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The fourth estate and values. *Deon.pl* portal in search of quality journalism

Abstract

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE: The research objective of this paper is to analyze the profile and selected content of the Catholic portal *deon.pl* in the context of quality journalism.

THE RESEARCH PROBLEMS AND METHODS: The main research problem is to determine the facts related to the genesis, profile and content of the messages of one of the most popular Catholic portals in Poland.

THE PROCESS OF ARGUMENTATION: The first part of the paper reviews the literature in the field of broadly defined criteria of quality journalism. Then, the profile of the *deon.pl* portal was presented, and in the following sections, the analysis of the content of the *Deon* FB profile and the *deon.pl* portal.

RESEARCH RESULTS: All these materials were analyzed according to their subject matter, the nature of the message, the number of likes, political overtones and the program line of the portal. The titles of the *deon.pl* Facebook account reflect two thematic lines: the theme of the war in Ukraine and the theme of preparations for Easter. At *deon.pl*, an analysis of the texts in the tabs of the information and opinion sections was carried out.

CONCLUSIONS, INNOVATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS: Quality journalism is on the one hand "journalism of values" and on the other "professional journalism". Manifestations of such journalism are visible in *deon.pl*.

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The Jesuit portal should be considered a manifestation of journalistic quality in Poland due to the clear values professed, and at the same time, transmitted by the editorial staff, as well as professionalism of work in accordance with accepted journalistic rules and high ethical standards, visible in the unambiguous separation of information from opinion. Deon.pl is an example of a Catholic portal with a successful attempt to combine tradition and journalistic news against the *fake news* tendencies.

KEYWORDS:

deon.pl, quality journalism, Jesuits, web portal, values

INTRODUCTION

Digital media are not just a mere tool for evangelization among Christian communities. The presence of the faithful in online media provokes new situations and generates new challenges for church practices in social communication. One of them is the necessity to properly recognize attitudes and values of the young generation, who grow up in full symbiosis with the electronic media, and then use their language and symbolism in media coverage. This peculiar and interesting marriage of the Catholic portals (or, to put it more broadly, with all religious social and informational portals) with contemporary reality, has been observed for decades all over the world, also in Poland.

Such trend can be also seen in numerous Catholic media church entities, such as, for instance, the multilingual papal website *vatican.va*, the English-language websites including *catholicnewsagency.com*, *catholic.com*, *catholicnews.com* and *ewtnnews.com* (Giordano, 2022), as well as some Polish-language portals, e.g. *wiara.pl*, *gosc.pl* and *opoka.org.pl*. However, there is a lack of broader research in this area, therefore it has been recognised worthy of a thorough media analysis. Such a research need is particularly important in the context of discussions on the quality of contemporary journalism. In the times of online communities, when the business environment is based on their capabilities, it is necessary to look for communication channels that aim – with their organizational mission – at *pro publico bono* social activities, while at the same time maintaining high standards of journalism and shaping the society's morality.

Social and informational portal *deon.pl* was established in 2009 by The Society of Jesus (Jesuits) and the WAM Publishing House, which has existed for over 140 years. The name of the portal comes from the shortened phrase “Deus on-line”. However, this specific name gains value not so much because of its roots and meaning, but as a consequence of obeying the rules to which the creators of the portal refer (Hofman, 2014). Deon.pl is the only portal in the Polish media sphere that directly invokes God in its name. According to Gemius research, this portal ranks first in Poland among religious portals (Batorski and Olcoń-Kubicka, 2006). The creators address it primarily to recipients over 25 years old, i.e. to the so-called *young adult plus* environment. These are mostly people with university degrees who expect counseling, deepening their social knowledge, as well as having a voice in the ecclesial world.

From the beginning, the portal acted in the spirit of the Ignatian tradition, i.e. “finding God in all things” (St. Ignatius of Loyola). For this reason, its offer is addressed to lay people, and it is neither clericalized, nor clerical. Thus, it does not repeat the mistake of many of such initiatives that scare off the laity, especially faith seekers and non-believers. There are also elements useful in everyday life, i.e. life advice section. The statistics of the portal indicate almost 2.5 million unique users per month, who generate over 8 million page views. It shows an upward trend in relation to previous years (*deon.pl*). Other portals, such as *onet.pl*, *wp.pl* or *interia.pl* achieve better results in this respect, but taking into account the much smaller size of the target group of *deon.pl*, these numbers prove that people appreciate the quality mission of journalism represented by the portal’s editors. Therefore, the *deon.pl* initiative and the process of its development are an interesting case in the context of Polish media studies, especially in the area of quality journalism. Unlike many other social and information websites, the content of *deon.pl* is not aimed at “flattering” Internet users in order to increase click-through rates at the cost of losing its identity.

The research objective is to analyze profile and selected content of the *deon.pl* portal in the context of quality journalism. The content analysis was used as the research method, covering 270 materials published within one editorial week (April 8-14, 2022). This analysis also covered the materials and comments of Facebook users, in terms

of their compliance with the primacy of objective moral order and in-foethics adopted in the Catholic media, which is related to the primacy of human dignity. This analysis also covered the presence of political context and discourse of current events in the selected content.

“QUALITY JOURNALISM” VERSUS “VALUABLE JOURNALISM” – REVIEW OF THE EXTANT KNOWLEDGE

The concept of “quality journalism”, or “quality in journalism”, also referred to by some sources as “journalistic excellence” (Meier, 2019) has been defined in the literature in many ways. Researchers emphasize that there are no universal criteria for defining this term, as it can be interpreted subjectively (Chapman and Oermann, 2020). Specifically, judgment of quality is dependent on factors such as culture, level of education or socio-economic background. Not even the Pulitzer Prize has set definite criteria that makes a piece of journalism distinguished enough to win the prize. However, the quality in journalism can be analyzed from at least three perspectives: the public (recipients of information), editors and journalists, as well as scholars interested in various factors influencing the quality of journalism (Vehkoo, 2010).

Meier (2019) described three fundamental groups of values which can be used for quality measuring purposes, namely: 1) Truth/facticity, 2) Relevance/context, and 3) Independence. These values can be used to assess the quality criteria of both journalistic actions and products. As regards the value of truth/facticity of journalistic action, it consists of accuracy, “in-depthness” and fairness of the process of enquiry, while the same value for journalistic products consists of diversity, transparency, interactivity and clarity of language and style. The relevance/context of journalistic action comprises i.a. the significance of topics and facts, originality, intellectual inspiration, timeliness and novelty, while in terms of journalistic products, these are attractiveness and usefulness for the audience. Finally, the value of independence reflects organizational autonomy of journalistic actions from economic and political influences, while in personal terms, it indicates separations from own attitudes, opinions, or involvements.

Independence of journalistic products means separation of news/facts from comments.

Other sources discuss “quality journalism” based on the notion of “valuable journalism”. For example, Meijer (2022) provides a thorough meta-analysis of this concept and demonstrates that valuable journalism revolves around three key experiences of the audience: learning something new, getting recognition and increasing mutual understanding. In light of the above considerations, the present paper assumes that “quality journalism” is in other words “valuable journalism”, whose determinants of both journalistic activity and products are not only the result of professionalism, but are based on goodness, truth, beauty, as well as noble goals and ideas. Albeit these criteria do not always coincide with each other in terms of the meaning, they constitute motivators of some editorial teams, referred to by some sources as “the last Mohicans” of journalism (ps, 2017).

The most common synonym of “value” is the concept of “goodness”. Thus, it can be assumed that the quality of “valuable media” is based on the criterion of goodness. Kowalczyk (1995) states that “value” always has a relation to “goodness”. In other words, goodness is always a value, and value always constitutes some goodness. Thus, it can be concluded that professional, technical and ethical quality of media coverage are desirable and valuable characteristics, ensuring nobility of all journalistic initiatives.

In a democracy, the media play their key role as the fourth power or estate (Dewenter *et al.*, 2020). Therefore, serving the truth should be the key task of the media. Also, the language itself – the primary tool of interpersonal communication – should be used in the media to promote veracity. Such understanding of the quality in journalism has been conveyed in the studies by philosophers such as Max Scheller, Roman Ingarden, Władysław Stróżewski, Karol Wojtyła and Józef Tischner. By using the term “quality media”, referring directly to the truth, the current analysis refers directly to their achievements. Concern for truth and law (both moral and statutory) results in a social mission, called the control function of the authorities. Therefore, “quality media” reflect socio-political relations and axiological order (Stróżewski, 2014).

When considering the above issues, one should consider the phenomenon known as disinformation or fake news (Kedar, 2019).

Although it was already described in Byzantine times (Darnton, 2017), it is considered nowadays an increasing problem, caused largely by the popularity of social media, which has become a convenient platform for spreading false information (Olan *et al.*, 2022). The extensive literature on the subject distinguishes several different categories of this phenomenon. Among them are messages in which the title and lead do not correspond to the actual content of the article, or true information is presented in a false context. The most obvious type of fake news is that in which content is entirely untrue and deliberately fabricated (Su *et al.*, 2018).

J. Howard Owens, the pioneer of digital media, developed a “decatalogue of quality journalism”. It corresponds to a simple principle: “don’t use journalism to feed your own ego” (Owens, 2012). The sources such as Charter of Media Ethics, codes of journalistic deontology and numerous legal regulations associate the quality of journalism with honesty and reliability of this profession (Pisarek, 2008).

Beckett (2010) draws attention to the fact that in disinformation, human emotions play a much greater role than facts. However, although in the field of information the truth can be interpreted subjectively, the facts remain unique and unchanged (Krajowa Rada Radiofonii i Telewizji, 2020). Discussion with the above theses may lead to various conclusions, including pessimistic ones. Specifically, one can observe the effective displacement of quality journalism by fake news, which reduces its credibility (Raś, 2019).

PROFILE OF THE *DEON.PL* PORTAL

The purpose of this section is to present the profile of the *deon.pl* portal. It was prepared based on the analysis of secondary data – publicly available information contained in selected tabs of the *deon.pl* portal, supplemented by an in-depth interview conducted by the author of the article with the general director of the WAM Publishing House and the manager of the *deon.pl* portal on March 30, 2022.

Deon.pl provides commentary, opinions and explanations of the broadly understood Teaching of Jesus. In recent years, the portal has also dealt with the most difficult topics in the life of the Church, defending the position and teachings of Pope Francis. In the area

of contact with the recipient (feedback), the tools provided by the portal are visible (comments, creating profiles, the ability to save articles). Such an environment encourages many users to join the community, co-create the portal and support its mission. Therefore, *deon.pl* is an example of combining tradition and modernity, somewhat contrary to the tendencies of some periodicals. The suspension of the “Messenger of the Heart of Jesus”, published in print some time ago, indicates that the Jesuits’ media mission has been moved to the Internet. Although in terms of the length of articles and comments *deon.pl* resembles a daily newspaper, the editors understand well the social challenges caused by the convergence of the media. In today’s world of digital media, Jesuits and their editors consistently present and bring God closer through this form of communication. This is possible primarily thanks to human resources with appropriate education, experience and skills. They include both clergy and lay people, graduates of such faculties as, for example, philosophy, theology, Polish philology, economics and management, and journalism.

ANALYSIS OF SELECTED CONTENTS OF *DEON.PL*

This section aims to present a detailed discourse analysis of messages published on the *deon.pl* portal and on the *Deon FB* social profile, in the period from 8 to 14 April 2022. This is consistent with the methodology of this type of research, which should include the inspection of all materials published within one editorial week (Batorski and Olcoń-Kubicka, 2006). This period was chosen deliberately due to the proximity of two important events: the beginning of the war in Ukraine and Easter (the research covered part of Holy Week). The presented content analysis included 270 different materials, e.g. editorial posts and articles. This weekly number of 270 new contents confirms the average number of newly posted materials per month, declared by the respondents as reaching between 900 and 1000. All these materials were analyzed according to their subject, nature of the message, the number of likes, political overtones and the program line of the portal. User comments on Facebook (FB) and other social interactions occurring there, such as likes and shares, concerned portal materials appearing at the time of the study as proposed to FB users. The main

limitation of the current study is that content analysis of the articles retrieved from *deon.pl* and *Deon FB* had mainly descriptive character, with only little reference to the quantity of specific phrases, words or discourses. This was due to the potential risk that an overly quantitative approach would not allow capturing of “quality journalism” represented by the portal, and which according to the literature cannot be measured using quantitative indicators. Another limitation is that the content is constantly modified with regard to time allocation, which is in line with the process journalism (not product journalism, as in the old media). Hence, it is difficult to capture statistics on the FB portal account, which change frequently. Thus, all the numerical data look completely different after a few months. Therefore, the presented numbers were adopted in accordance with the analysis summary date of September 1, 2022.

Content analysis of social media – Deon FB

The research material in the study reported in this section were messages published on the FB profile on only one randomly selected day out of seven under the observation, i.e. April 12, 2022, including 22 posts, 3003 likes of editorial materials, 665 shares, and 776 comments. It is worth noting that until that day, the portal profile was liked and followed by 263,185 FB users.

On that particular day, the titles of articles of *Deon FB* reflected two thematic lines. First group of titles (6 out of 22) was searching for a solution to the problem regarding the ongoing war in Ukraine, and the related attitude of the Moscow Patriarch Kirill, with all related comments. The number of 230 likes of the first topic indicates a rather low level of popularity of this content in the daily range. The subject of the war appeared for another month that day, but the editors, being aware of the importance of the war in the close vicinity to Poland, continued to deliberately explore this topic. They did so in line with the mainstream agenda setting of news about the war in Ukraine, which at the same time dominated the Western media, from CNN to the local daily press.

The second group of titles (11 out of 22) referred to a different topic, which distinguishes *deon.pl* from secular websites in terms of its

identity and quality, namely preparations for Easter. Titles and narration, likes and reactions were more numerous here than under the war-related themes. A high number of likes (1200) and 400 comments in one day was given to the article about the Archbishop's Lenten retreat, entitled: *Archbishop Ryś: God comes to comfort you when you cannot stand yourself*. This article received a high number of comments compared to the average ones. Even articles with relatively more attractive titles, such as *God's letter to a man. "My son. Do not be afraid, I am with you"*, did not receive such a large number of comments. However, it is worth mentioning that in the discussed period of April 8-14, the largest number of interactions was recorded in relation to another sensational post: *The actor playing Jesus in "Passion": I was struck by lightning on the film set; I was frightened!*. No other Facebook article received more than 3900 likes, was shared by 529 followers and commented on by 592 active Internet users.

Five themes were similar to those posted in the *After Hours* section of *deon.pl*, such as: *See the 107-year-old pianist Colette, who has been playing for over a century*, and: *The dog remembered the man who saved his life. The touching video is taking the internet by storm*. Despite the fact that light contents created an appropriate distance to hard news topics, they were not very popular among the audience in terms of likes and comments. There are also two noteworthy pieces of news which were matching both groups (war and preparation for Easter): *Ukrainians and Russians will bear the cross during the way of the cross in the Colosseum? The Ukrainian embassy opposes it*, and: *Easter truce*. In the latter article, the portal's commentator Stopka (2022) points out as follows:

It is not only in the Church that one can see the confusion with the message of the Vatican about Russia's aggression against Ukraine. More clarity is expected here by many.

As it was observed, the portal's style does not shy away from questions about the Vatican's attitudes towards the situation in Ukraine. It is a style open to people's inquiries and allowing for discussion. After all, the recipient sometimes expects simple answers, other times he or she needs a deeper solution to the problem. People often resort to emotions. One of the Internet users accusingly and emotionally

added to the above opinion of Stopka (2022) his own judgment, using the following, somewhat crude phrases:

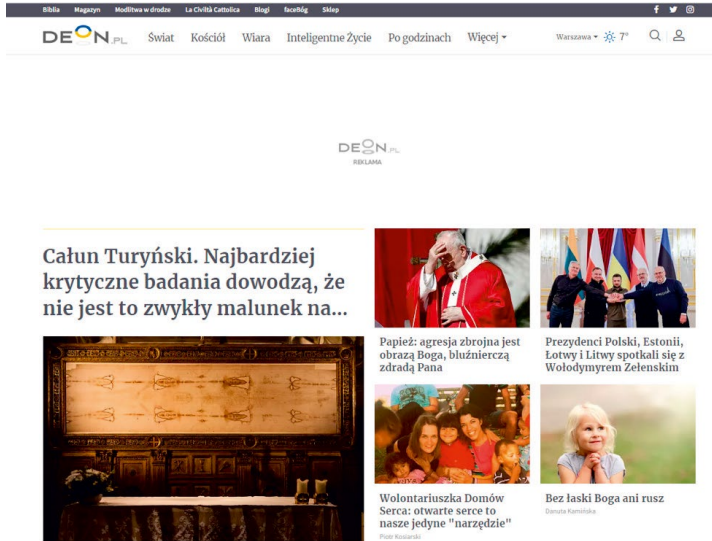
The Pope has completely failed in this situation, unable to pinpoint the obvious culprit, talking nonsense that “we are all guilty”. And then there is the planned meeting with the bastard Cyril openly calling for the murder of innocents.

The editors of the Jesuits’ portal consciously bear the risk of openness; however, they cannot be responsible for some emotional comments on FB. Users’ views are sometimes expressed using vulgar language. In the age of social media, these types of external comments are all too common. However, the analysis of the content of 22 posts indicated the activity, timeliness, and assertiveness of the *deon.pl* editorial staff in relation to the FB community. Several thousand user activity per day probably translates into a multiple of aggregated visits to the main page of the *deon.pl* website through the selection of specific topics. The narrative of the *deon.pl* editorial office differs significantly from the style of the FB users’ comments. The editorial content is balanced, there is no restlessness in it, but one can notice the search for deeper answers, indicating the openness of the editors to people who are faith seekers. *Deon FB* provides tools such as comments, creating profiles, and the possibility to save selected contents that encourage users to join the community, contribute to the profile and increase interaction with the portal.

Content analysis of the main portal deon.pl

This part of the study covered a week-long observation of the *deon.pl* portal (i.e. from 8 to 14 April 2022), in accordance with the research methodology described earlier. In this area, the texts contained in the tabs of the information and opinion sections of the website were content analyzed. The main page of the portal is shown in fig. 1.

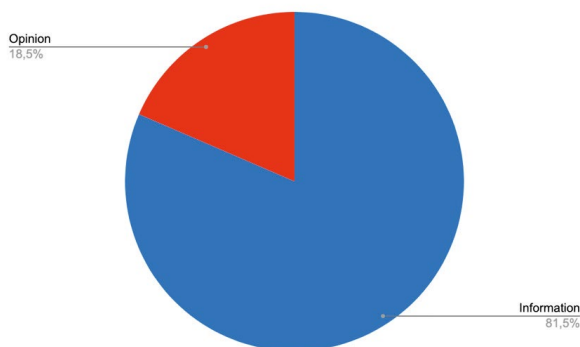
Fig. 1. The appearance of the main page of the deon.pl portal of April 14, 2022



source: deon.pl

The sections of the Jesuits' portal show clear separation of information from opinion. The characteristics and division of functions on the analyzed portal are transparent and serve better orientation of the recipient. Among the 270 texts in the analyzed research period, 50 (18,5%) of them belonged to opinion-forming journalism, while the remaining 220 (81,5%) were the information section (fig. 2), which also includes texts of a formative nature ("formation" refers in a close way to the concept of "information", not only in the semantic sense, but this distinction will not be further explored in the current study). The information section also includes video materials, for example: *Krakow Salesians with a song for Ukraine*. Also, the memories of the Saints' biographies, related to the date falling in the calendar, were included in the info section for the purposes of the analysis. In the analyzed period, there was not a single formal violation of the rules of genre separation: in the opinion sections (e.g. tabs *On the edge of the pen*, *Comments*, *Blogs*) there were only opinion-forming materials, while in the information sections only news and their derivatives were organized and posted. Therefore, the editors strictly respect the rules of separation of journalistic genres.

Fig. 2. Percentage share of information and opinions on *deon.pl*, April 8–14, 2022



Source: own study

The portal is also characterized by clear graphics that help Internet users in choosing individual tabs. The main division includes the following tabs: *World, Church, Faith, Smart Life, After Hours* (fig. 3).

Fig. 3. Tabs and sections of the *deon.pl* portal



source: *deon.pl*

The *World* tab provides both *News from Poland* and *News from the world*, which seems to be an interesting change in the information optics, which in many portals is divided into *this* from Poland and *that* from the world. In addition, one of the information sections was dedicated to Ukrainian readers, who came to Poland because of the war. The entire content is provided at *deon.pl/novyny* in Ukrainian language. The *Church* section contains information mainly on ecclesiastical life,

coming from the press agencies, but there is also the portal's own information, properly sourced. In this section, before every second Wednesday of the month, one can find an invitation to the Holy Mass for the readers of *deon.pl* from the Jesuit Basilica in Krakow. The sections have also many thematic tabs.

The tabs in the grey bar above the main section route contain i.e.: *Bible, Magazine, Prayer on the Road, La Civiltà Cattolica, Blogs, faceGod* (*faceBóg* in Polish, which is a smart word game phonetically referring to *Facebook*), and the *Shop* website. Based on the analysis of views, it can be concluded that this is a formative bar with the possibility of discussion and making purchases in the bookstore. It is particularly interesting to read *La Civiltà Cattolica*, the translations from the original oldest Italian monthly, founded and run by the Jesuits since 1850. The publisher of the portal informs readers about this initiative at the very beginning with the following words:

Due to close relations with the Vatican, it is often considered one of the most important sources of information about the Church and its mission in the world. In a unique way, in the light of the Catholic faith, it raises topics related to history, politics, culture, science and art.

The readers who are less inclined to follow long narrations are encouraged by *deon.pl* to take part in the community on the *faceBóg* profile or refer to the FB room. This is a place providing a thoughtful, educational message about the faith for online social tools. It is like a *leitmotif* of Christian life, which was placed on the profile banner in a modern style: "Man is great not by what he possesses, but by who he is; not by what he has, but by what he shares with others – St. Pope John Paul II". The *Prayer on the Road* tab is also a widget for a mobile phone, which is used to stop and reflect on a fragment of the Bible during everyday activities, for example on a tram. The portal lacks, however, some popular sections, such as sports, economy and travel. The *More* tab presents the thematic map of *deon.pl*, shown above in fig. 3.

In addition, based on the analysis of all 270 materials, it can be concluded that the portal avoids publishing content regarding current politics. This may be negatively perceived by some active politicians who are not presented with their views, especially during intense social debates. However, this seems to be a conscious choice of the

portal's editors, who deliberately avoid politics for not to reduce the goals of the faith to political ideas. Despite this precaution, writing about societal issues results in natural emergence of political and ideological disputes in the opinion section. These opinions are part of the discussion belonging to *deon.pl* journalism. One can rarely find the proverbial "adding fuel to the fire" in social controversies, such as the Smolensk tragedy. In this case, *deon.pl* displayed calmness in the narrative, especially where social emotions seemed to be, according to the editors, destructive for the social debate. The anniversary of the Smolensk plane crash on April 10 was commented on during the reception of war guests from Ukraine, in the following way:

On Sunday morning, the president attended a Holy Mass at Wawel for the victims of the Smolensk catastrophe. Then he laid a wreath in front of the sarcophagus of Maria and Lech Kaczynski. In his statement for the media, the president pointed out that this year the celebrations of the Smolensk catastrophe have their own specificity, because "the images that we now see in the media come to mind – of destroyed Ukraine".

The above text with a long, descriptive title: *Duda on the anniversary of the Smolensk catastrophe: then we saw a destroyed plane, today we see destroyed Ukraine* was sourced from the Polish Press Agency dispatch. While some portals at that time pointed to the history of social controversy behind the presidential crash, *deon.pl* pointed to the facts. This tendency has been observed in many places in the analyzed period, allowing us to conclude that it is a constant trend accompanying this portal on a daily basis. Silencing controversies, pointing out what connects, not inciting additional divisions and arguments at every opportunity are characteristics resulting from ethical solidity of the *deon.pl* portal.

CONCLUSIONS

Quality journalism is on the one hand "valuable journalism", and on the other "professional journalism". The analysis of both the profile and the content of the *deon.pl* portal indicates the simultaneous

fulfillment of these criteria. The activities of *deon.pl* should be considered a manifestation of journalistic quality in Poland, due mainly to the clear values transmitted by the editors, the accepted and applied journalistic rules reflected in a separation of information and opinion content, as well as a clear distance to the political issues. In the analyzed period, the articles related to the war in Ukraine generated the most emotions, both in the information and opinion sections. Moreover, the sensitivity to the subject of war and the translation of the content in the tab into Ukrainian language should be considered a manifestation of informational solidarity with neighbors who are in a great need. It has taken over most of the Polish media coverage since February 2022, and the content of *deon.pl* has also been maintained in this general, positive trend. During the analysis of 270 texts posted on the *deon.pl* portal, not a single content was found that violated the primacy of the objective moral order or that would be against the Decalogue. This is key to the success of journalists' quality approach to the Jesuit portal. Observation of the portal confirms the consistency of this approach and the high standard of the portal *ethos*, i.e. values, norms and rules of conduct adopted by the *deon.pl* team. The study described in the present paper can be summarized by confirmation of relevance of the 1963 *Inter Mirifica* decree on the means of social communication in *deon.pl*. This decree clearly recalls the primacy of the objective moral order also in the field of activity of the "fourth estate" activity.

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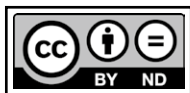
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