

KRZYSZTOF WASILEWSKI

 [HTTPS://ORCID.ORG/0000-0002-5378-2822](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5378-2822)
KRZYSZTOF.WASILEWSKI@TU.KOSZALIN.PLKoszalin University of Technology
Faculty of Humanities
Department of Regional and European Studies

Digital regionalism and rural empowerment in the public sphere

Cyfrowy regionalizm i upodmiotowienie wsi w sferze publicznej

Summary: The experience of the last three decades reveals not only the significant exclusion of rural issues by the press, radio and television, but also its stereotypical portrayal. As a consequence, the public sphere does not perform its basic function in relation to rural communities, namely, it does not lead to their empowerment. On the other hand, social media offer a chance for real empowerment of the village and its communities. The aim of the article is therefore to analyze various types of regional initiatives in social media in terms of their potential to empower the village and its inhabitants in the public sphere. The hypothesis is digital regionalism constitutes a qualitative change in the functioning of the public sphere concerning rural issues.

Keywords: village, public sphere, digital regionalism, social media, case study

Streszczenie: Doświadczenia ostatnich trzech dekad jasno dowodzą nie tylko znacznego wykluczenia tematyki wiejskiej przez prasę, radio i telewizję, ale także jej stereotypowego ujęcia. W konsekwencji, sfera publiczna nie realizuje swojej podstawowej funkcji w stosunku do społeczności wiejskich, a mianowicie nie prowadzi do ich upodmiotowienia. Szansę na rzeczywiste upodmiotowienie wsi i jej mieszkańców oferują natomiast media społecznościowe. Zadaniem artykułu jest zatem analiza różnego rodzaju inicjatyw regionalistycznych w mediach społecznościowych pod względem ich potencjału do upodmiotowienia wsi i jej mieszkańców w sferze publicznej. Przyjęto bowiem hipotezę, iż to właśnie tak rozumiany cyfrowy regionalizm stanowi jakościową zmianę w funkcjonowaniu sfery publicznej w odniesieniu do tematyki wiejskiej.

Słowa kluczowe: wieś, sfera publiczna, cyfrowy regionalizm, media społecznościowe, studium przypadku

Introduction

The marginalization of the countryside and its inhabitants in public discourse in Poland after 1989 is a clearly noticeable phenomenon.¹ Studies published in recent years, as well as public opinion polls, reveal not only the significant exclusion of rural topics by the press, radio and television, but also its stereotypical portrayal.² As a result, the public sphere, which is supposed to provide a forum for the free flow of information and opinions and the formation of views, does not fulfill its basic function in relation to rural communities, namely, it does not lead to their empowerment. On the contrary, in many cases, there is a regression in the activity of this group.³ Thus, the basis of any democratic system, founded on the emancipation of all groups across society, is disrupted.

Until recently, rural topics appeared only on the pages of specialized agricultural press and regionalist periodicals. Although these enabled it to exist in the public sphere, they had limited impact due to their small circulation and hermetic nature. Social media, on the other hand, provide the opportunity for real empowerment of the village and its residents. Setting aside the negative aspects of the internet, it is sites such as Facebook and Twitter that make it possible to break through the communication barrier created by commercial media and bring hitherto marginalized topics into the public forum.

The task of this article, therefore, is to analyze various types of regionalist initiatives on social media in terms of their potential to empower villages and their residents in the public sphere. According to my hypothesis, it is thusly framed digital regionalism that constitutes a qualitative change in the functioning of the public sphere concerning rural issues. In order to verify the above assumption, the following three research questions were posed:

1. Among the regionalist initiatives in social media, are there any that address the history, culture and traditions of the village and its inhabitants?
 2. What functions in relation to the described village and its community do the above initiatives perform?
 3. Do social media lead to rural empowerment in the public sphere, and if so, how?
- In this article, answers to these questions were sought through the application of research methods used in ethnography and the sciences of social communication and

1 B. Fedyszak-Radziejowska, *Proces demarginalizacji polskiej wsi*, Warszawa 2005, p. 16.

2 W. Klimczak, G. Kubiński, E. Sikora-Wiśniewska, *Wykluczenie społeczne w Polsce. Wybrane zagadnienia*, Wrocław 2017, p. 29.

3 W. Knieć, W. Goszczyński, C. Obracht-Prondzyński, *Kapitał społeczny wsi pomorskiej*, Wieżycza 2013, p. 70.

media.⁴ Above all, a case study method was employed, selecting for analysis one of the social media profiles that takes a closer look at the history and traditions of the village of Wyszyny Kościelne.

The public sphere and subjectivity

The public sphere is one of those terms in modern social sciences that elude simple definitions. According to Kaja Gadowska and Jan Winczorek, this is due to its eminently normative nature, which is extremely difficult to subject to empirical testing.⁵ Thus, in the most common understanding, one can identify the public sphere as a space, independent of state structures, where a free and rational discussion of socially important issues takes place and – what is equally important – everyone has the opportunity to participate in it equally.⁶ This is how the term was understood by Jürgen Habermas, who traced the origins of the modern public sphere to 18th-century clubs and social salons in Western Europe and the United States. It was these places that provided a kind of forum for debate and the free formation of opinions of the elites at the time.⁷ However, many scholars have criticized the German philosopher for overgeneralization in his historical vision of the development of the public sphere, especially for overlooking its exclusive nature. This is because it allowed the voice of a large part of the society at the time to be marginalized or even excluded from any debate.⁸ The absence of women or representatives of the lower classes and national minorities in the discursive space so understood provoked Nancy Fraser, among others, to put forward the concept of a counter-public sphere, and as a result, to also question the very existence of a single public sphere.⁹ Yet other researchers

4 Cf. M. Kawka, “Utopia interdyscyplinarności i rozproszenie teorii a problem badawczy w naukach o mediach i komunikacji społecznej,” [in:] *W poszukiwaniu fundamentów nauk o mediach*, eds. K. Wolny-Zmorzyński, A. Lewicki, Wrocław 2019, pp. 57–67; M. Lisowska-Magdziarz, “Metodologia badań nad mediami – nurty, kierunki, koncepcje, nowe wyzwania,” *Studia Medioznawcze* 2013, no. 2, pp. 27–42.

5 K. Gadowska, J. Winczorek, “Sfera publiczna – funkcje, dysfunkcje, normy oficjalne i nieoficjalne,” *Studia Socjologiczne* 2013, no. 1, pp. 5–6.

6 F. Webster, “Information and Democracy. The Weakening of Social Democracy,” [in:] *Media Perspectives for the 21st Century*, ed. S. Papathanassopoulos, London and New York 2011, p. 24.

7 Cf. J. Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere. An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, Cambridge 1989.

8 J.L. Chapman, *Gender, Citizenship and Newspapers. Historical and Transnational Perspectives*, New York 2013, p. 9.

9 N. Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere. A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy,” *Social Text* 1990, no. 25/26, pp. 56–80.

point out that even if a single public sphere is a fact, it is constantly subject to processes of commercialization and political domination, which consequently disrupt free discussion.¹⁰ The media play an important role in this case, not only mediating access to the public sphere, but even creating it.¹¹

Regardless of how the public sphere is perceived, it is a space where not only opinions but also identities are formed.¹² It is also an expanse where the process of empowerment of a particular idea, language, group of people (such as an ethnic minority) or place occurs. The concept of the public sphere, after all, is based on the belief that political and social subjectivity is gained by being in a discursive space. This applies to both the nationwide public sphere and its local counterparts. In all these cases, as has already been suggested, presence in the public sphere is mediated by the mass media. Until recently, the traditional media – i.e., the press, radio and television – played a key role in this process, but with the development of the internet and the emergence of social media, it is the latter that have gained in importance as transmitters of information, views and opinions.¹³ The proliferation of social networks has led to the democratization of the public sphere with all its consequences – positive and negative (e.g., the decline of authority figures, the growth of political polarization, the spread of false information, digital addiction, etc.).

Studies confirm the marginalization of the so-called provinces in the public sphere. The very name is often stigmatizing, since classifying an area as a province signifies its geographical remoteness from not only the political, economic or cultural center. In the public sphere, the division between the center and province determines the hierarchy of topics and opinions. In other words, those associated with the center dominate, while “provincial” issues function to a much lesser degree. Furthermore, this division also shapes the narrative about the province, reduced today to two main topics: namely, agriculture and poverty.¹⁴ As Wojciech Knieć has aptly noted:

10 J. Curran, “Rethinking the media as a public sphere,” [in:] *Communication and Citizenship. Journalism and the Public Sphere in the New Media Age*, eds. P. Dahlgren, C. Sparks, London and New York 1991, p. 29.

11 D. McQuail, *Journalism and Society*, Los Angeles, London, New Delhi, Singapore, Washington DC 2013, p. 41.

12 L. Tsaliki, “Women and New Technologies,” [in:] *The Routledge Companion to Feminism and Postfeminism*, eds. S. Gamble, London and New York 2004, p. 86.

13 Z. Papacharissi, “On Networked Publics and Private Spheres in Social Media,” [in:] *The Social Media Handbook*, eds. J. Hunsinger, T. Senft, New York and London 2014, p. 153.

14 P. Sadura, in collab. with K. Murawska and Z. Włodarczyk, *Więś w Polsce 2017. Diagnoza i prognoza. Raport z badań*, Warszawa 2017, p. 7.

In the discourse on Polish society and development, the countryside is completely on the margins. Essentially, it appears more widely only in the context of elections because it is a numerous and disciplined electorate. What is offered to the countryside are forms of passive support. Urban residents don't have the faintest idea of what the Polish countryside is, how farmers live, how they are doing, and so on. Higher, but also lower cultures are heavily urbanized. The modern lifestyle of Poles is that of city dwellers. The countryside is completely on the sidelines.¹⁵

The marginalization of the countryside in the public sphere is not only due to the stereotypical portrayal of topics associated with it.¹⁶ An equally important factor remains the lack of an adequate medium to represent the voice of the countryside in local and national discourse. Among the exceptions are magazines edited by or aimed at the rural community.¹⁷ The same is true of television and radio broadcasts, which tend to be specialized in nature and limited in scope. It is therefore not surprising that among rural residents, one of the main sources of information continues to be the family.¹⁸ Given the fact that the modern public sphere is based on the media, their absence in relation to rural communities can be considered a major factor hindering the construction of subjectivity. In practical terms, this means smaller community involvement, linked to scepticism over the causal nature of grassroots initiatives.¹⁹

Digital regionalism

Social media have transformed not only the media landscape of the modern public sphere, but also the rules of its operation. The role of traditional media in the process of selecting information (gatekeeping) and determining the dominant narrative (agenda setting) has eroded in favor of new media, including social media platforms in particular. As evidenced by opinion polls, for a growing audience, it is sites such as Facebook and Twitter that are the main sources of news on global

15 W. Knieć, "Miasto – wieś. Od napięcia do współpracy." Available on-line: <https://www.kongresobywatelski.pl/idee-dla-polski-kategoria/miasto-wies-od-napiecia-do-wspolpracy/> [accessed on: January 2, 2023].

16 M. Wieruszewska-Adamczyk, "Wieś polska w perspektywie stulecia. Refleksje rocznicowe 1918–2018," *Zeszyty Wiejskie* 2018, z. 24, p. 18.

17 M. Przybysz-Stawska, "Świat gdzie indziej? Magazyn *Kultura Wsi. Ludzie, Wydarzenia, Przemiany* w latach 2014–2016," *Zeszyty Wiejskie* 2022, z. 28, pp. 121–150.

18 E. Jaska, "Media a pozostałe źródła informacji na obszarach wiejskich," *Stowarzyszenie Ekonomistów Rolnictwa i Agrobiznesu* 2013, vol. XV, z. 1, p. 80.

19 M. Mularska-Kucharek, "Podmiotowość i partycypacja społeczna w warunkach lokalnych," *Wieś i Rolnictwo* 2011, no. 2(151), p. 123.

and local issues.²⁰ In the latter case, one can speak of a real breakthrough, caused by the formation of hyperlocal media. They can be broadly defined as “online news or content services pertaining to a town, village, single postcode or other small, geographically defined community.”²¹ However, the above explanation does not capture the complexity of this phenomenon, as the geographic factor is not the most important in this case.²² Hyperlocal media are a hybrid of traditional local, alternative and community media, which, with regard to their audiences, perform not so much an informational function as an integrative and activating one.²³ This is due to their interactive nature, which – unlike in the case of the press, radio and television – blurs the distinction between the sender and receiver of a message. The result is the formation of a community centered around a given medium and a given space, a community that is directed toward its empowerment.

With the spread of social media, one can speak of the formation of digital regionalism (regionalism 2.0). The modern networked structure of society and the basing of the communication process on the digital flow of information have led to the creation of a new media studies definition of region and regionalism. The former should be understood as

a space determined by communication practices, the scope of which defines its boundaries, while the transmitted information constructs its memory, customs and values. Thus, a region can be an actual geographic and cultural area, formed over centuries and years; it can also be an imagined region, functioning only in a discursive space, shaped freely by participants in communication networks. In both cases, however, the key features of the region are determined by communication practices.²⁴

Digital regionalism, on the other hand, can be identified with a communicative process “aimed at constructing a shared value system of a region and its community.

20 A. Watson, “Social media as a news source worldwide 2022,” Statista 2022, August 1. Available on-line: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/718019/social-media-news-source/> [accessed on: January 3, 2022].

21 D. Radcliffe, *Here and Now. UK Hyperlocal Media Today*, London 2012, p. 6.

22 Z. Kantyka, “Media hiperlokalne – nowy element systemu społecznego komunikowania,” [in:] *Komunikowanie lokalno-regionalne w dobie społeczeństwa medialnego*, vol. 2: *Aspekty polityczne, społeczne i technologiczne*, eds. M. Mazur, M. Kornacka-Grzonka, Katowice 2018, pp. 159–173.

23 K. Wasilewski, “Media hiperlokalne i regionalizm 2.0,” [in:] *Polski system medialny w procesie zmian*, vol. 1, eds. J. Kępa-Mętrak, P. Ciszek, Kielce 2021, p. 117.

24 Idem, *Regionalizm 2.0. Media hiperlokalne i małe ojczyzny*, Koszalin 2022, p. 135.

Since the region forms a system, that is, a network of connections, regionalism is both the effect of these connections and their direct cause.”²⁵ Digital regionalism is thus based on hyperlocal media and is characterized by its bottom-up, causal nature.

Thanks to the internet, modern regionalism has gained a grassroots, mass and causal character. This is because the use of social networks to promote local history, culture and traditions not only makes it possible to reach a larger audience than with traditional tools, but also gives modern regionalism a political dimension and, consequently, the causal power to create new identities. This is primarily due to the peculiarities of hyperlocal media, which, unlike traditional media, permeate all three dimensions of the public sphere, i.e. structural, representational and organizational.²⁶ As a result, the public sphere constructed by hyperlocal media performs three basic functions that lead to the empowerment of its participants: it sets the boundaries of the space, defines the space and gives it an identity, and activates the participants of the space to act. Setting the boundaries of space is done through the negotiation by all users of the territorial scope of the described place and its characteristics.²⁷ The second function, i.e., defining the space and giving it an identity, is carried out with the help of constructing the collective memory of the place and its community, value system, etc. On the other hand, the activation of participants into action boils down to the involvement of participants in the public sphere to partake in social issues, such as the protection of local heritage.²⁸

Methodology

The above theoretical assumptions were applied to construct empirical research based on a case study of a selected regionalist profile in social media. For the purpose of this article, the profile entitled “Wyszyny Kościelne – History of a Small Village,” on Facebook since 2020 and followed by more than 430 people, was analyzed.²⁹ The choice of this profile stemmed from its relatively long and continuous existence (compared to many other such projects), and its non-commercial, original character.

²⁵ Ibidem, p. 137.

²⁶ J. Hujanen, O. Dovbysh, L. Jangdal, K. Lehtisaari, “Towards (Hyper)Local Public Sphere. Comparison of Civic Engagement across the Global North,” *Media and Communication* 2021, vol. 9, no. 3, p. 75.

²⁷ Cf. W. Willems, “The politics of things. Digital media, urban space, and the materiality of publics,” *Media, Culture & Society* 2019, vol. 41, no. 8, pp. 1192–1209.

²⁸ K. Wasilewski, *Regionalizm 2.0...*, pp. 97–99.

²⁹ As of May 5, 2023.

According to Robert E. Stake, the use of the case study method “is not a methodological choice but a choice of what is to be studied.”³⁰ Thus, a case study is a qualitative method, used when there are “many more variables of interest than data points. In response, an essential tactic is to use multiple sources of evidence, with data needing to converge in a triangulating fashion.”³¹ The analysis of the various aspects of the selected case is therefore carried out using all available and applicable research techniques, following the principle of triangulation. As a result, online ethnography (virtual ethnography and netnography) and narrative interviewing were primarily used.

The first method employs observation (including participant observation) and description, which are traditionally used in ethnography.³² However, in the case of its digital variant, it is necessary to take into account that “in online environments, the construction of identity is a process that must be initiated more deliberately or consciously.”³³ Therefore, my observation was active and consisted of using information and interacting on the studied profile according to the rules applicable to all users of the social network during the period from January 5 to 20, 2023.³⁴ At the same time, it is worth bearing in mind the limitations associated with this method, arising from the very properties of cyberspace.³⁵ These include, first and foremost, the mediated nature of online communication, the lack of tools to verify its participants, or the ability of the person running the profile to modify previous posts.³⁶ The research was conducted after the administrator of the analyzed profile had been informed of this fact.

The second method comprising this case study was a narrative interview conducted with the administrator of the profile.³⁷ According to the premise, the subject

30 R.E. Stake, “Qualitative Case Studies,” [in:] *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, 3rd Ed., ed. N.K. Denzin & Y.S. Lincoln, Thousand Oaks, CA 2005, p. 443.

31 R.K. Yin, *Case Study Research: Design and Methods*, 4th Edition, Thousand Oaks, CA 2009, p. 2.

32 U. Flick, *Designing Qualitative Research*, Los Angeles, London, New Delhi, Singapore 2007, p. 118.

33 A.N. Markham, “The Methods, Politics, and Ethics of Representation in Online Ethnography,” *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, 3rd Ed., ed. N.K. Denzin & Y.S. Lincoln, Thousand Oaks, CA 2005, p. 794.

34 K. Jurek, “Badania społeczne w internecie. Wirtualna etnografia w teorii i praktyce,” *Nauka i Szkolnictwo Wyższe* 2013, no. 1(41), p. 90.

35 Ch. Hine, “Virtual Ethnography: Modes, Varieties, Affordances,” [in:] *The SAGE Handbook of Online Research Methods*, eds. N.G. Fielding, R.M. Lee, G. Blank, London, Thousand Oaks, CA, New Delhi, Singapore 2008, pp. 257–270.

36 Cf. D. Jemielniak, “Netnografia, czyli etnografia wirtualna – nowa forma badań etnograficznych,” *Prakseologia* 2013, no. 154, pp. 97–116.

37 K. Kaźmierska, K. Waniek, *Autobiograficzny wywiad narracyjny*, Łódź 2020, pp. 21–66.

of interviews is “the individual experience of the participant, which is seen as relevant for understanding the experience of people in a similar situation.”³⁸ In doing so, the study benefited from the achievements and theoretical assumptions of oral history, which is increasingly forming the basis not only of historical research, but also falling within the field of social sciences, such as sociology and political science.³⁹ It is worth noting that the study also drew on the experience of previous interviews with digital regionalists.⁴⁰ The interview was conducted on January 5, 2023, using Zoom instant messaging, in the form of an audio-conference, the transcription of which was one of the key research materials. The actual interview was preceded by communication on Messenger, which laid out the goals and the course of the study. The interviewee was also notified about the use of the information obtained during the interview in further work. The questionnaire included basic questions designed to elicit free answers. Any vagueness was clarified in writing.

Case study

Wyszyny Kościelne is a village located in Mazowieckie Voivodeship, in the *powiat* of Mława and the rural municipality of Stupsk. According to the 2021 *National Population and Housing Census*, it was then inhabited by 492 people, 51% of whom were men. The village’s population accounted for just over 10% of the entire municipality. The *List of immovable monuments located in the Mława powiat* includes two that are linked to the village: the remains of a manor complex (a brick administrator’s house from the 20th century, a landscape park from the second half of the 19th century, two access lanes, and an orchard) and an early medieval cemetery from the 11th century.⁴¹ Also located in the village is a church from the early 20th century, which is now the parish church of Our Lady of the Rosary. On the church grounds, there is a mass grave of sixteen Polish soldiers killed during the 1920 Polish-Bolshevik War. The parish itself, in addition to Wyszyny Kościelne, includes eight neighboring villages.

Before the spread of the internet, Wyszyny Kościelne lacked its own regular medium. The exception was *Wiadomości Parafji Wyszyny Płockiej Diecezji* [News of the Parish of Wyszyny of the Płock Diocese] published by the parish of Our Lady

38 U. Flick, op. cit., p. 79.

39 Cf. M. Kierzkowski, “Historia mówiona – próba definicji pojęcia,” *Wrocławski Rocznik Historii Mówionej* 2014, no. 4, pp. 5–20.

40 K. Wasilewski, “Regionaliści jako liderzy pamięci polsko-niemieckiego pogranicza w wywiadach narracyjnych,” *Wrocławski Rocznik Historii Mówionej* 2022, no. 12, pp. 178–200.

41 *Wykaz zabytków nieruchomych znajdujących się na obszarze powiatu mławskiego*. Available on-line: <https://www.powiatmlawski.pl/3148,wykaz-zabytkow-nieruchomosci> [accessed on: January 7, 2023].

of the Rosary from 1932–1934.⁴² Even today, the parish is active in the media, running its website and a Facebook profile.⁴³ However, both the website and social media are used almost exclusively to post information about parish activities.

The profile called “Wyszyny Kościelne – History of a Small Village”⁴⁴ was launched in July 2020. Its originator and administrator is Justyna Zarazińska, a history graduate who has been affiliated with the discussed village since birth. During an interview, she explained that:

I owe my interest in history to my father. He wasn't a professional historian and didn't read much, but he talked about the past of our village. He would show my places and tell me who lived there, and what events were associated with a particular person. All this sparked my imagination. I found that the history of large centers is well known, and many books have been written on the subject. Meanwhile, the history of my village has not been described, yet it is just as interesting and important for its residents.⁴⁵

At the beginning of 2023, the profile was followed by 434 people, mostly past and present residents of the village.⁴⁶ Alongside the profile, a website was created – a blog with the same title containing expanded versions of the posts put on the social network.⁴⁷ According to the available data, the site has so far been visited by nearly 3,500 users.⁴⁸ In the inaugural post of the profile and blog, titled “Why do we need this history?,” published on July 28, 2020, the author indicated the reasons and goals of her activity:

Well, why do we need a history of Wyszyny? Because our grandparents and great-grandparents lived here; to know where we are from; whether it is a reason to be proud or perhaps to be ashamed; and so that we're never taken aback by a stranger

42 Based on press collections digitized and made available by the Polona Digital National Library.

43 Available on-line: <https://www.facebook.com/ParafiaWyszyny/> [accessed on: January 10, 2023].

44 Available on-line: <https://www.facebook.com/historiamalejwsi> [accessed on: January 10, 2023].

45 Conversation with Justyna Zarazińska, administrator of the profile “Wyszyny Kościelne – Historia małej wsi,” held and recorded using Zoom instant messenger on January 5, 2023. The recording and transcription is in the author's collection.

46 As of January 6, 2023.

47 Available on-line: <https://historiamalejwsi.wordpress.com/> [accessed on: January 10, 2023].

48 As of January 7, 2023.

who knows more about our place than we do. To sum up, if you know history, you're informed, and who doesn't want to be informed?⁴⁹

On the other hand, in a post found on the blog's home page, and therefore, aimed at all visitors, one can read:

Because this is a small town whose history has been written by its residents for hundreds of years. The only thing we can do to prevent tradition and history from falling into oblivion is to speak, write and show others that we have our "history of a small village." We're all well aware of the history of Warsaw, or other major cultural centers. Let's be informed about our own local history and the many interesting facts about the Polish countryside. What's more, I want to render something that many of us have forgotten in a way that's accessible.⁵⁰

Posts on the profile are published irregularly. As the administrator reveals, this is due to her professional obligations that often do not allow for systematic work on social media. This is because, like most digital regionalists, Zarazińska's popularization activities are carried out in her free time, using her own resources, including financial. Individualism and the lack of institutionalized support of one's activity benefiting one's small homeland can even be considered a characteristic of contemporary regionalism, especially in its digital variety.⁵¹ The administrator of the profile in question admits as much:

I cooperate with the mayor and the [municipal] councilman on projects to popularize the history of our village. I'm not part of any association or regional society. [...] I personally reached out to other, more experienced regionalists, who have helped me with many questions about Wyszyna's past.⁵²

Importantly, the personal contacts made by the administrator were preceded by conversations via instant messaging, in which the regionalist profile itself played an important role. Thus, on the one hand, the individual nature of the entire initiative

49 Po co komu ta historia? Available on-line: https://historiamalejwsi.wordpress.com/2020/07/28/po-co-komu-ta-historia/?fbclid=IwAR19lMxk9syGde3UN3nCkYWN-zYdB9Lq2rXUV2309objc94aHY-_z8aetkqI [accessed on: January 6, 2023].

50 Available on-line: <https://historiamalejwsi.wordpress.com/> [accessed on: January 6, 2023].

51 K. Wasilewski, *Regionalizm 2.0...*, p. 31.

52 Conversation with Justyna Zarazińska, administrator of the profile "Wyszyny Kościelne – Historia małej wsi," held and recorded using Zoom instant messenger on January 5, 2023. The recording and transcription is in the author's collection.

hinders its deliberate and systematic application for creating a local identity and constructing a community; on the other hand, it gives the whole activity a truly grassroots character, which consequently strengthens the potential for community activation.

The discussed profile performs three basic functions, which were described earlier in the article. These were: setting the boundaries of the space, defining the space and giving it an identity, and activating the participants of the space into action. The first function relates to indicating the actual – not administrative – boundaries of a given locality. In other words, the texts published on the profile demarcate the area by locating it in the past and present. It is no coincidence that the first posts after the profile was established were precisely about the historical location of the village. In a post published on July 29, 2020, the administrator described the history of Wyszyńy Kościelny during the appanage period:

To look for Wyszyńy and understand its location, we need to learn some historical context. We know that Wyszyńy is located in Zawkrzańska land. [...] Wyszyńy comes in a variety of spellings: “Wysszina, Wyssini, Wissini, Wyssino, Wyschini, Wyszchyn, Wischini, Wysyny, Wyszchyno, Vyssyny, Vyszymy, Visini, Vyszyny.” Where did this name come from? Various theories come to mind, one suggesting that the name could mean Wyżyny – Highlands, something located high up. [...] Although the first mention of our village appears only in 1349, Wyszyńy has a much older history and had existed for many centuries earlier.⁵³

Explaining the origin of the village’s name, locating it in time (the 14th century) and space (the Zawkrzeńska land) allows for determining Wyszyńy Kościelne’s basic contours – real and cultural. Therefore, it is not surprising that the administrator returned to the topic of the village’s genesis in subsequent entries, such as the post referring to an early medieval stronghold, located on the territory of modern Wyszyńy. A post published on September 14, 2020, reads: “At this point, I can only reveal that, in my opinion, it is likely that the pagan deity ‘Daćbóg’ or ‘Dadzóbóg,’ also known as Svarog, was very important in our lands.”⁵⁴

Similarly, in the next entry posted two weeks later, the topic of the stronghold resurfaced: “As promised, here’s an entry about the Wyszyńy stronghold. Perhaps

53 Available on-line: <https://historiamalejwsi.wordpress.com/2020/07/29/slowo-o-roz-biciu-dzielnicowym-czyli-gdzie-sa-te-wyszyny-i-skad-ta-nazwa/?fbclid=IwAR24inx-50tRn5p5toIOsLjgQzHYKnjEJSuCGSRgouqDRpBGH-Jnizodok-M> [accessed on: January 8, 2023].

54 Available on-line: <https://www.facebook.com/historiamalejwsi/photos/a.103883854757533/131796245299627/> [accessed on: January 10, 2023].

someday it will be updated when I find new information. In the meantime, I think that even the residents of Stupsk will find something of interest in this post.”⁵⁵

Let us consider the above-cited excerpts from the two entries. In the first one, you can clearly see the definition of the space in question which divides it into “our lands” and others. In the second post, this is even more noticeable, as in the last sentence, an opposition to Stupsk and its residents is directly expressed. Admittedly, this is done in a light, humorous form, but it performs the function of defining a place, in this case, the village of Wyszyny Kościelne.

The second function carried out by digital regionalism is to indicate the characteristic elements of a place. As already mentioned, it does not have to be a real place, it might as well be imagined and discursively constructed by a person running the profile or a blog. The same is true of the described initiative on Facebook, where the administrator gives the described village specific features and characteristics. One example is posting photos of the village, highlighting the beauty of the surroundings. In a post dated May 16, 2021, the administrator wrote:

Wyszyny means not only a rich history, but also beautiful landscapes. This post is for those who have never visited us, for those who have not been here for a long time, and for those who can appreciate the beauty of our village. Feel free to share your photos of the Wyszyny landscape in the comments.⁵⁶

The administrator’s appeal met with an enthusiastic response from the profile’s followers. In the comments under the post, users posted their own photos of the village, while sharing their opinions about it. One commenter wrote in reply to the quoted post: “The beautiful manor park has its character. It’s a pity that the manor house couldn’t have been preserved.”⁵⁷

References to the natural landscape are not the only way to define a space. Another, equally important, is the construction of its individual identity through the identification of characteristic elements from the past that make it a unique place. In the case of the profile in question, the identity of the village is formed through references to the noble families that ruled it. Analyzing the content of the profile, this topic is one of the most frequently addressed by the administrator. Therefore, it is not surprising that it resounded in one of the very first posts, dated July 30,

55 Available on-line: <https://www.facebook.com/historiamalejwsi/photos/a.103883854757533/135271624952089/> [accessed on: January 10, 2023].

56 Available on-line: <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=254156483063602&set=pcb.254158453063405> [accessed on: January 12, 2023].

57 Ibidem.

2020, which read: “We all know the Łebkowski family, but did you know that the village was predominantly in the hands of other nobles? For at least four centuries, the village was ruled by the ‘Junosza’ armigers.”⁵⁸ In subsequent entries, the author broached the topic of the wealth of the local nobility and discussed its representatives. An important point of reference was the Junosza coat of arms, which distinguished the village from other localities.

Another important element in the collective memory of the village community thus shaped was the local repercussions of the independence uprisings, such as the January Uprising, the Polish-Bolshevik War, World War II, and the post-war independence underground. By reviving the figures and events of this period, not only was the identity of Wyszyny Kościelne and its residents strengthened, but also the history of the locality was linked to national history, especially its glorious pages. One example was an entry dated February 28, 2021, outlining the figure of the parish priest of Wyszyny, Fr. Stanisław Szulborski. On Sunday, August 22, 1920, against the pleas of his parishioners, he remained in his church, where he died at the hands of the Bolsheviks. As one could read in the post, which served as an introduction to a longer text published on the blog: “Father Stanisław Szulborski was a parish priest of the Wyszyny Parish briefly, only for two years. He was a priest who cannot be described with words such as ‘coward,’ because it is certainly not appropriate for this character. He knew what awaited him and humbly accepted his fate.”⁵⁹

Fr. Szulborski’s biography not only contributes to the knowledge about former villagers, but also points to positive role models and attitudes to be emulated. A similar function was served by the post of March 7, 2022: “Today a post about interesting places in the Wyszyny cemetery, where you can pray and contemplate in your free time; places that commemorate those who fell in wars and unique monuments to honorable people.”⁶⁰

The events and figures of the past were not only meant to teach patriotism, but also inscribed the locality in the history of the entire country. This is illustrated, for instance, by an entry dated November 24, 2022, regarding the post-war independence underground (original spelling): “What does the independence underground have to do with a hut in the middle of our village? What role did the Cursed Soldiers

58 Available on-line: <https://www.facebook.com/historiamalejwsi/photos/a.103883854757533/142571850888733/> [accessed on: January 9, 2023].

59 Available on-line: <https://www.facebook.com/historiamalejwsi/photos/a.103883854757533/209520307527220/> [accessed on: January 13, 2023].

60 Available on-line: <https://www.facebook.com/historiamalejwsi/photos/a.103883854757533/431613971984518/> [accessed on: January 13, 2023].

play in the history of our locality? Why do we refer to them as ‘bands’? Who most likely was Orłowski? Read our latest blog post to find out!”⁶¹

Another example is a post from December 5, 2022, which places Wyszyny Kościelne on the map of the January Uprising through the figure of Ignacy Łebkowski: “Ignacy Łebkowski, January Uprising insurgent. He died on August 9, 1863, in the battle of Chromakowo. The bodies of the fallen were supposedly buried on the battlefield, then moved to the cemetery in Lutocin. We do not know where he is buried. There is only an epitaph plaque in the Wyszyny church.”⁶²

The profile in question also fulfills the third basic function of digital regionalism, namely, to activate the local community. In the case of Wyszyny Kościelny, this included efforts to create a new village coat of arms. In October 2020, the administrator published a post on the portal, as well as a longer text on the blog, introducing readers to the history of the coat of arms of noble families – the owners of the village: “We all know the Junosza coat of arms well by now, but is it the only one we can boast of in our history? Read on to learn more.”⁶³

The described history of the coat of arms inspired the residents of Wyszyny, led by the village council, to create a modern symbol of the village. The initiative came from the profile’s administrator, who, in a post dated November 24, 2020, called on her followers to gather and share information about local history that would help work on a new coat of arms. Here is the post in full:

Dear users, I have a small favor to ask you. We are considering giving a coat of arms to our village, unfortunately, it requires considerable work and the collection of a lot of information, because such deeds must be properly documented for the heraldic commission; there must be as much information as possible according to the guidelines. So at this point I must ask for your help.

Please contact me on Facebook via messenger or at my email address:

historiamalejwsi@gmail.com

1. If you know any local legends.
2. If you know any historical themes or people from our village who participated in World War II, partisan post-war activities, or other historical events (earlier or later). Please feel free to contact me as well.

61 Available on-line: <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=181232207894047&set=a.16728525595409> [accessed on: January 13, 2023].

62 Available on-line: <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=183838427633425&set=pcb.183838677633400> [accessed on: January 17, 2023].

63 Available on-line: <https://www.facebook.com/historiamalejwsi/photos/a.103883854757533/142571850888733/> [accessed on: January 9, 2023].

3. If you know of places, some important events, burial sites, graves from our cemetery that belong to insurgents/soldiers/persons related to history indirectly or directly.
4. If you know people who can give us valuable information.
If you can't help, please share the post; the more people read it, the greater the chance that the application will be thoroughly documented.”⁶⁴

The post was shared eleven times – more than any other published post on the discussed profile. Importantly, the initiative also gained popularity among representatives of the municipal authorities, who were among the profile's followers, helping to make it official. Finally, on August 16, 2021, the village council established a new coat of arms, which is a combination of the coats of arms of the first and last owners of the village, namely Junosza and Dąbrowa. As the administrator wrote on January 6, 2022, thanks to the involvement of the residents: “We have our own symbol, with which the whole community can identify, which reminds us of our roots. We need to remember that there are hundreds of years of history behind us, we need to remember who our ancestors were and be aware that our village was one of the most beautiful villages in the region.”⁶⁵

The grassroots activity that led to the establishment of the coat of arms came from the activities of the profile in question. Thus, although the idea had been discussed before, it was only its popularization in social media and grassroots social mobilization that made it possible. Furthermore, the activities for the establishment of the coat of arms integrated the local community around the symbol, raised its historical awareness, and consequently, influenced the formation of local identity.

Summary

The case study presented in the article illustrates the potential of digital regionalism to empower villages and their residents in the public sphere. Seeking answers to the research questions posed in the introduction, it was shown that social media provide an effective space for the development of various types of regionalist initiatives aimed at popularizing the history, culture and traditions of the village and its inhabitants. The case study further confirmed that digital regionalism performs three basic functions in relation to the described space,

⁶⁴ Available on-line: <https://www.facebook.com/historiamalejwsi/photos/a.103883854757533/151840619961856/> [accessed on: January 18, 2023].

⁶⁵ Available on-line: <https://historiamalejwsi.wordpress.com/2022/01/06/flaga-oraz-herb/> [accessed on: January 20, 2023].

namely, setting its boundaries, defining its basic characteristics, and activating the local community. Consequently, it can be concluded that regionalist initiatives in social media allow local communities not only to exist in the public sphere – to a much wider extent than with the help of traditional media – but also to gain subjectivity in it.

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