

**Helena Chmielewska-Szlajfer**

[h.chmielewska-szlajfer@kozminski.edu.pl](mailto:h.chmielewska-szlajfer@kozminski.edu.pl)

Koźmiński University, LSE Visiting Fellow

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## **Politics in online tabloids: values in the voices of writers and commenters**

**in the US, UK and Poland [working paper]<sup>1</sup>**

### **Introduction**

United States, United Kingdom, and Poland, three very different democratic states, in the recent years have been witnessing a significant right-wing shift. In all these three countries, predictions made in official polls proved to be wrong in face of elections—presidential and parliamentary elections in Poland in 2015, presidential elections in the US in 2016—and the British Brexit referendum in 2016. However, major online tabloids I have studied, Gizmodo Media Group (formerly Gawker) in the United States; Mail Online in the UK; and Pudelek (the name means “poodle” in Polish) in Poland, as it turns out, showed a more sensitive ear towards the voters. The online news available there mix celebrity and entertainment news with political coverage but also provide open space for commentary next to the articles themselves.

Interestingly, taken together, the news and reader comments proved to be noteworthy predictors of the elections’ outcomes. Thus, I offer a preliminary analysis of opinions made by online

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<sup>1</sup> Parts of the research presented in this paper were conducted thanks to the Polish National Science Centre Miniatura grant no. 2017/01/X/HS6/00252.

readers under the most commented articles covering political topics in Gawker/Gizmodo Media, Mail Online, and Pudelek. In addition, I present some of the opinions voiced by over a dozen journalists and editors who have been writing these online tabloids, and who I have interviewed in the last two years. Here, I focus on three major campaigns that took place in these countries in the recent years, which in consequence significantly changed the political landscape. In each case I analysed articles on these topics during the three final months before the vote on all the three websites, and I have specifically focused on those that earned the most comments from their readers. I believe that this mixed method approach makes it possible to reveal some of the underlying beliefs concerning fundamental social values: what a good society, state, as well as journalism should be—yet coming from an often-ignored source, the online tabloids.

Given the recent rise of populism in these and other Western countries, I think it is crucial to take a closer look at political issues covered by these widely read news outlets, which cater to readers who do not necessarily go there for coverage of “serious” issues—which the journalists I talked to defined as “hard news”—yet who influence political decisions as voters. (A telling example of this paradox was voiced by a “leave” voter after the Brexit referendum, who admitted, “I didn't think my vote would count”, wishing he had voted “remain” instead.<sup>2</sup>) The juxtaposition of popular tabloid articles, anonymous comments,<sup>3</sup> and the opinions on making these news voiced by the journalists and editors who work there, serves to uncover political

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<sup>2</sup> Mail Online labelled such people “Bregretters”; source: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3658563/Meet-Bregretters-Public-backed-Leave-vote-say-want-STAY-EU-one-admits-didn-t-think-vote-count.html>. The topic was also covered by the Polish online tabloid: [https://www.pudelek.pl/artykul/94409/brytyjczyk\\_glosowal\\_za\\_brexitem\\_teraz\\_jest\\_w\\_szoku\\_myslalem\\_ze\\_zostan\\_iemy\\_w\\_ue/](https://www.pudelek.pl/artykul/94409/brytyjczyk_glosowal_za_brexitem_teraz_jest_w_szoku_myslalem_ze_zostan_iemy_w_ue/) (all websites accessed 26 August 2018).

<sup>3</sup> As in most online news outlets, readers do not have to register with their real names in order to leave comments.

emotions that are often lost in official polls and expert analyses, but which nonetheless play a significant role in shaping today's political reality. In my approach, I am inspired by scholars who emphasise the importance of emotions in political activity, notably Chantal Mouffe (2000) and Zizi Papacharissi (2015), and who in doing so question Habermas's (1974) classic concept of the public sphere as a space of essentially rational debate. According to Mouffe, "[i]f there is anything that endangers democracy nowadays, it is precisely the rationalist approach, because it is blind to the nature of the political and denies the central role that passions play in the field of politics" (2000, p. 146). Instead, the scholar proposes "agonistic pluralism", the possibility of conflict, not only rational, but also emotional, that guards against radicalisation of political stances within a democracy. In my analysis I present such agonistic attitudes voiced online, which, however, already present a level of political radicalisation Mouffe warned against. In the context of media as spaces for public deliberation, Daniel Dayan's idea of media visibility (Dayan 2013; see also Brundidge and Rice 2012) is helpful in understanding the power of showing (and, respectively, hiding) particular agendas—here, offered by online tabloids—which may lead to considerable political effects. The issue of internet visibility is also emphasised by Papacharissi, who argues that the medium offers "presencing" viewpoints that are underrepresented elsewhere (2015, p. 130). In my opinion, the online tabloids, and their reader comments sections in particular, provide a space, where such viewpoints are not only "presenced" but augmented.

### **Popular tabloids, underrepresented voices**

It is perhaps a paradox to consider major online tabloids spaces for voicing *underrepresented* voices—Mail Online reaches over 12 million unique visitors per day (and

many of the journalists from Mail Online I talked to claimed, often with noticeable pride, that it is the most popular news website in the world), while Gawker/Gizmodo is visited by over 30 million unique visitors per month, and Pudelek attracts 5 million unique visitors per month.<sup>4</sup> Yet, at the same time, because of the news they offer—filled with celebrity gossip, scandalising human-interest stories, where political news coverage is only part of the daily mix—they reach people who do not have to be necessarily interested in nuanced “hard” news, and who get their updates from sources that are more entertaining (or infotaining, that is mixing information with entertainment). However, people engaging in this emotional rather than rational plebeian public sphere, as Habermas (1991, 1992) put it, also take part in elections. Thus, given that in all the three cases of political elections polls turned out to be wrong, it is worth taking a closer look at the online tabloid readers’ reactions to the political news presented on these websites. There, they post their comments and vote in favour or against others directly beneath the news articles. It is worth noting that this particular layout, which grants visibility to opinions of ordinary readers is also, in a way, democratising. These opinions, too, are seen, sometimes further discussed, and rated, pushing the most popular ones higher up, closer to the original news story. The journalists who write these stories offer an additional, insider perspective from the newsroom, including working within the ideological frameworks of their respective media outlets, interacting with the reader comments, and maintaining professional integrity. Finally, it is one thing to study local election campaigns through the eyes of a local online tabloid. It is another, however, to add the lens of foreign online tabloid press. This approach allows to notice

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<sup>4</sup> Sources: <https://www.newsworks.org.uk/daily-mail>, <https://www.quantcast.com/measure/gizmodo.com>, <https://www.wirtualnemedial.pl/artykul/pudelek-pl-przed-plotek-pl-i-plejada-pl-w-gore-jastrzabpost-w-dol-kozaczek-top10-serwisow-plotkarskich>.

issues that overlap in foreign online tabloids, whether in the articles or the readers' comments, at times revealing quite different interpretations of the same "hard" news story.

I offer a closer look at campaign coverage offered by writers and the commenting readers of American Gawker/Gizmodo, British Mail Online, and Polish Pudelek for several reasons. The first is that while significant attention has been paid to the coverage of the US presidential campaign in major opinion media, online tabloids, the usual suspects in providing scandalising news, have been largely ignored.<sup>5</sup> Another reason for this comparative American-British-Polish online tabloid perspective is that despite major differences between these countries—historical, geopolitical, economic, cultural, etc.—in these news outlets one can notice recurring patterns in the reductive, black-and-white stories. One of them is that they focus on pro- and anti-establishment "heroes", which in the 2016 presidential campaign in the United States were filled by the two main rivals, Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump, in the earlier, 2015 presidential campaign in Poland, by Bronisław Komorowski and Andrzej Duda, and in the United Kingdom in 2016 by the "remain" and "leave" Brexit camps. The third reason is that in online tabloids, the articles together with the readers' comments expose how big, complex issues are made familiar, "homely", and simplified using related patterns across different local contexts, transcending them in what I call "online tabloid magic sauce". These issues are played out in a distinctive online-tabloid format, where politicians are objects of gossip next to sports and television stars, which lends the former an air of lightweight, entertaining celebrity—a "showbiz discourse", as one of the interviewed journalists put it. In addition, these particular media are also public

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<sup>5</sup> The American paper tabloid, *New York Observer* was an exception, but it is owned by Donald Trump's son-in-law, Jared Kushner; see e.g. <https://www.nytimes.com/politics/first-draft/2016/04/04/paper-whose-editor-helped-donald-trump-with-speech-vows-no-more-such-input/>; Thompson 2018.

spaces<sup>6</sup> that attract readers with their deliberately infotaining but also tongue-in-cheek approach. Some of the journalists I interviewed described this as game between the journalists and the readers where both sides are “in on the joke”, which is that the articles are not entirely serious—until they are. Yet this is only for the readers in constant conversation with the news articles to decide. This open, interactive, and not entirely straight-face setup may be one of the reasons why there the readers’ emotional responses, often ironic, sometimes insulting and vulgar, turned out to be more telling markers of voter sympathies than analyses offered by “hard” media outlets both in the Polish and US presidential elections, as well as in the UK referendum.

### **The websites: Gizmodo Media Group, Mail Online, and Pudelek**

Gizmodo Media Group, formerly Gawker Media, runs several popular gossip websites,<sup>7</sup> including Jezebel, which focuses on women’s issues, Deadspin, which concerns sports, and Gizmodo, the oldest website, which publishes articles on technology. Gawker, the group’s most famous website, launched in 2003, which focused on celebrity (Gawker Stalker in particular), media, and politics, became defunct at the end of August 2016. The website ceased to operate as the result of a defamation lawsuit filed by the celebrity wrestler, Hulk Hogan, who received financial backing from Peter Thiel, the Silicon Valley investor and creator of PayPal (see e.g. Holiday 2018).<sup>8</sup> Hulk Hogan sued the website for publishing a video of him having sex with his friend’s wife. As if taking a page from a celebrity tabloid story, Peter Thiel secretly paid Hogan’s

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<sup>6</sup> While these online tabloids are privately owned, in this context I understand public space as one to which access is unrestricted, the only condition being internet access.

<sup>7</sup> In August 2018 there were eight websites in total: Gizmodo, Deadspin, Jalopnik, Jezebel, Kotaku, Lifehacker, Splinter, and The Root, The Takeout, and The A.V. Club. The last four have been created after Gawker Media was turned into Gizmodo Media Group in 2016.

<sup>8</sup> In addition, in 2017 the case was turned into a documentary film produced for Netflix, titled *Nobody speak*.

legal fees as a way to take revenge for a story that had been published on Valleywag, one of Gawker Media websites, back in 2007.<sup>9</sup> In the article Thiel was publicly outed as gay; according to Gawker journalists this had been generally known in Silicon Valley but not elsewhere. After Gawker closed down and the media group was bought by Univision, a Spanish-language broadcasting network, the website's staff writers were moved to other, websites—now under the banner of Gizmodo Media Group.<sup>10</sup> Mail Online is one of the most popular online tabloids in the United Kingdom, and according to the website's journalists, the most visited news website in the world. It was launched roughly at the same time as Gawker as a web version of the newspaper. However, unlike Gizmodo Media and Pudelek, it is an online version of a paper tabloid, *Daily Mail*, one of the largest dailies in the UK, with a circulation of over 1.3 million copies,<sup>11</sup> albeit more life-style and celebrity focused, and with a separate staff. According to Mail Online journalists, it is also more liberal than the paper edition, which makes it appealing to a younger audience.<sup>12</sup> The Polish online tabloid, Pudelek is the most read online tabloid in Poland. The website is run independently but it is owned by one of the largest Polish portals, Wirtualna Polska. Similarly to Gawker, which together with TMZ was the site's direct inspiration, Pudelek maintains a blog-like chronological format that has not changed since the emergence of the website in 2006. Unlike its American counterpart, however, Pudelek's writers remain

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<sup>9</sup> Source: <http://gawker.com/335894/peter-thiel-is-totally-gay-people>.

<sup>10</sup> I use the terms "Gizmodo Media" and "Gizmodo Media Group" interchangeably. At the time of US elections, former Gawker authors who were writing for Gizmodo Media's Deadspin, Jezebel, and Gizmodo websites included Gabrielle Bluestone, Ashley Feinberg, Marina Galperina, Hanna Gold, Hudson Hongo, Rich Juzwiak, Brendan O'Connor, Alex Pareene, Jordan Sargent, Kelly Stoud, and J.K. Trotter.

<sup>11</sup> Source: <https://www.pressgazette.co.uk/national-newspaper-print-abcs-daily-star-overtakes-daily-telegraph-for-first-time-in-over-a-year/>.

<sup>12</sup> Indeed, the difference is stark: while *Daily Mail* is read by people 35 years old or older ten times more than by younger age groups, one third of Mail Online readers are under the age of 35. See:

<https://www.newsworks.org.uk/daily-mail>.

anonymous, and they sign articles with pseudonyms. While the site is mostly focused on celebrity scandals and fashion, since the 2016 presidential campaign in Poland, political news has been comprising around one third of the site's content. According the journalists at Pudelek, readers love to hate political posts, and indeed some of the most popular comments under those articles are "Stop writing about politics on Pudelek!"

### **Online tabloid magic sauce**

In general, tabloids engage in "downgrading of hard news and upgrading of sex, scandal and infotainment" (Esser 1997, p. 292). Gizmodo Media, Mail Online, and Pudelek websites match these criteria, and the issues found there receive appropriate scandalising, 'gossipifying', and 'celebrifying' treatment. What's more, because they are online news providers, unlike paper tabloids they are able to open the news to readers' comments the moment the stories are published. All these three elements create an online-tabloid magic sauce of sorts. I argue that this is particularly notable in relation to politics, where matters of public importance, including performance and accountability of public officials, stand next to intentionally shocking news about athletes, pop singers, actors, and social-media stars. In contrast to hard opinion media, the role of these online tabloids is not to present in-depth, nuanced analyses but emotional, relatable, and easily understandable stories—in this sense, they are "reactionary", as one of my interviewees put it. Political topics are shaped to fit this frame in order to attract readers.

Still, politics is a sphere fundamental to shaping the rights and regulations for peoples' functioning within the state, which structures their legal, economic, and social realities. Thus, as such politics is not an innate part of entertainment business. Yet in the online-tabloid format,

politics is presented as one of many topics with the usual personal drama, fame, money, and power. Interestingly, in usual tabloid coverage the latter often boils down to fame (visibility power) and money (financial power), as if political power itself was not important—or perhaps too nuanced for an online-tabloid story (vide: Bourdieu 1998). In online-tabloid coverage politicians are treated like entertainment-business celebrities, and politics as though it were an element of the entertainment industry, while the editors wink knowingly at the readers in a game of “we assume our readers can tell the important stuff from trash”, as one journalist put it. Interestingly, while online tabloids generally attract a younger audience than paper tabloids, online tabloid viewers tend to be better off than the stereotypical view would suggest (e.g. Johansson 2007): Mail Online claims to have 68% middle class (ABC1) adult readership, 72% of Gizmodo’s audience has at least a college degree, and Pudelek follows a similar pattern, with 52% of its audience holding a higher degree. In addition, both paper and online tabloids are more often read by women than men.<sup>13</sup>

In regard to the Polish and US presidential elections, as well as the British Brexit referendum, this celebrifying magic sauce could be noticed in articles on Gizmodo Media websites and perhaps even more so on Pudelek and Mail Online, where readers were additionally exposed to posts concerning not only local but also international politicians, all turned into either heroes or villains (and sometimes switching roles) within the online tabloid genre. While it was

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<sup>13</sup> Sources: <http://www.metroclassified.co.uk/productsandaudiences/mailonline>; <https://www.quantcast.com/measure/gizmodo.com>; marketing material received from Pudelek’s advertising department in August 2018. Remarkably, in *Dish: The Inside Story on the World of Gossip* Jeanette Walls quotes similar findings already from the 1970s: “according to one study, the 20 million people who read the [*National*] *Enquirer* every week were not, as was commonly believed, ‘trailer park trash’ at the very bottom of the demographic chart, but women aged twenty-five to forty-nine with high school or college educations.” (2000, p. 89)

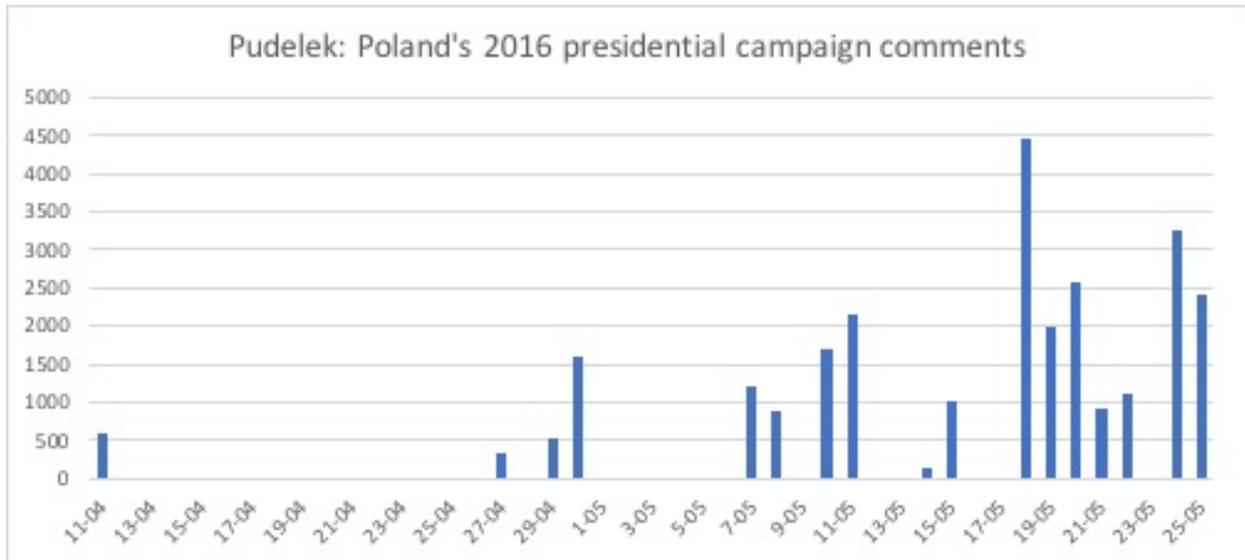
largely left to the audience to make these international figures relevant to their local affairs, they often did so in the comments section. It is noteworthy that in all the three online tabloids some of the readers posted down-to-earth opinions that were popular among other readers. Such comments ignored the gossipy, celebrity appeal of the original articles. Others posted opinions that were sarcastic, or presented conspiracy theories, as if to show the commenters' insider knowledge, ability to uncover deeper meanings, and a general understanding of powerful, global mechanisms, to others. In this respect, the online comments formed their own singular genre, with its own, unique literary form (see e.g. Rolston 2012; Phillips & Milner 2017).

### **The most commented posts**

What were the posts that galvanised the attention of readers of Gawker/Gizmodo Media, Mail Online, and Pudelek? In the case of the Polish 2015 presidential elections, I analysed articles that mentioned Bronisław Komorowski and Andrzej Duda, the two main presidential candidates, during the final three months of the campaign (the first round of elections was held on May 10, the second on May 24). In the case of the British 2016 Brexit referendum, I analysed articles that mentioned Brexit, and here, too, I focused on the three final months before the referendum, held on June 23. In the case of the US 2016 presidential elections, I analysed articles that mentioned Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump, published between September 20—six days before the first presidential debate—and election day, November 8, 2016.

#### 2015 Polish presidential campaign

The Polish online tabloid, Pudelek published 37 articles mentioning the presidential campaign, of which the oldest one was posted a month before the first round, on April 11.



The articles focused mainly on celebrity endorsements and comments (predominantly pro-Komorowski, who was the incumbent president from the centrist Civic Platform (PO) party); information about polling results and the results of the elections; as well as on news on the campaign shown in the major press and on television. Unlike celebrity endorsements, readers' comments were overwhelmingly pro-Duda, who was the right-wing Law and Justice (PiS) party's candidate, and the eventual winner. For example, the most commented post (4463 comments, May 18) concerned the Komorowski-Duda presidential debate held before the second round of the elections. While the heading claimed "Stars about the debate: 'Komorowski crushed Duda! Pathological lying, here's something [Duda] to be afraid of!'",<sup>14</sup> the most up-voted comments focused on Komorowski interrupting all the time. Interestingly, comments under the second most-commented article—on Duda's victory—were far more cautious, for example: "It's best to change the authorities with each election, perhaps they will take make more effort then..."; another mentioned (sarcastically?) "And now he will certainly get the wreckage back", alluding to the 2010 plane crash near Smolensk in Russia, in which 96 people died, including the

<sup>14</sup> All translations made by the author.

president, Lech Kaczyński, one of the founders of the Law and Justice party. Another popular post was published a day after the first round of elections, with a black-and-white cover of the Polish edition of “Newsweek”, on which Jarosław Kaczyński, the head of Law and Justice and the twin brother of Lech, was taking off the mask from his face, the mask being his party’s presidential candidate, Andrzej Duda. The cover headline read: “Electoral fraud”. It is noteworthy that the commenters had similar reactions both to celebrities and popular news journalists, accusing them all of being “biased elites”, afraid of Duda who would “push them away from the trough”. If for Pudelek’s commenters Komorowski represented the “haves” who, it was implied, had acquired power, wealth, and fame illegally, Duda heralded the empowerment of the “have-nots”, the less successful, but hard-working, honest people who had been tricked by the elites (see also: Chmielewska-Szlajfer 2018a).

The American and British tabloids, however, did not pay attention to the Polish presidential elections. Gawker did not mention them once, while Mail Online published a piece several months later, after the victory of Law and Justice in the parliamentary elections held in October. Mail Online readers’ comments were strongly sympathetic, treating the results as a sign of resistance against the European Union, particularly the policy of admitting refugees from Syria, which was in line with pro-Brexit arguments. “So Poland can see the danger of letting loads of people into their country, it really is a no brainer”<sup>15</sup> was the most up-voted comment; another popular one was: “First Portugal and now Poland, the anti-EU Nationalist parties are on the rise. This is a fight back for Christianity in Europe by our Eastern countries. Well done Poland. Are you listening Merkel and Juncker?”. Still, one of the top comments was made by a Pole (his screen name was Tomasz, the Polish version of Thomas): “What is worse for you

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<sup>15</sup> Typos are left from the original comments.

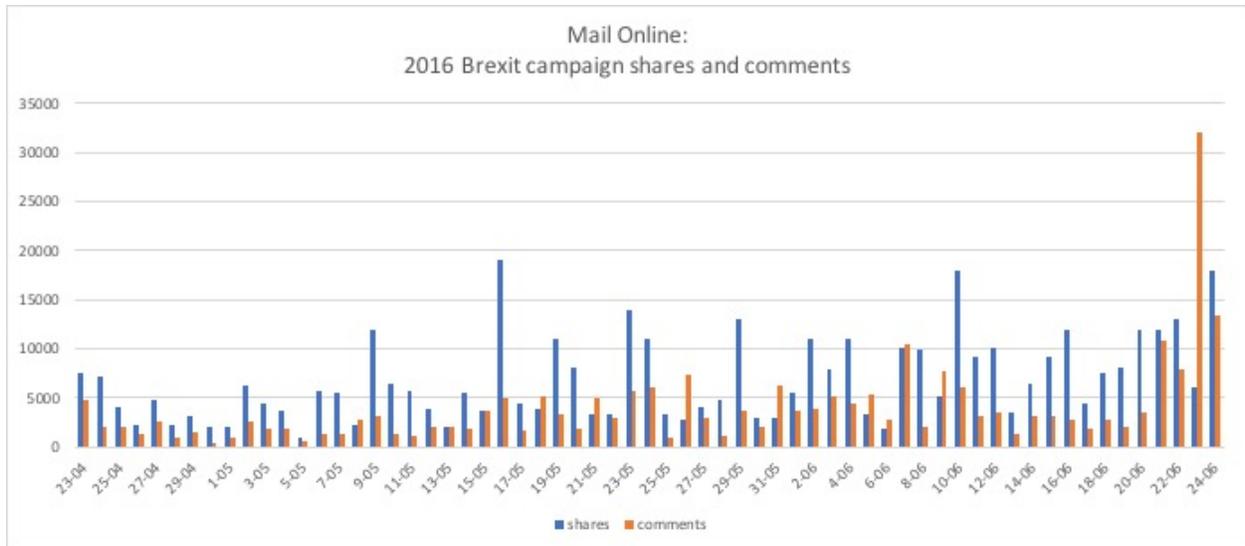
Britons? Polish - mostly hard-working or Fake War Refugees from Syria with Adidas tracksuits and iPhones?”—but the answers to his question varied from “Give me the Poles anyway” to “Yes I agree we don't want either of you”.

### 2016 Brexit campaign

Mail Online, as an online version of the paper tabloid and thus publishing content from the paper and at the same time providing its own material, posted 599 articles concerning Brexit, around twenty times more than Pudelek did on the Polish presidential elections. The online version, while somewhat less straightforward about it than *Daily Mail*, was, too, a supporter of the “leave” campaign, which could be noticed in the headlines: anti-Brexit arguments were often shown as abominable, by using words implying hidden secrets, and by writing about people being forced to “reveal” or “admit” something.<sup>16</sup> In addition, it is also worth noting that the articles published there tended to be significantly longer and with more photo and video material than those posted on Gawker/Gizmodo and especially Pudelek. Of the twenty most commented posts, over a half were “hard news” political reporting about the referendum campaign, as the journalists I interviewed put it, others were focused on the European Union, immigrants, and people unhappy with the perspective of leaving the EU.

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<sup>16</sup> For example, “Biggest stitch up since the Bayeux Tapestry! Boris Johnson lashes out after leaked letter reveals PM was plotting anti-Brexit campaign during EU renegotiation” <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3593784/David-Cameron-s-EU-sham-exposed-Leaked-letter-reveals-PM-hatched-anti-Brexit-plot-telling-voters-campaign-leave.html>; “Follow your heart and not scaremonger Cameron!: Michael Gove twists the knife into his friend as he urges voters to defy 'sneering elites' and the 'undeserving rich' - and tell the EU 'You're fired'” <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3624338/Gove-slams-sneering-elites-trying-Britain-EU-urges-voters-control-referendum.html>.



During the three months, six posts on Mail Online received over 10,000 comments, of which the most popular one received almost 32,000 comments, almost three times as much as the second most popular news piece. The most commented article was published in the evening of the Brexit referendum, with the headline, “It all ends in tears: David Cameron stands down in the wake of historic Brexit vote with emotional resignation speech as rival Boris Johnson makes first pitch to take over”. The comments were predominantly favourable to Brexit, as demonstrated by “I pray we are OUT..Give my grandchildren HOPE!! GOOD LUCK BREXIT!!”. However, other popular comments such as “BREXIT if tonite the voters say REMAIN you know this election has BEEN RIGGED!”, anticipated a similar sentiment shared by Trump and his supporters during the US presidential campaign. Boris Johnson, one of the key “leave” campaigners, was the subject of numerous popular posts, including “Boris Johnson hijacks his own daughter's graduation by unveiling a Brexit banner – but one defiant student marched up to collect her degree with a Remain poster” also from June 23. (It is perhaps worth adding that one of the most up-voted comments under that article was: “Tony Blair is expected to be the president of the EU. Need I say any more? Vote BREXIT. Vote FREEDOM.”, framing Tony Blair as more or less the antithesis of Boris Johnson.) Another recurring topic was immigrants.

An article titled “I have no GP, I can’t get on the housing ladder and have three kids in one room’: David Cameron is taken to task for his immigration record by ‘40-year-old Brit who has been working full time since 16” received a significant number of up-voted comments in favour of Nigel Farage. Unlike the Tory prime minister, Farage was a determined UK Independence Party “leave” campaigner, hence comments such as “Go for it Nigel! Make mincemeat out of the traitor and expose the lies and deceit of the remainiacs. Vote LEAVE, LEAVE, LEAVE”. Aside from politicians, three celebrities made it to the top posts: Daniel Craig was photographed wearing a t-shirt with the slogan, “No man is an island. No country by itself. Vote Remain on 23rd June”; the article also mentioned David and Victoria Beckham as supporters of the “remain” campaign. The popular comments mirrored the theme of “the elites” vs. “ordinary people” found on Pudelek during the Polish presidential campaign. An example of this was “Remaining in EU has advantages for the rich only.”

The American online tabloid Gizmodo Media, disinterested in British politics as it had been disinterested in Polish politics a year earlier, published just a single article about Brexit, on June 20. Titled “The number of stars on the EU flag means absolutely nothing”, the post concerned Brexit (“awful”, according to the article’s author). However, the context of the stars on the EU flag made the British topic homelier to an audience focused on US points of reference, in this case the American stars and stripes. Unlike Gizmodo Media, Pudelek, published 18 articles with reference to Brexit, and it was hard not to notice that the issue of Polish immigrants—currently, around one million in the UK—played a significant role both in the news and in the comments. Indeed, the most commented post, which appeared three days after the referendum, bore the headline “Brexit supporters to Polish emigrants: Leave the EU. No more Polish vermin”. While the anti-immigrant demonstrations used language not unlike that used by

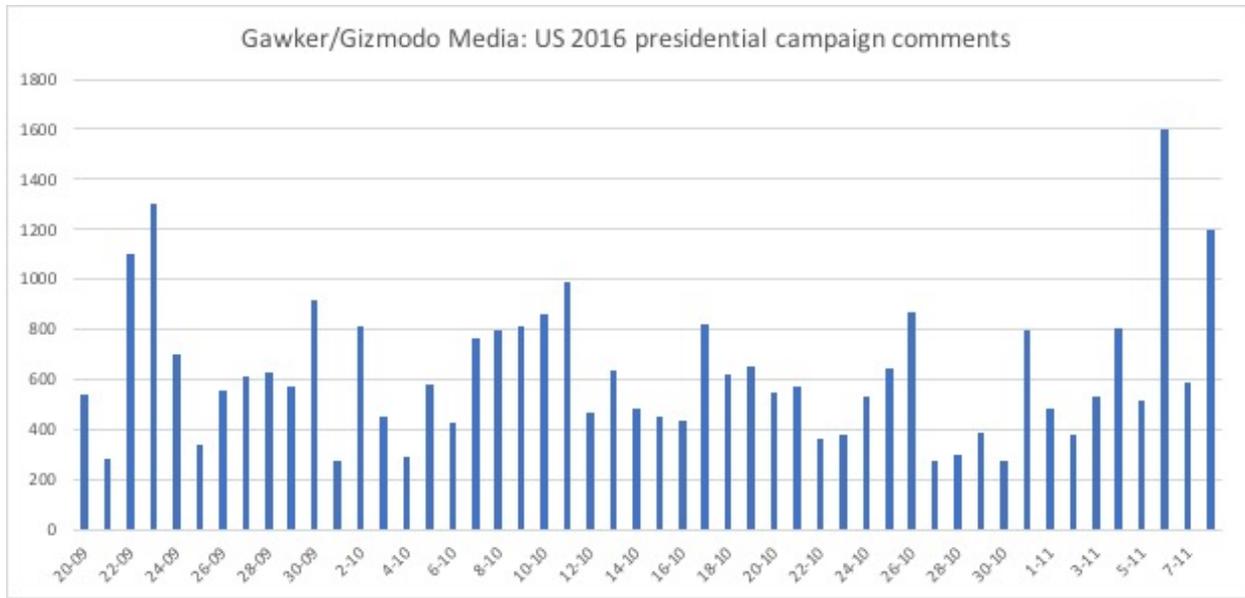
members of the Law and Justice party toward Syrian refugees (see e.g. Chmielewska-Szlajfer 2018b), the most up-voted comments kept a sober tone, “Soon you will slave at your English kitchen sink and you’ll cry after that vermin”. The second most popular post put Brexit in the context of local Polish politics: Jarosław Kaczyński, the head of the ruling Law and Justice party accused Donald Tusk, president of the European Council, a former prime minister and an influential member of the Civic Platform, the main opposition party, of being directly responsible for Brexit. Interestingly, unlike a year earlier, this time to comments were less favourable to the Law and Justice party, “This guy has an inferiority complex towards Tusk... there is no other way of putting this”, was the most up-voted comment.

#### 2016 US presidential campaign

In the final case discussed here, I found 447 posts on Gizmodo Media websites.<sup>17</sup> On the whole, Gizmodo’s authors were clearly more sympathetic towards Hillary Clinton than Donald Trump. It was also difficult to find pro-Trump attitudes in the website’s comments. When mentioning Trump supporters, the commenters—nearly all of them anti-Trump, although not necessarily pro-Clinton—most often referred to their “Facebook friends,” “father,” or distant relatives as points of reference to understand Trump supporters. In general, Gizmodo focused on Trump, highlighting political issues (e.g. Trump and his tweets, Trump and Pence), and sex scandals. Of the twenty most commented articles on Gizmodo Media, most of them centred either on “hard” political reporting or on sexual scandals; four top posts received over a thousand comments.

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<sup>17</sup> The journalists who had previously written for the company’s most politically-oriented website, Gawker, while comprising less than 20% of all Gizmodo Media writers who covered the US presidential campaign, published one third (147) of all the posts on the topic, starting from around ten each day up to 27 on election day.



While the top commented post, which appeared two days before the election, had the headline “Donald Trump is going to get his ass kicked on Tuesday”, the comments were less enthusiastic. The commenters focused on the lack of support both for Trump among Republican voters and for Clinton among Democratic voters, for example: “There are so many ‘toss-up’ states going by recent polling that it’s terrifying enough. There’s a very good chance that Hillary wins but doesn’t get past 300, which would be the closest election since 2004. Somebody please explain what happened in this country where Sarah Palin was enough to bring somebody as respected as John McCain into the gutter but Donald Trump can come within sneezing distance of the presidency only 8 years later.” Two other highly commented articles focused on the 25-year-old founder of VR company Oculus Rift, who had funded Trump’s campaign and took part in online trolling. The commenters mentioned his links to 4chan, an online forum famous for hate speech, but the most up-voted comment was more universal (and in a headline-like vein), “White Silicon Valley Tech Millionaire Unaware He Is Already Part Of The American Elite”. However, a post on Trump’s fashion choices also gained popularity. An analysis of his “ill-fitting suits” from October 11 sparked sentimental comments about the incumbent president: “Obama is so

handsome. Not just by comparison, but goddammit. It's like putting a glass of French wine next to a half empty PBR [Pabst Blue Ribbon, a cheap beer brand] that's mostly backwash." Trump's sex scandals, including the "grab them by the pussy" video, and accusations made by a number of women of Trump's sexual harassment were, too, among the most commented posts—particularly one, which at the same time discussed his habit of tweeting late at night, "Check out sex tape,' presidential candidate tweets at 5 AM". Remarkably, some of the commenters foresaw that the scandals could help Trump's campaign. "This video is gonna give him more votes if anything. He's a straight talker! He ain't politically correct! He's not a politician! It's dem media dem's against'im! Etc", is an example of such insight.

Trump's sex scandals, fashion, as well as sympathy for the Obamas were also a popular topic on Polish Pudelek, although the number of posts on Pudelek was much lower (29) and peaked at ten posts on the election day. (It is worth noting that Pudelek posts around 40 articles a day, which is one third of the articles published on Gizmodo Media websites). While Pudelek, similarly to Gizmodo Media, was more sympathetic towards Hillary Clinton, it did so less openly than the US websites, posting, for example, image galleries filled with favourable pictures of Barack and Michelle Obama on the one hand, and angry-looking Donald Trump on the other. At the same time, it was far easier to find comments praising Trump on Pudelek than on Gizmodo Media websites. On Pudelek, roughly one third of the readers up-voted a comment claiming that the election was an impossible choice between "crazy" Trump and "crooked" Clinton; the rest was fairly equally divided in their sympathies between the two candidates. It is noteworthy that a recurring theme tied to Clinton on Pudelek was that of being "bought" or "sponsored" by "the Jews" or specifically George Soros (anti-Semitic slurs can be often found on the Polish internet)—the Hungarian-Jewish finance mogul turned philanthropist and founder of Open

Society Foundations, which funded a significant number of non-governmental organizations in Central-Eastern Europe after 1989—or being a member of the Masonry, or even the Illuminati. For example, a popular comment made anti-Semitic allusions, while focusing on the Clintons: “I remind you that it was the clintons, not trump, who mentioned that poland should pay certain [World War 2] reparations to someone [Jews].” Perhaps because of Pudelek’s focus on fashion, Melania Trump’s hot pink “pussy bow” blouse, which she wore to the second presidential debate right after the “grab them by the pussy” scandal broke out, was the only piece of news mentioned at the same time on both the US and Polish websites. Still, the most popular post concerning the US election published on Pudelek, was published on November 5 and, once again, discussed the cover of the Polish edition of “Newsweek”. There, black-and-white photos of Donald Trump’s and Jarosław Kaczyński’s faces were merged into one. The main caption read, in indicative, “Did the world go mad”. The readers’ comments were largely unfavourable towards the editor-in-chief of the weekly Tomasz Lis, a well-known commenter and journalist, as well as a strong opponent of the politicians featured on the cover of the magazine. One of the more popular comments under Pudelek’s post went so far as to say, “Lis is afraid he will lose even the leftie sponsors from the US! Soros and Israel and Germany will cease to give him the dough to spit on Poland!”,<sup>18</sup> mixing anti-left-wing and anti-German sentiments with anti-Semitism in a specifically contemporary Polish context. Nonetheless, nine out of the top twenty posts on Pudelek were photo galleries presenting presidential fashions. On Pudelek, the majority of up-voted comments under the “Melania in pussy-bow blouse!” post concerned not the US candidates or their families, but Polish politics. The most popular comment stated, “I don’t want

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<sup>18</sup> The Polish edition of “Newsweek” is published by Axel Springer, a German-owned media conglomerate.

the 500+ programme<sup>19</sup> funded with my tax money to be used by degenerates!” Another person posed a question, presumably to the fellow commenters, “What do Law and Justice voters think of ‘good change’ [the party’s political slogan]? I’m asking seriously.” “But he said the truth”, was the only comment directly related to the post, a remark concerning Trump’s claim that “you can do anything” to women “when you’re a star”. Although Pudelek published only a few posts concerning the political aspect of the campaign, a notable one was published after the first presidential debate (held on September 26). During the event Trump described the US as a third world country, after which Clinton snapped, “maybe because you haven’t paid any federal income tax for a lot of years.” The commenters appreciated her quick remark, and asked alarmingly, “If USA is a third world country, where does Poland stand?”, implying in the question that Poland’s position was even more inferior.

Finally, the British online tabloid published 499 articles, which was even more than Gizmodo Media. out of the top twenty stories most were “hard news” political reporting, four focused on Trump’s sex scandals, while one—posted on election day—had a specifically British context, “‘We now have a President who likes our country!’ Nigel Farage gloats over Donald Trump’s victory as he flies into America TODAY in a bid to be Donald’s ambassador to the EU”. While some of the commenters mocked Farage, “For a bloke who claims to hate everything that it represents he sure likes to ride the EU gravy train for his personal benefit.”, others noted that Farage’s remark had been a joke. While the article concerning “grab them by the pussy” video garnered comments mostly unfavourable to Trump, comments made to another post, concerning a porn star who had been paid hush money after having had sex with Trump while he

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<sup>19</sup> It is a universal subsidy programme for families with at least two children, which was introduced by the Law and Justice government in 2016.

was already married to Melania, suspected Clinton of manipulation: “Dems over played their hand on this. They've marched out too many ‘victims’ and now it's just laughable and falling on deaf ears.” What’s more, the most commented post on Mail Online, from November 6, ““You can’t review 650,000 new emails in eight days!’ Furious Trump blasts FBI Director after Houdini Hillary is CLEARED over second email investigation sparked by Anthony Weiner’s teen sexting scandal” found readers even more suspicious of Clinton’s campaign. “So they got to Comey as well, no surprise there” and “Does not help her. Now it looks even more like a rigged system” were among the most popular ones. Thus, in the “screaming”, yet emotionally side-shifting headlines, one may find what one of the Mail Online journalists described as “opportunistic” and “reactive” journalism, adding, “I think it [Mail Online] reacts to what people are clicking on. It reacts to what people are interested in.”

### **Familiarity and celebrity aesthetics**

The three election campaigns covered by the three online tabloids present a multitude of connections between the local and global, using the equalising (or, perhaps, even democratising) celebrity magic sauce, next to familiar emotional typecasting, as a common glue. For one thing, the sheer number of articles and comments indicate interest in issues that shape political realities, at the same time showing that the Polish and the British online tabloids are far more interested in matters concerning the political scene in United States than vice versa. Another thing, however, is the process of making foreign issues familiar and making them our own by putting inserting in recognisable contexts. This is particularly visible on Pudelek, both in the articles and in the comments, where Trump is compared to Kaczyński, Brexit becomes a story about Polish immigration to the UK, and a US presidential debate is a trigger to ask questions about economic

and social development in Poland. Polish elections, however, are left barely noticed by the two other websites, in this a perfect example of Wallerstein's tension between centre and periphery (1974). In the middle of this remains the news coverage of Brexit, which was noticeably covered by Pudelek, yet received one single mention on Gizmodo Media, and that put in a larger frame of the European Union—perhaps a more comparable match given the size of the United States.

Another layer made evident in the online tabloid posts is “celebrity-aestheticisation” (and at the same time an Orientalisation of sorts; vide: Said 1978). While scholars focusing on the celebrity aspect of politicians, such as Mark Wheeler (2013), emphasise the involvement of celebrities and celebrity-flair in the political process, this analysis comes from a different standpoint: the immersion of politics and the political process in a celebrity-tabloid narrative. A more general media-refocusing can be found in the interpretation of mediatisation offered by Nick Couldry, coming from a Bourdieusian perspective of symbolic capital. In the context of television, the media scholar points out “the growing influence of media institutions over what counts as symbolic capital in many specific areas of competition.” (Couldry 2012: 122) While in this particular context Couldry mentions television talent shows, I believe this competition also relates to news-media struggles for audience attention, of which online tabloids with a strong celebrity focus, yet also offering some political coverage are a prime example. These online celebrity tabloids influence the symbolic capital of politics—and, more specifically, politicians—within a celebrity tabloid narrative, which is an increasing shaper of public life outside media as well, for example during elections.

In sum, what I find particularly significant is that in these celebrity-heavy, infotaining online tabloids, online comments typically present emotional reactions in a way that could be framed in the context of Mouffe's *agon* or Papacharissi's affective politics. These spaces offer a

way of making one's stance visible in a medium, which—unlike print media or moderated traditional newspaper websites—gives the opportunity for users' opinions to be seen in a way that all but equalises their importance with that of the articles written by professional journalists. On the one hand, through emotions, hero and villain figures, the anonymous online commenters speak of values (or their lack) in political life. On the other hand, through the online tabloid magic sauce, journalists claim to offer easily-digestible yet solid political coverage (“hard news”), coverage of issues they consider important, entertainment, and the power to write about the “raw”, “unpolished” reality the “hard media” does not discuss. The emotional agon is still waiting for its righteous plebeian public sphere.

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