

Polish Bulletin Board Systems: archaeology of early social media (1996-2004)

The Internet constitutes one of the primary spaces of human communication. However, like any medium, it has emerged as a result of a series of processes, not only technological but also social. These have made it possible to make the transition from limited computer networks linking academic institutions and companies towards the open social network, identified today with 'social media'. How did this work out for the Polish Internet?

The tensions involved in the emergence of the future social networks are best seen in the operation of BBSes (Bulletin Board Systems) - services installed on enthusiasts' home computers, usually running for several hours a week. The first Polish BBS was established in 1986, it was connected to the global FidoNET network a year later - thus more than 4 years before Poland was connected to the Internet (December 1991). What is particularly important, however, is that BBSes, unlike academic networks operating in Poland since the 1970s, as well as Bitnet (active in Poland earlier than the Internet), were available to anyone with a computer modem and access to the telephone network. Thus, although the entry threshold was still high, BBSes were still more egalitarian than other solutions of the time.

As of today, we have a fairly well-documented technical history of the early Polish internet, but there is a gap to fill in terms of thinking about cultural and social aspects of the phenomena. The project thus aims at documenting a wide spectrum of such communities, operating in Poland since 1986, through their heyday in the mid-1990s (when there were at least 200 such networks operating in Poland), until the first years of the 21st century, when the first broadband internet service without limited data access closed the era of Polish BBSes.

The project is in line with a historical turn in media research, but is also devoted to a local, Polish history of internet, in many ways - as with other mediums - different from the dominant history, which is most often its American version. On methodological level the project draws from a media archaeology and oral history. Crucial to bringing out the tension between the "chronicling" of the history of technology and the information already accumulated about infrastructure, and the social actions and visions that accompany them, will be the use of two methodologies that fit well together. The first is embedded in the treatment of media as social practices - this part will include knowledge of users' routines, but also recognition of the norms and rituals in place and the ways in which they are produced and disseminated. The second, added to it as a result of reflection on the importance of technological solutions as tools that model social practices to some extent, is related to the study of infrastructure.

The main sources of data will be archive searches and interviews with BBS sysops (at least 20). The research will include a search of materials from the period (mainly computer magazines) and available texts. As part of desk research and source comparison, a possibly complete list of BBSes operating in Poland will also be compiled. The interviews will help in the search for answers to questions on motivations and perceptions of social media at the time. Also important are questions about political issues and perceptions of relations with the West, but also the relationship between grassroots networks and official institutions. This also applies to the use of BBSes in the activities of crackers copying computer software, mainly games, and links to the demoscene - and establishing knowledge of the links or distinctiveness of these communities, remotely and through meetings at organised events.

The result will be a synthesis to be included in a dissertation, a website with links and material from the project and joint PI's and PhD candidate article for international publication or journal is also planned.