Media and Information Literacy of Students – Skills and Challenges in the Context of Political Preferences: The example of Poland

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Abstract:

The main purpose of this article is to present the link between the level of media and information literacy (MIL) and political preferences of Polish students based on empirical research. MIL is a key issue for today's societies as it equips citizens with the skills needed to use various media and information channels and exercise their basic human rights. Phenomena such as post-truth, the way people are more inclined to accept arguments based on emotions and beliefs than facts, disinformation and fake news are an important context and subject of ongoing scientific discussions. Keeping in mind the limitations of self-report methods, the authors combine the elements of students' self-assessment with the questions that test their theoretical knowledge and competences related to recognizing fake news. The research sample consists of 870 students of social sciences and journalism. The results of the research provide detailed knowledge about the level of MIL as well as political preferences of students. By that, authors hope to contribute to the global scientific discussion, offering their research conducted in the context of the declining quality of democracy in Poland.

Keywords: fake news, democracy, media, Media and Information Literacy, political preferences, survey

Introduction

Education and literacy might be perceived as preconditions for democracy. The first person who famously linked "information issues" to democracy was Tocqueville (1954) but almost two centuries later some prominent scholars and politicians (Annan, 2018; Norris, 2019) still present

issues like fake news and disinformation as a central element of discussion on the quality of modern democracy.

The newest studies shows that the number of fake news in the global public debate is increasing, but their ability to set the issue agenda for public opinion strongly depends on online partisan media (Vargo et al., 2018). In this paper we propose the approach, that examines the relation between the problem of fake news and political preferences through theoretical framework and empirical study of Media and Information Literacy (MIL).

Media are still important both for information dissemination and democracy, therefore MIL is a crucial skill in media-saturated world for all citizens and young people in particular (Wallmark, 2013, p. 399). However, MIL is a broad and complex concept, so we decided to focus only on some of its components, which cover citizens' knowledge and abilities to recognise and react on fake news. In this way, we have narrowed the aim of the paper and tackled more particular challenges to the quality of public debate in Poland.

In the paper we will discuss the results of our research on Polish students of social sciences and journalism regarding their abilities to cope with fake news based on MIL guidelines. Exploring the primary research puzzle, we will try to present to what extent the level of MIL among young, well-educated and potentially politically oriented citizens is related to their political preferences. Basing on the analysis of 870 questionaries we will try to answer the following research questions:

Q1: Are there significant differences in MIL level between students who declare themselves to be voters of different parties?

Q2: Are there significant differences in MIL level between students who are undecided voters and those clearly declaring their support in future elections?

In this way we hope to broaden area of studies on fake news impact on the quality of electoral processes and democracy as such. We will contribute to the existing state of research by presenting both the in-depth theoretical explanation and the empirical evidences proving that without proper level of media and information literacy the quality of the public debate, challenged by the level of fake news, might undermine democratic satisfaction and deepen partisan mistrust among young voters.

In the next part, we will present the current state of research on MIL and fake news and shows how our paper can expand this area. After that, we will firstly present the methodological

aspects of our research, and then discuss the final findings. In the last section, we will return to the question of the importance of our research in the context of the current political situation in Poland and some fears and concerns expressed by students involved in our study.

State of research

Carlsson (2019, p. 37), while describing MIL, noticed that it is based on a recognition that mediated societies require media-literate citizens. United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) stresses that "empowerment of people through Media and Information Literacy" is important in the context of securing equitable access to information and knowledge as well as in promoting pluralistic and independent media (UNESCO, n.d.). MIL could be understood as crucial competencies and skills needed by citizens in the twenty first century. UNESCO identifies three main areas of knowledge for MIL. The first includes the functions of media, libraries and other information providers, the second embraces the conditions in which news media and information providers can operate in an effective manner and the last one circulates around the performances of these functions by evaluating their content and service (UNESCO, 2011, p. 16). Over the past five decades the knowledge about media has been discussed in different fields and from different perspectives and now MIL is in an ongoing process of change in both the media sector and society (Carlsson, 2019, p. 51).

In Europe we can identify some differences in understanding of MIL. In Western European countries it is rooted in media education while in Eastern Europe understanding of MIL is closer to computer and information literacy (Frau-Meigs et al., 2017, p. 32). Poland is an example which fits this observation. When discussing Polish example some experts stressed that teaching media competences was limited to IT skills and reception of ICT messages what many specialists consider insufficient (Iwanicka et al., 2014, p. 4). The Media Literacy Index for 2021, which assesses the resilience to fake news potential in 35 countries in Europe using indicators for press freedom, education and trust in others, ranked Poland on 17th position with 56 points (Lessenski, 2021).

In case of MIL we should consider political, economic, cultural and technological factors. As Freedom House stressed, the pandemic and its consequences, like economic insecurity, have impact on democracy and its defenders have sustained heavy losses (Repucci & Slipowitz, 2021). In the abovementioned document Poland is classified as free (with score 82/100), but there is also

a note that since populist, socially conservative Law and Justice (PiS) party won the elections in 2015 it has led to a situation in which it can "increase political influence over state institutions and threaten to reverse Poland's democratic progress" (Freedom House, 2021). There are many voices arguing that democracy is under attack by populist leaders and parties. In case of Europe the threat is greater in CEE countries which do not have such long and developed tradition of independent, democratic institutions as Western European countries. They also have problems with institutional and political volatility. Moreover, in recent years, Poland has experienced a large decline in Press Freedom Index – from 18 position in 2015 to 64 in 2021 (World Press Freedom Index, 2015; 2021). It is worth noting that despite many changes in social life the role of media in the contemporary society is still important both in case of traditional and new media. However, apart from the important role of political, economic or cultural factors, there is also a significant impact of fast developing technology. In times of democratic deficits, the role of MIL seems to be especially important, because it could help citizens critically evaluate content of different media and in consequence develop informed citizenry.

When discussing the topic of political context and role of technology, it is worth referring to the problem of fake news. Fake news can be understood as containing false, discrediting or whitewashed information and their aim is to manipulate and deceive recipients in order to achieve financial or political interests (Meinert et al., 2018). Scholars also study use of the fake news discourse by political actors. Farhall et al. (2019) argued that fake news language has emerged in strategic political communication in Australia since Trump election and that this form of discourse is used rather to attack media. Moreover, the research proves that false news spreads more rapidly on the social network than real news does and humans, not bots, are mainly responsible for dissemination of false information (Dizikes, 2018). When we take into consideration the role and fast dissemination of fake news in the Internet as well as their potential to shape political communication, the role of MIL seems to be even greater. It can be considered as one of the basic skills necessary for citizens.

Ptaszek (2019, p. 223-224) claimed that algorithms are being used on a large scale not only to create and spread fake news but also to simulate, especially in social media, real interactions between people and manipulate public opinion. The same author calls this process a computational propaganda and suggests that it is one of the most dangerous technological tools that threaten democracy (see also Gorwa, 2019). It is therefore interesting what knowledge and

competencies students of social science and journalism have in this area. On one hand, young people are often perceived as having innate IT skills and knowledge about media. Also, according to the report by the European Audiovisual Observatory, in case of projects dedicated to MIL, the most common audience group for the top 145 projects were "teens and older students" despite the fact that authors excluded curricular-based projects (European Audiovisual Observatory, 2016, p. 4). On the other hand, when writing about the problem of spreading fake news many authors focused on teenagers and young people because of their very low trust in traditional media and willingness to share other types of information (Łódzki, 2017, p. 21).

We are interested not only in MIL among students, but also in their political preferences and possible links between level of MIL and political views. Wenzel (2018) studied the scale of influence of the media on party preferences. The scholar argued that there is a clear difference in consumption of media and its evaluation displayed by the electorate of governing party (PiS) and everyone else. Public broadcaster is trusted primarily by PiS voters, while other voters trust major private broadcasters (Wenzel, 2018, p. 71). The contribution of our article to the current state of research consists not only in further verification of theses put forward, for example, by Wenzel, but also of our own analysis of differences in MIL levels between students who declared clear political preferences and those who described themselves as undecided voters.

Research methods

In the article authors present in a multidimensional manner the level of students' MIL as well as political preferences based on empirical research. The first step was desk research necessary to present the state of research, outline the socio-political context and indicate the level of MIL in Poland compared to other European countries. Authors analyzed literature on understanding of MIL and differences in this area between Western and Eastern European countries to present Poland against this background. Other sources of data were reports (e.g., by the European Audiovisual Observatory) and indexes (including The Media Literacy Index). Authors also tried to analyze the determinants of the political preferences of young Poles. As Frankfort-Nachmias and Nachmias (2001, p. 322) noticed, the general advantage of using secondary data is the fact that a wide range of materials allows the analysis to be deeper than that based only on primary data from a single research project.

Secondly, the main tool used in the study was a survey which is a quantitative technique for data gathering. We believe that the article benefits from key strengths of survey such as highly structured mode of collecting data, and fact that respondents approached them in their natural environment, allowing examination of broad range of variables (Hansen, Machin, 2019, p. 203). The article presents the results of the survey conducted among students of social sciences and journalism on a sample of 870 respondents representing academic centers in various parts of Poland. Authors assumed that such students are usually credited with relatively high skills and understanding of the new media ecosystem and should have some knowledge about media functioning, information verification, problem of fake news, disinformation and other social phenomena which affect mass communication on different levels. The research period started on April 12, 2021 and ended on May 31 2021 (survey closure). In order to increase the representativeness of the sample we used official lists of universities supervised by the Minister responsible for higher education and sent our online survey to all universities which offered studies in social sciences and journalism. Web survey as well as stratified and convenience sampling techniques are often adapted in this type of research (Ashley et al., 2017, p. 84; Ojebuyi & Salawu, 2015, p. 211). We chose stratified sampling to ensure that the survey was disseminated in an online form not only to the biggest universities in the country (e.g., in Krakow, Warsaw, Poznan, Wroclaw, Gdansk) but also to smaller academic centers (e.g., Płock, Kalisz, Jelenia Góra, Siedlce). The survey was anonymized and the respondents filled it in the form of an online questionnaire. It consists of five sections: students' self-assessment of MIL, assessment of students' MIL, practical questions, trust and responsibility, respondents' personal details. Keeping in mind the limitations of self-report methods, the authors, in addition to questions encouraging to indicate the level of students' own skills, also included questions that test their theoretical knowledge and competences related to recognizing fake news.

Due to the wide range of research and the complexity of the studied field the authors concentrated on the basic elements of MIL, especially the knowledge about fake news and practical skills connected with critical thinking in recognition of false information. This is justified by both an established role of critical thinking in concept of MIL and growing number of studies and reports which show large scale of disinformation campaigns and the spread of fake news as well as vulnerability of societies to these phenomena.

Results

In the section we will discuss the outcomes of our empirical study by comparing the average results gathered by supporters of the main political parties in Poland. We will analyse the qualitative difference in responses between respondents with clear voting intentions and undecided voters. In both cases, to explore the main research puzzle we will present some basic descriptive statistics in the form of clear diagrams and tables.

During our research, we found that 11% of respondents had taken part in a course developing media and information competences ending with a certificate, what might have had an impact on our research. However, the obtained results seem to confirm the main conclusions of other similar studies (CBOS, 2021a) on the political preferences of young Poles. To further minimize the risks associated with conducting an online survey, in the part devoted to political preferences, we ask about those political forces that 1. in the previous parliamentary elections exceeded the election threshold; 2. during the research period were usually indicated in the polls (CBOS, 2021b; PKW, 2019; PAP, 2021).

Chart 1. Political preference of students of social studies and journalism in Poland
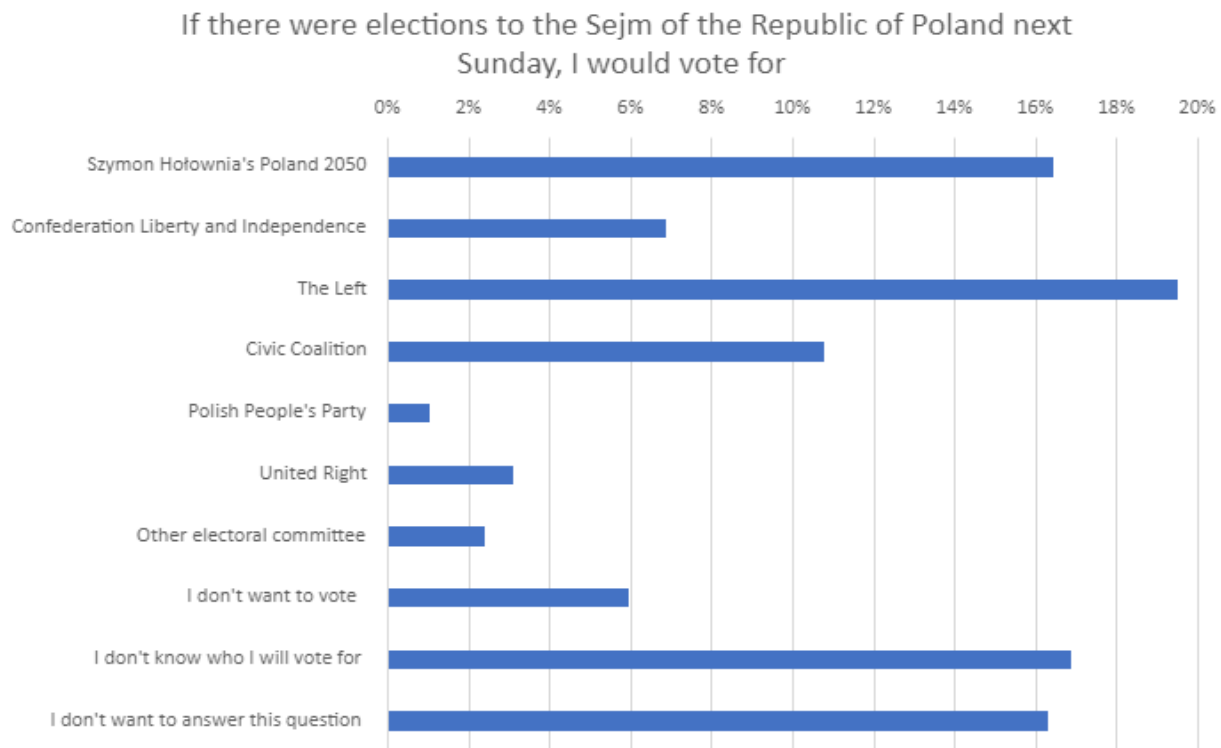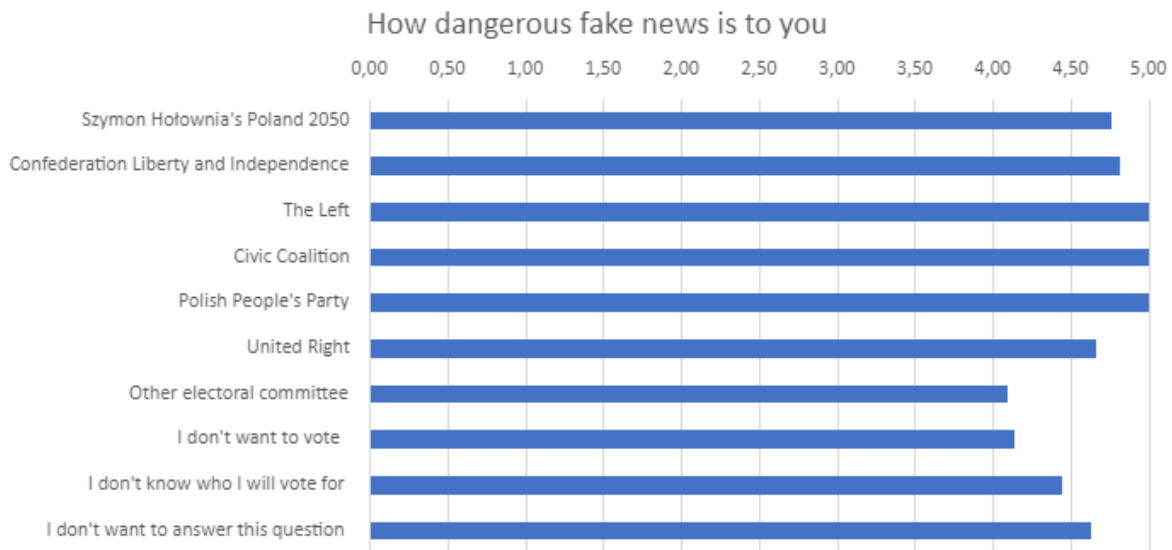

Source: Authors' calculations from the primary data gathered April 12 - May 31, 2021. Sample size – 870 people.

Respondents declared the highest support for the Left (20%) - an electoral coalition and a parliamentary club composed at the time of the research from three parties: the Democratic Left Alliance (SLD, now – New Left), Spring, Left Together. This is significantly different comparing to other nationwide surveys, where the Left usually takes 4th place with support not exceeding 8% ("Sondaże / Polska", n/d). The visible turn of the younger generation towards left-wing values, however, was confirmed by the CBOS (2021a) which helps to explain the obtained results. According to our research, the party of the well-known journalist and TV presenter Szymon Hołownia, established after the last parliamentary elections, also enjoys high support among students (16%).

The low support for the ruling PiS – only 3% – is very symptomatic. The party, which is still often trusted by older people, is often critically perceived by younger voters, participating in large numbers in anti-government protests related to the tightening of anti-abortion law (Salik, Płociński, 2020). A high percentage of respondents either do not intend to vote in the next election (6%) or still do not know who to vote for (17%). People who did not want to answer this question (16%) constitute a separate, problematic category. We will discuss the significance of this phenomenon in the last section of our article.

Chart 2. Perception of fake news among respondents with different voting preferences

Source: Authors' calculations from the primary data gathered April 12 - May 31, 2021. Sample size – 870 people. Answers on a scale of 1 - 7, where: 1 - completely harmless, 7 very dangerous.

The visible differences in the support of political parties, however, do not easily translate into a different perception of fake news as an Internet threat. The respondents who declared their

will to vote for other than the most popular political parties perceived fake news as a threat to the least extent – in average 4.10/7 points. The voters of the ruling camp are in the second place (4.67/7). Overall, however, the declared level of perceived threat was similar for all respondents.

However, the greater difference between supporters of mentioned political parties can be seen in the context of their declared experience with fake news. Only 67% of the United Right's voters were able to indicate the approximate frequency of encountering fake news which was definitely lower than the next result of Szymon Hołownia's party with almost 90% of answers indicating such frequency. The declared voters of the United Right were also the least likely to say that they encounter fake news on a daily basis (15%).

A certain deviation from the dominant pattern of the answer, containing the option "hard to say", can be seen in the case of the PSL, which, however, can be explained by the extremely small number of people who decided to vote for this party (9 out of 870 replies). The voters of "other election committees", which do not exceed the election threshold in the latest polls (e.g., Kukiz '15), responded in a similar way. These differences are greater than those existing between the majority of respondents with clear electoral preferences and those who were undecided or unwilling to answer the question.

Chart 3. Experience with fake news among respondents with different voting preferences
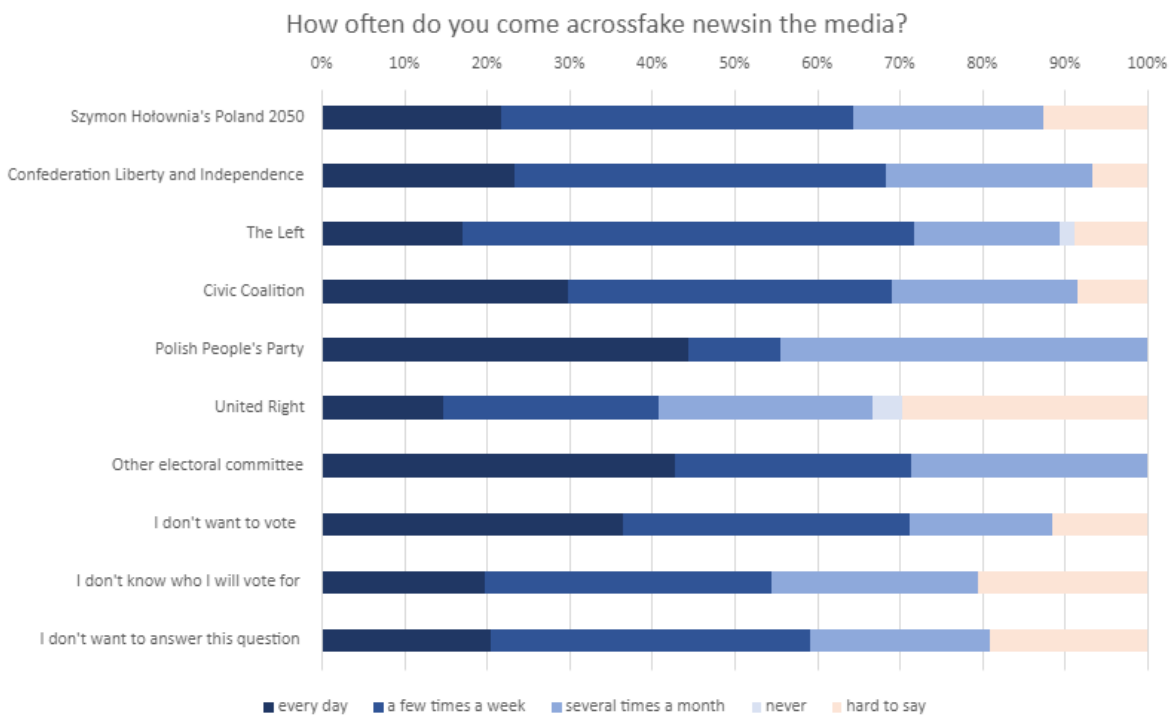
Source: Authors' calculations from the primary data gathered April 12 - May 31, 2021. Sample size – 870 people.

The report of the Centre for Media Pluralism and Media Freedom covering political independence of media in Poland (Klimkiewicz, 2020) shows that the highest risk in this area was identified by the indicator on Independence of public service media governance and funding (83% - high risk). The report of the Polish Language Council of the Polish Academy of Sciences (Kłosińska et al., 2018) also points to the fact that public media in Poland are used to disseminate pro-government propaganda, which may explain the fact why the supporters of the three main opposition groups are less likely to check all controversial information in traditional media (Szymon Hołownia's Poland 2050 13%, the Left 14%, Civic Coalition 15%). In this context, the answers of people who do not want to vote are more similar to the supporters of the current ruling camp – 23% of answers – while people who do not know whom they are going to vote for or do not want to answer this question answered in line with opinions expressed by the supporters of the opposition – in both cases 12 % of answers.

Supporters of the United Right have also stated that they never verify the information provided by media more often than supporters of other parties: 7% of them indicated that they never verified information delivered by traditional media, 11% that they never do it in the context of new media. For comparison, only 2% of the supporters of the relatively recently established Szymon Hołownia's Poland 2050 replied that they do not verify the information received both in the traditional media and new media. Respondents who do not know who they are going to vote for or did not want to reveal their plans responded in a manner similar to the supporters of the main opposition parties – in both cases 5% of respondents never check information provided by traditional media and 3% by new media. The most challenging is the case of 15% of people who do not want to vote and say that they never verify the news reported in traditional media. Perhaps it can be interpreted as a desire to withdraw from the classically understood public sphere, but further research is necessary to verify such a hypothesis.

Table 1. Information verification among respondents with different voting preferences

	How often do you verify information provided by the media?					
	always		sometimes		never	
	traditional media	new media	traditional media	new media	traditional media	new media
Szymon Hołownia's Poland 2050	13%	22%	85%	76%	2%	2%
Confederation Liberty and Independence	18%	32%	78%	63%	3%	5%
The Left	14%	23%	83%	76%	3%	1%
Civic Coalition	15%	19%	79%	76%	6%	5%
Polish People's Party	22%	22%	78%	67%	0%	0%
United Right	22%	22%	70%	67%	7%	11%
Other electoral committee	5%	19%	90%	71%	5%	10%
I don't want to vote	23%	21%	62%	73%	15%	6%
I don't know who I will vote for	12%	27%	84%	70%	5%	3%
I don't want to answer this question	12%	24%	82%	73%	5%	3%

Source: Authors' calculations from the primary data gathered April 12 - May 31, 2021. Sample size – 870 people.

There are studies dedicated to fact-checking initiatives as promoters of MIL. In case of Poland, it was observed that fact-checking groups engage themselves occasionally in educational activities related to MIL, but at the same time some of these initiatives (usually those related to civil society groups), treat their educational activities as a priority (Kuś & Barczyszyn-Madziarz, 2020, p. 262). We asked students if they knew any fact-checking initiatives. Majority of respondents did not know any of them (88.6%) and only 11.4% were able to give an example of at least one organization. On a side note, the most frequently indicated organization were Demagog (it was pointed out by 67% of these respondents who were familiar with fact-checking initiatives), then OKO.press (23%) and Konkret24 (10%). Other initiatives (eg. Wojownicy Klawiatury, fakenews.pl or international groups) were given as examples rarely.

When we take into consideration political preferences of respondents and their knowledge about fact-checking initiatives we can see some notable differences. First of all, in case of two groups – students who would like to vote for the United Right or the Confederation Liberty and Independence – awareness of organizations active in fact-checking is tangibly lower (up to 5%) (Chart 4). All of other groups of respondents exceeded 10%, and voters of the Civic Coalition, the Left, The Polish People Party and other electoral committees exceeded the 15% threshold. Groups of respondents with the lowest level of knowledge of fact-checking initiatives also showed a lower level of ability to recognize fake news.

Chart 4. Fact-checking initiatives awareness among respondents with different voting preferences
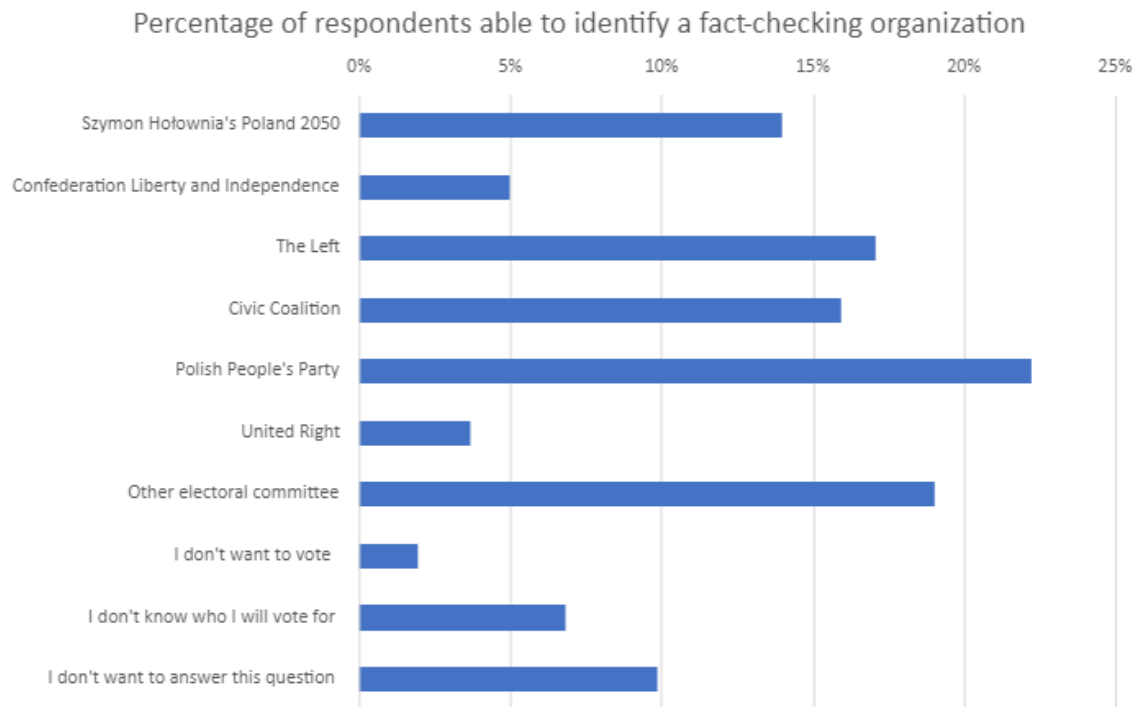
Percentage of respondents able to identify a fact-checking organization

Source: Authors' calculations from the primary data gathered April 12 - May 31, 2021. Sample size – 870 people.

In our research we used not only self-report questions, but we also gave students some practical tasks. We presented them with six news (some of them were real news and some were fake news) and asked if they had seen such information before, how they would assess the credibility of information and whether they were willing to share this information on the Internet, e.g., on Twitter or Facebook. Therefore, students had a chance to present their critical thinking skills in practice (check if there is information about author and sources, evaluate sources etc.).

First of all, we can analyze students' abilities to recognize fake news by pointing out their good ability to spot that news. We can find that four groups have similar outcomes oscillating around 80% of correct answers – supporters of Szymon Hołownia's Poland 2050 (80% of all correct answers), Left (82%), Civic Coalition (80%) and Polish People's Party (81%) (Table 2). supporters of other electoral committees had a lower score (74%), then Confederation Liberty and Independence (72%) and on the last place United Right (69%). The difference between the highest score (Left, Polish People's Party) and the lowest (United Right) is not very significant, but certainly noticeable (13%). The fact that students were familiar with the information or not was not very important in case of their correct assessment. This pattern is however different when it comes to respondents' willingness to share false information.

When we look at data showing us which group of students was willing to share false information the most often we can see United Right's voters are on first place (26% of them admitted that they could share this kind of content). Voters of other electoral committees are second (24%). Regarding other respondents, in all cases less than 20% of students indicated willingness to share information which was fake news. Only one group fell between 0% and 10% and it was population of supporters of Szymon Hołownia's Poland 2050 (10%). The outcomes are interesting when we look at percentage of people willing to share false information when unfamiliar with it. Generally, respondents were quite often willing to share fake news which they had seen before. In some cases the difference is significant (more than half as much) like in case of Polish People's Party (general 13% of people willing to share false information and 0% of people willing to share false information when unfamiliar with the information) or Confederation Liberty and Independence (12% and 3%) and other electoral committee (24% and 10%). We can assume that if students saw the information which we presented during our assessment before and knew it, they were more likely to treat the fact that this information had appeared in public discourse as a manifestation of its credibility.

Table 2. Responses to fake news among respondents with different voting preferences

The ability to recognize fake news and the willingness to disseminate them			
% of all correct answers	% of correct answers when unfamiliar with the information	% of people willing to share false information	% of people willing to share false information when unfamiliar with the information
Szymon Hołownia's Poland 2050			
80%	80%	10%	5%
Confederation Liberty and Independence			
72%	74%	12%	3%
The Left			
82%	80%	16%	8%
Civic Coalition			
80%	78%	17%	12%
Polish People's Party			
81%	90%	13%	0%
United Right			
69%	69%	26%	22%
Other electoral committee			
74%	73%	24%	10%
I don't want to vote			
74%	69%	18%	10%
I don't know who I will vote for			
75%	72%	21%	14%
I don't want to answer this question			
72%	73%	17%	6%

Source: Authors' calculations from the primary data gathered April 12 - May 31, 2021. Sample size – 870 people.

To sum up, our study shows that there is a potential link between MIL and the electoral preferences, by which we strengthen some previous studies delivered among others by Wenzel. We believe that our research shows that there is a visible difference between the supporters of the United Right (mostly PiS voters) and the rest of the respondents (the first research question) and that this difference is much more tangible than the difference between the decided and undecided voters (the second research question). However, what is also important our study shows the surprisingly high percentage of young citizens who simply refused to declare their political preferences present knowledge, attitudes and behaviour significantly different from those who don't not know who they want to vote for or simply decided not to vote at all, which will be discussed in the last section of this article.

Conclusions and discussion

The paper proves that it is worth looking at the level of MIL competence among students who are often perceived as understanding the new media ecosystem and related threats such as fake news better. As it was indicated, there is a persistent difference in undersign MIL between scholars from Western and Eastern Europe (Frau-Meigs et al., 2017: 32). The contribution of our work is that to some extent these differences need to be reconceptualize and reconsidered in the light of the impact of the current political situation in Poland.

The research sample used in this paper consists of 870 students of social sciences and journalism from numerous academic centres around the country. The biggest challenge in this context was however not the vast number of institutions involved in shaping MIL among Polish students but the reluctance of respondents to express their views in a form of an online questionnaire. Although our study was fully anonymised the repercussions that have arisen among some pupils and students participating in anti-government strikes could have significantly influenced the number of people who refused to reveal their political preferences in the research.

According to the Media Literacy Index 2019, Poland was 18th (53 points) and recently, along with the Czech Republic and Slovakia experienced the greatest decline (Lessenski, 2019). Our research has shown that even among the youngest voters there is a tendency of the level of MIL declining in the context of people clearly declaring support for the ruling camp. On the one hand, the large percentage of people who partially did not complete the questionnaire make these results dubious, Still, it proves that MIL is political and should be accepted as a fully-fledged subject of interest for political scientists.

Our research has some limitations also on the theoretical level, therefore in our future studies we want to support our empirical studies with broader conceptual framework of the theory of information equality and democracy. As Simpson argues: "Democracy depends not only on wealth or power resources but more on cognitive capacity and societal values" (Simpson, 1997, p. 165). We hope that in our study we show that analysing cognitive aspects of the young generation of Poles is crucial in further studies of democracy in crisis.

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