Table 1).

Furthermore, Peruško, Vozab and Čuvalo's<sup>63</sup> models of media use do not reflect the situation of the analyzed countries during the pandemic. The division of countries into a rich North and a poorer South it is not confirmed by the media usage in 2020. France, Czech Republic, Poland and Italy were to represent a model in which rates of social media and Internet use are lower than in Northern countries (such as Sweden or the United Kingdom). But the results show that Polish and Czech respondents very often used websites (almost as often as media users in the United Kingdom) (Table 2). Social media was also extremely popular in Poland and France. These results made us realize that there are dynamic changes taking place among media users in these countries, and that the media use during the pandemic did not correspond to the media systems concept by Peruško, Vozab and Čuvalo.<sup>64</sup>

Another important observation from our research is the fact that citizens' consumption of information increased significantly during the pandemic, which is in line with Casero-Ripollés study on this subject.<sup>65</sup> During the lockdown, many people who had not previously searched for information in the media began to be interested in news about COVID-19 as well as the restrictions and their consequences. Such a situation was noticeable in the case of Poland, where there was an increase in public service television viewership<sup>66</sup> and online media use.<sup>67</sup> The increase in audience interest in news about the virus may be due to the intensity of the coverage of the pandemic. It has been the main topic in the media in many countries since the turn of February and March, which also influenced the way media outlets function. For example they created *special primetime TV shows [...] or sections on websites dedicated COVID-19* where audiences could find information about how the virus spread and how to protect themselves against it<sup>68</sup>. In

<sup>60</sup> P. Mancini, M. Gerli, "Italy", Media Landscapes, at <https://medialandscapes.org/country/italy/media/television>, 10 October 2021.

<sup>61</sup> D.C. Hallin, P. Mancini, *Comparing Media...*

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Z. Peruško, D. Vozab, A. Čuvalo, "Audiences as a Source...", pp. 137-154.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> A. Casero-Ripollés, "Impact of Covid-19...", pp. 1-11.

<sup>66</sup> M. Kurdupski, "TVP1 i TVN..."

<sup>67</sup> "Rośnie popularność platform..."

<sup>68</sup> P. Pacula, "Poland: Coronavirus and the Media", European Journalism Observatory, 31 March 2020, at <https://en.ejo.ch/ethics-quality/poland-coronavirus-and-the-media>, 8 October 2021.

this way the media has become the main source of information about the coronavirus for a large part of citizens in the analyzed countries. Moreover, the change in the functioning of the media and the intense coverage of COVID-19 could make it take the form of a media event, which in turn could have influenced audience behavior. Hodalska points out that media events, for example catastrophes, terrorists attacks, as well as pandemics, create greater interest from the audience, for whom media consumption becomes a form of ritual or celebration,<sup>69</sup> and also triggers a need to almost constantly follow the news event.

How people use the media has also changed due to the lockdown. Casero-Ripollés points out that the greatest increase in popularity was recorded in the case of social media, which is also reflected by the results of our survey – where social media was the third most popular source of information about the pandemic (Table 2) – and data about sources of news in Poland from the Reuters Institute reports from 2019<sup>70</sup> and 2020.<sup>71</sup> This may be due to the fact that as Lazreg et al. write *social media has become the de facto medium for public crisis communication*,<sup>72</sup> and therefore respondents from the analyzed countries could search there for information about the pandemic, like official communications from authorities or services. On the other hand, Casero-Ripollés points out that public television was among the most important sources of information in Europe during the pandemic.<sup>73</sup> Such changes are also visible in the case of Poland,<sup>74</sup> which might indicate a general trend in the way media are used during crisis situations, especially those with a global character such as the COVID-19 pandemic. This might also have something to do with trust in the media. It can be assumed that the media that are most often consumed by recipients are also the ones that they trust the most and from which they mainly obtain information about the world, as confirmed by the studies of Strömbäck et al.<sup>75</sup> and Kalogeropoulos et al.<sup>76</sup> However, The Reuters Institute research shows that trust in the news media continues to fall globally, and in the countries analyzed in this article it ranges from 45% in Poland to 23% in France.<sup>77</sup> In

<sup>69</sup> M. Hodalska, “Wydarzenia medialne i maratony katastrof – jak trauma i terror zmieniają teorie komunikacji”, *Zeszyty Prasoznawcze* 2014, vol. 57, no. 4(220), pp. 678-693.

<sup>70</sup> N. Newman et al., “Reuters Institute... 2019”.

<sup>71</sup> N. Newman et al., “Reuters Institute... 2020”.

<sup>72</sup> M.B. Lazreg et al., “Social Media Analysis in Crisis Situations: Can Social Media be a Reliable Information Source for Emergency Management Services?”, Conference paper: Proceedings of the 27th International Conference on Information Systems Development (ISD) At: Lund, Sweden (2018), p. 1, at [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/328198192\\_Social\\_Media\\_Analysis\\_in\\_Crisis\\_Situations\\_Can\\_Social\\_Media\\_be\\_a\\_Reliable\\_Information\\_Source\\_for\\_Emergency\\_Management\\_Services](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/328198192_Social_Media_Analysis_in_Crisis_Situations_Can_Social_Media_be_a_Reliable_Information_Source_for_Emergency_Management_Services), 22 November 2021.

<sup>73</sup> A. Casero-Ripollés, “Impact of Covid-19...”, p. 6.

<sup>74</sup> M. Kurdupski, „TVP1 i TVN...”.

<sup>75</sup> J. Strömbäck et al., “News Media Trust and Its Impact on Media Use: Toward a Framework for Future Research”, *Annals of the International Communication Association* 2020, vol. 44, no. 2, pp. 139-156.

<sup>76</sup> A. Kalogeropoulos et al., “News Media Trust and News Consumption: Factors Related to Trust in News in 35 Countries”, *International Journal of Communication* 2019, vol. 13, pp. 3672-3693.

<sup>77</sup> N. Newman et al., “Reuters Institute... 2020”.

the case of Sweden it is at 38%, 33% for Czech Republic, 29% for Italy and 28% for the United Kingdom.<sup>78</sup> People might therefore want to verify information by using a variety sources – especially information found on the Internet due to the excess of fake news and misinformation about the pandemic, which many researchers point out.<sup>79</sup> It may be that audiences use traditional media, for example public service, because they want to verify information found online, and because they are interested in authorities' opinions on the virus and restrictions, which in many countries, for example in Poland, were mostly presented in this kind of media. Interestingly, a strong position of public service is, according to Castro Herrero et al.,<sup>80</sup> an important feature of the 'central cluster' to which Poland belongs, which shows that certain features of media systems are reflected in the way media is consumed by the respondents. Moreover, public service media in Poland, which became more popular during the pandemic, are highly politicized<sup>81</sup> and 'colonized' by the ruling coalition,<sup>82</sup> which also corresponds to the characteristics of the media system to which Poland belongs.<sup>83</sup> However, the fact that some of our findings correspond to the characteristic features of the countries' media systems does not prove that these systems influenced people's choice of sources of information during the pandemic.

## CONCLUSION

The aim of our analyses was to examine media usage during the pandemic in Poland and compare this to Italy, France, Czech Republic, Sweden and the United Kingdom, and to check whether the media systems of these countries had an effect on the choice of sources of information about the virus. We were also interested in the differences in media use in Poland before and during the pandemic. Our research showed that the dominant sources of information during the pandemic were online media such as websites, social media and online newspapers, chosen by over 60% of respondents. These media were usually among the four most frequently chosen sources. In the case of Poland, websites were even the most frequently chosen medium, while it comes second in Czech Republic, Sweden and the United Kingdom. The French most often chose social media. Other sources of information, such as radio and the printed press, generally do not have a strong position. In all countries except France, we have seen that

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> T. Kaya, "The Changes in the Effects of Social Media Use of Cypriots Due to COVID-19 Pandemic", *Technology in Society*, vol. 63, November 2020, pp. 1-7. See also: S.B. Naeem, R. Bhatti, A. Khan, "An Exploration of How Fake News Is Taking Over Social Media and Putting Public Health at Risk", *Health Information and Libraries Journal* 2020, vol. 38, no. 2, pp. 143-149.

<sup>80</sup> L. Castro Herrero et al., "Rethinking Hallin and Mancini...", pp. 4797-4823.

<sup>81</sup> B. Dobek-Ostrowska, "25 Years After Communism...", p. 27.

<sup>82</sup> P. Bajomi-Lázár, "Variation in Media Freedom...", pp. 4-20.

<sup>83</sup> D.C. Hallin, P. Mancini, *Comparing Media...*; B. Dobek-Ostrowska, "25 Years After Communism...", p. 27.

television played an important role as a source of information during the lockdown, especially in Italy and Czech Republic. Although it is not an online medium, it was the single most popular medium. We also noted the growing position of the online press, especially in Italy and Sweden. We see that there are significant differences between the analyzed countries. However, some general trends are noticeable, such as the increase in general media use, especially the Internet and social media as well as public service and news media outlets, which could say something about the audience's behavior during crisis situations and other important events.

Regarding the research question – Could the media system model influence people's choice of sources of information during the pandemic? – the answer is that we cannot see such a connection. The results of our research show that the current typologies of media systems<sup>84</sup> do not describe the behavioral pattern of the studied group during the pandemic. Some researchers have stated<sup>85</sup> that higher rates of Internet and social media use are characteristic of societies of the rich North. In the studied group, we observed higher rates of Internet use and various forms of online media among respondents from all six countries. We believe that this finding should be subject to further studies as we suspect that the restrictions of people-to-people contacts during the pandemic can lead to higher use of online and social media. We noticed significant differences related to the consumption of television and online press (see Table 2), but we cannot state unequivocally that there is a link between the media system and the use of media during the pandemic.

In Poland there were some noticeable differences in media usage before and during the pandemic. In 2020, the use of the Internet and social media increased, which was probably due to their greater availability and speed during the lockdown compared to other sources. It is also interesting that in 2020 Poles consumed information from public service more often than from private media outlets, which were dominant in 2019. These changes seem to be in line with the previously described trend pointed out by Casero-Ripollés,<sup>86</sup> that crisis events affect how people consume media. The results of our research suggest that the pandemic had more of an effect on people's media habits than the media system models in the analyzed countries.

The limitation of our research is its purely quantitative nature and the fact that the respondents did not specify what particular media outlets they mostly consumed during the pandemic. For example, it would have been better if the respondents could have clarified, in the case of radio and television, whether they meant commercial media or public service. Or, for example, what exactly were the websites that they used. This information would be helpful in better understanding and exploring the processes described in the article. In the future it could be good to supplement a similar survey with in-depth interviews with the audience to better understand the changes in their media

<sup>84</sup> D.C. Hallin, P. Mancini, *Comparing Media...*; L. Castro Herrero et al., "Rethinking Hallin and Mancini...", pp. 4797-4823; Z. Peruško, D. Vozab, A. Čuvalo, "Audiences as a Source...", pp. 137-154.

<sup>85</sup> Z. Peruško, D. Vozab, A. Čuvalo, "Audiences as a Source...", pp. 137-154.

<sup>86</sup> A. Casero-Ripollés, "Impact of Covid-19...", p. 6.

use habits, especially before and during crisis situations and other significant events. Moreover, due to the intensification of the coronavirus outbreak in Poland and neighboring countries, which is currently taking place, an interesting idea for future research is to compare media use in different phases of the pandemic. Another limitation of our analysis may be the use of statistical description as the main research method and the use of an online panel that does not have the character of a representative sample. However, these methods are not uncommon in research on media consumption and content.<sup>87</sup> We concluded that the use of statistical description in our analysis allowed us to observe significant changes regarding media consumption in selected European countries during the pandemic and the role of media systems on people's choice of sources of information about the virus.

### Author Contributions

All authors contributed equally to the writing of this article.

### Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid. See also: B. Kalsnes, A.O. Larsson, "Facebook News Use...", pp. 209-225; D.C. Hallin et al., "Mediatización de las pandemias...", pp. 1-24; M. Skovsgaard, A. Shehata, J. Strömbäck, "Opportunity Structures for Selective Exposure: Investigating Selective Exposure and Learning in Swedish Election Campaigns Using Panel Survey Data", *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 2016, vol. 21, no. 4, pp. 527-564.

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