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## REGIONAL MEDIA – SOCIAL CAPITAL – SECURITY

### Abstract

Security, in the broadest sense of the word, requires enormous financial expenditure. Equally important, however, is the provision of social capital, garnered through the relationships and connections that bind individuals and social groups, facilitating completion of a multitude of tasks, and measured primarily by the level of mutual trust. A group with a high degree of mutual trust is capable of achieving more than one which lacks it. Proper functioning of the media expedites the growth of social capital. Public local media have both specific responsibilities and greater opportunities for action in this regard. Rooted in the 'small homelands' and drawing on shared experiences, cultural traditions, and even customs, on the matters near to their recipients' hearts, they occupy an advantageous position when it comes to fostering a sense of community and faith in its worth. These media, operating close to their audiences, are familiar with the needs and interests of these groups and are capable of quickly acquiring and disseminating reliable information concerning local communities. They can also respond quickly to fake news emerging within local information spaces.

**Keywords:** security, social capital, trust, local media, public media, post-truth, disinformation

**JEL:** L32, Z1

Poland's geopolitical situation that has existed since Russia's aggression in Ukraine has made matters related to broad national security and the country's readiness for self-defence against external threats one of the most discussed topics in public debate. Defence and security require investment, purchase and manufacture of military equipment, a significant financial effort, and commitment of vast resources. However, tangible, material capital, counted in billions of zlotys and measured by the GDP share of defence spending, is insufficient to achieve the desired results. Social capital is also a necessity. Without this capital, it is impossible to build a sense of security within a society. The collective effort necessary for defence against dangers of all kinds becomes difficult and ineffective.

## Social capital – a value present in social relations

Social capital is difficult to define clearly. It exists thanks to the relationships and ties that connect people and social groups, facilitating their completion of various aims. Financial capital can be accumulated as resources within the banking system; human capital consists of the knowledge and skills acquired through education and training; social capital exists only within networks, in the relationships that bind individuals and social groups. As J.S. Coleman, one of the creators of the social capital theory, notes, a group with a high level of trust is able to achieve more than a group which lacks it (Rymsza, 2007, p. 26). Pointing towards the basic human needs satisfied by social capital, Piotr Sztompka lists the pursuit of existential security as the key motivation: “The ability to potentially mobilize a rich network of relationships when needed provides a sense of this type of security and emotional support. I am not alone in the face of the threats and challenges of everyday life” (Sztompka, 2016, p. 306).

In the *Social Capital Development Strategy 2020*, adopted by the government in 2013, social capital was defined as ‘the citizens’ ability to mobilise and combine resources, resulting from trust and existing norms and patterns of behaviour, which fosters creativity and strengthens the will to cooperate and reach consensus in 4 achieving shared goals. Relationships built on trust foster cooperation and communication between citizens and bind individuals to society in a way that enables them to work with others and pursue common goals. Trust between citizens, as well as trust in social institutions, a particularly important value here, is the result of real-life experiences and is shaped by the practice of social life. Therefore, it requires a stable foundation in the ‘social infrastructure’ (SKRS, 2013).

For Robert Putnam, an example of such infrastructure were the bowling clubs that had been developing in the United States for decades. Their members honed their skills, but meetings also allowed for the creation of bonds between them, which was ultimately the clubs’ chief social aspect. Players would form a community, pursue joint initiatives, and maintain social contacts. Until the moment came when automation entered the bowling lanes. A machine began to set the pins and tally the points. There was no need to waste time; one could devote all of it to perfecting their technique. Players’ skills were being enhanced: human capital was growing. But bowling alone doesn’t require partners; it provides no opportunity to meet the people living down the street. There are no interpersonal relationships, no social bonds. Social capital started to diminish. This change was most succinctly summarised in the title of his essay, and later, an extensive book: *Bowling Alone* (Putnam, 1995; 2008).

Social organisations, clubs, and associations of all kinds build trust, foster collaborative bonds, and allow citizens to pool their efforts to achieve important social goals. In Poland, Volunteer Fire Brigades (OSP) are an example of organisations with great traditions that demonstrate the practical importance of social capital.

Even the highest-end, cutting-edge fire engine or the most qualified firefighters manning the equipment are not enough. Success will only be possible through willingness to cooperate and mutual trust. It could be said that trust, an intangible asset, is the foundation of any organisation's efforts. The certainty that volunteer firefighters will drop their duties at the sound of the alarm and immediately be ready to act in tandem stems from such mutual trust. The presence of a certain amount of trust is crucial in every dimension of public life; it allows for the development of lasting social relationships, while its absence causes people to become passive and antisocial, cautious in their relationships with others, and to no longer believe in the meaning and probability of success of any endeavors (Mularska-Kucharek, 2013, p. 70).

In the *Strategy* adopted in 2013, the main goal, defined as strengthening the role of social capital in Poland's socio-economic development, was to be achieved through four specific objectives, including "The improvement of social communication processes and knowledge-sharing". The role and tasks of public media in building a social community, issues of media education, and finally, matters related to utilising the internet as a space for interpersonal contacts and a new platform for cultural activity were important parts of the program. However, the Law and Justice government quickly deemed that *Strategy* obsolete. The new document (SKRS, 2020), adopted in 2020, does not include the word 'communication'. This exclusion of the issue of social communication, including the public media, from the realm of social capital is completely incomprehensible. However, this seems to reflect the understanding (or rather misunderstanding) of the role of the media in contemporary society that was characteristic of the Law and Justice administration.

Social capital is measured primarily by the typical level of trust. The media are undoubtedly an important tool for forging social bonds. Unfortunately, mass communication at the local and regional levels often fails in this regard. Local and regional media are affected by the wider process of tabloidization and commercialisation. This also applies to some extent to the regional newspapers of the Polska-Press group, which are still owned by Orlen and therefore controlled by the State Treasury (Braun, 2024a). We are increasingly faced with a situation rightly highlighted by Tomasz Goban-Klas, who wrote that the traditional functions of journalism and its links to democratic processes are evolving in a direction inconsistent with the interests of a civic society (Goban-Klas, 2012, p. 39).

Media focused on building connections, meeting the needs of specific social groups, and representing them, both in the system of information flow and the public debate, are largely uncompetitive. This phenomenon has been on the rise for years, along with the increasing concentration and globalisation of the media sector, which are subject to market logic. The consequence is the homogenisation of culture in the broad sense, the blurring of its national, and especially regional, characteristics, along with the elimination and virtual erasure of minority cultures (Jędrzejewski, 1997, p. 3). This clearly indicates the need to strengthen regional

public media, which, fulfilling their statutory obligations, should constitute an important element of the social infrastructure.

## Obligations of public media towards local communities

The obligation to serve local and, of course also regional, communities, is included in the *Broadcasting Act's* Article 21, Section 1a, which lists among the tasks of public media the creation of programmes “meeting the democratic, social, and cultural needs of local communities”, as well as “taking into account the needs of national and ethnic minorities and communities using regional languages”. The organisational structure of public media, as defined by the legislator, serves to fulfil these tasks. In the case of television, the Act provides for the existence of 16 local branches of Telewizja Polska (Polish Television), whose task is to create and distribute regional programming. As the authors of the commentary to the Act note, “the Act does not include a definition of a regional television programme. However, it should be recognised that it is a television programme that was both created and distributed by a local branch of TVP, intended for viewers residing within the territory covered by said branch’s scope of operation” (Piątek et al., 2014, p. 336). In the case of radio broadcasting, the legislature deemed it appropriate to create a structure that would guarantee regional units full independence. Each of the 17 regional radio companies operates autonomously, independent of the Polskie Radio (Polish Radio) company, which produces nationwide programming. Therefore, public radio and television broadcasting centres exist in all voivodeships (for historical reasons, a separate radio company also exists in Koszalin).

As the authors of the commentary to the *Broadcasting Act* rightly state: “The fact that the legislators determined the regional structure of public media (...) and the statutory obligation of these media to create and distribute regional programmes should be explained by the recognition of the importance of local government communities, meeting their needs for information, culture, and entertainment” (Piątek et al., 2014, p. 313). The importance of local government communities is particularly important today, given the existing threats. The emerging ideas of a greater centralisation and undermining the self-governance of regional public media deserve a strongly critical assessment in this context.

Security matters are related not only to the informational, but also to the cultural and even entertainment functions of the media. It is worth mentioning that the now-world-famous television program *Dancing with the Stars* originated from dance lessons broadcast on BBC radio in 1941, which were intended (as was claimed at the time) to boost public morale during the war (Braun, 2019, p. 212).

Safety is also a matter of appropriate reaction to various types of catastrophes and natural disasters. According to research conducted by Daniel Aldrich on the responses of local communities around the world to natural disasters, a high level

of social capital becomes the main driver of recovery, even more important than the amount of external assistance received. This is because survivors with strong social networks return to their normal lives much more quickly thanks to access to necessary information, tools, and assistance (Aldrich, 2012, cited in: Sztompka, 2016, p. 314).

Since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, local newspapers have been one of the pillars of American democracy. The ongoing collapse of that market has had numerous negative consequences. The closure of many papers and the associated drop in the number of journalists has led to a decline in both the quantity and quality of local news. However, because audiences still expect news about their immediate surroundings, Facebook launched the Today In service for its US users in 2018. Nonetheless, it is not a media outlet in the traditional sense, nor does it even have an editorial board. An algorithm selects news and articles from various news outlets from over 1,200 publishers and then provides Facebook users with a daily dose of local news and articles. In May 2020, this service was available in approximately 6,000 cities and towns in the United States. According to various studies, news was often delayed, but the primary effect of this service was the collapse of many local newspapers, which in turn limited the information base on which the news collation algorithm relies.

## The importance of local and regional media in building community

Researchers warn that the decline of local media is causing numerous negative consequences for social life. “A strong local news organisation helps each of us with everyday problems and unites us as a community to face the big ones. As we have lost newspapers and journalists over the past decade, both the quantity and quality of local news have declined” (Abernathy, 2020). A report co-authored by the Edward R. Murrow College of Communication at Washington State University and *The Seattle Times* states that the decline in the number of journalists working in the Pacific Northwest threatens to undermine civic engagement of the local communities. It also calls for the protection and support of local media through appropriate government action (Shors, Blanks, 2016). Previously cited Penelope Muse Abernathy notes the importance of public radio and television networks, especially those affiliated with the NPR (National Public Radio) network, which are available to 95 per cent of the country and continue to be particularly invaluable as a source of local information for more remote small and medium-sized markets (Abernathy, 2020, p. 49).

Properly functioning public media have a significant impact on citizens’ sense of security. In this area, regional public media have both unique responsibilities and greater opportunities to act. Rooted in the ‘small homelands’, drawing on shared experiences, cultural traditions, and even customs, matters close to their audiences,

they occupy an advantageous position when it comes to building a sense of community and faith in its worth. And this constitutes, one might say, an effective 'vaccine' against external threats and internal disintegration.

Local media have both the obligation and the ability to respond quickly when genuine solidarity turns pathological, xenophobic, and intolerant, when solidarity within a group becomes blind loyalty, and its members isolate themselves from the society at large with a wall of hostility. "Such solidarity", writes Piotr Sztompka, "does not unite, but divides; it does not integrate, but excludes" (2016, p. 15). Developing attitudes of identification with a given social entity and promoting cooperation, even in the form of organizing various joint ventures, seems relatively easier in the case of local and regional communities. This also helps limit the 'stowaway' phenomenon, i.e., a situation where some group members strive to receive certain benefits while simultaneously avoiding the costs associated with the process of generating social capital and abstaining from cooperation (Starosta, 2022, p. 115).

Of particular importance, of course, is the informational function of the media. When talking about strengthening security and defence against threats, resistance to foreign interference and disinformation spreading in the Polish information space is crucial. Here again, it is necessary to emphasise the importance of reliable regional and local media that operate close to their audiences, know their needs and interests, and are capable of quickly acquiring and disseminating credible information about local communities. They can also quickly respond to false information appearing in the local information space. This, of course, requires that these media be recognised as reliable and trustworthy, that they enjoy confidence. Fact-checking and the ability to quickly respond to fake news and simple rumours are gaining importance in the post-truth era in which, for many recipients, emotions are more important than actual facts (Braun, 2024b, p. 218). This phenomenon poses a huge threat today. Reliable information, based on actuality rather than one's own feelings or a slew of conspiracy theories, is the foundation of democracy. As Timothy Snyder rightly states, "post-truth is pre-fascism" (2017, p. 71).

It's also worth noting the technical aspects of regional public media. Utilising terrestrial, state-controlled broadcasting networks, they also provide a secure source of information and a tool for disseminating messages in emergencies. It's crucial, of course, that these media are adequately funded and technologically up-to-date. This is particularly important in the event of external threats and natural disasters, during which mobile phone coverage or internet access may be limited for various reasons.

## Conclusion

Regional and local media constitute a crucial element of the ‘social infrastructure’, essential for uniting communities around shared values and common goals. A sense of security is also only possible with properly functioning social communication networks. Public media are of particular importance here, both in the form of traditional radio and television broadcasts, as well as online content created by regional companies. In recent years, the importance of adequately funded public media employing competent journalists has been on the rise. These media, in accordance with their statutory duties, should not only be a source of credible information but also a tool for countering misinformation. To that end, it is necessary to establish national-level mechanisms of support for local and regional media, systematically monitor their effectiveness, and provide their continuous revisions in line with the ever-changing needs.

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