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Archives at the Time of Lockdown. Activity in Social Media Based on the Example of the State Archives in Siedlce between March 2020 and March 2021 (A Research Report)

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Abstract: *'Archives at the Time of Lockdown' is the text of the inaugural lecture delivered during the 22nd National Congress of Students of Archival Science in Siedlce on 16 April 2021*

Key words: COVID-19; lockdown; archives; social media; Facebook; Siedlce

Archives, like other institutions, function in a specific environment; they have their surroundings with which they should communicate creating their own universums.¹ The quality of this communication, resulting from the culture of such an organization, determines the mutual relations and perception of archives in society.² One of the simplest tools we can use to achieve it is the Internet, and state archives employ it most often for running their own databases, websites and social networking profiles.

The pandemic that was declared in 2020 brought about a profound change in how state archives work. Barring users from direct access to them and imposing the obligation to reduce the number of employees in archival space, as well as a move to teleworking has resulted in undertaking by archivists a number of professional activities for which there is normally less time, such as the preparation of higher-level aids to archival collections and the tagging of archival units in the Integrated Archive Information System for developing and organising new virtual exhibitions and presenting documents in the sphere of making accessible or preparing scientific studies.

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¹ CHOJECKA, 2019: 133.

² JABŁOŃSKA, 2014: 113.

Sanitary restrictions were compounded by the challenges faced by the government related to joining the campaign #stayathome i.e. the compulsory stay at home introduced by the government in order to limit the spreading of plague. Observing the social profiles of archives, we get the impression that reducing direct contact between users and archivists and the results of their work has shifted the activity of archives to Facebook to an even larger extent. Is this reflected in the facts? Let us analyse it based on the example of the State Archives in Siedlce.

The Profile ‘State Archives in Siedlce’,³ whose creation and maintenance was related to the implementation of the second strategic objective of the *State Archives Strategy for 2010-2020*,⁴ was followed by 570 users in the period before the pandemic time (February 2020); the average monthly reach of posts in the period from November 2019 to February 2020 was 2,493 people (min. 1441; max. 3,408); and the network community activity, under which we should understand *likes*, shares and comments, is 392 (min. 215; max. 743). All this with an average number of 6 posts per month.

From March 16 (the beginning of the first lockdown – a state of epidemic emergency in Poland) to April 19, 2020, 15 posts appeared on the Archives’ profile, which reached 5,834 followers, and a networking community activity reached 2,026. This represents a significant increase in impact, which is well reflected in the daily average, which has increased by 40% since March 2020 in terms of its reach, and by over 300% in terms of user activity.

It is worth mentioning that from the beginning of March to 19 April 2020 the number of followers of the Archives’ fan page increased by over 8%, which should be associated with the launch of a new profile on 25 March 2020, closely related to the pandemic and the #stayathome campaign: The *Siedlce Archives for teachers, students and enthusiasts*,⁵ which is a joint project of the State Archives, the Archives of the University of Natural Sciences and Humanities and the Archives of the Siedlce Diocese. As its originators stressed, the fan page “was created in response to requests from fellow teachers from the Mazovia and Lublin provinces who, by using archival and library materials, want to make their classes more attractive while working remotely with students”.⁶ The posts shared here (3 per day on average), also straight from the website and the Archive's Facebook profile, must have attracted new observers. During 50 days of its operation, the new fan page gathered a community of 649 followers, each post reached 986 people on average, and the activity of the online community towards it remained at the level of 210. A comparison of the two profiles in this respect, justified by the fact that the two communities do not overlap one hundred percent, gives a certain picture of the online reach of the Archives.

³ Facebook 1.

⁴ Strategy.

⁵ Facebook 2.

⁶ Siedlce Archives.

The above analyses confirm the increase in activity of the State Archives in Siedlce on Facebook during the pandemic. A community of over a thousand users, observing the activities of the archivists on a daily basis on two profiles and familiarising themselves with the resources of the Archives during March/April 2020, is both the result of this activity and of people spending more time in front of their computers.

At the conclusion of my analysis of observations made on the spot in April 2020, I asked myself this question: “Which of these factors played a greater role?”, and I pointed out that this question could be answered in the future, “when it becomes clear whether the circle of web users interested in the doings of the Archives and its activities in that strange spring of 2020 can be maintained even when the pandemic has passed.”⁷ Today, although we are stuck in another lockdown caused by the third wave of the coronavirus, one can nevertheless try to attempt to answer this question. After one year of the pandemic, symptoms of mental fatigue are noticeable, for which even a medical and media term *pandemic fatigue* was coined.⁸ It was easier to mobilise for a substitute form of functioning in the form of the #stayathome campaign when people had the prospect of a return to normality in front of them than later, when it moved beyond the foreseeable future. Since archives are managed by people, I would also extend the impact of *pandemic fatigue* to institutions, and this can be seen in the activities of the State Archives in Siedlce. However, this is not an accusation. Rather, it is an observation that the institution cannot continue in an emergency mode all the time. You can stop work in certain areas for a while, but a prolonged looser or tighter lockdown makes it necessary to resume them. This, in turn, sets aside the intensive ‘entertaining’ of the online community with tidbits from the archival resource.

The first phenomenon of this effect was the withering away of the profile the *Siedlce Archives for Teachers, Students and Enthusiasts*, as can be seen in Graph 1, illustrating the declining number of posts published between April 2020 and March 2021 from 43 to 0. Obviously, this also translated significantly into the reach of posts. Since April 2020, the number of people following the profile has only increased by 13%. It can be argued that *pandemic fatigue* of the administrators was the main reason for this decline, although not without significance is probably also the same phenomenon among the observing community. Thus, the whole of this enterprise can be considered extraordinary, which, having fulfilled its special function, has exhausted the reason for its existence.

⁷ MAGIER, 2020.

⁸ Badania; BADRE, 2021.

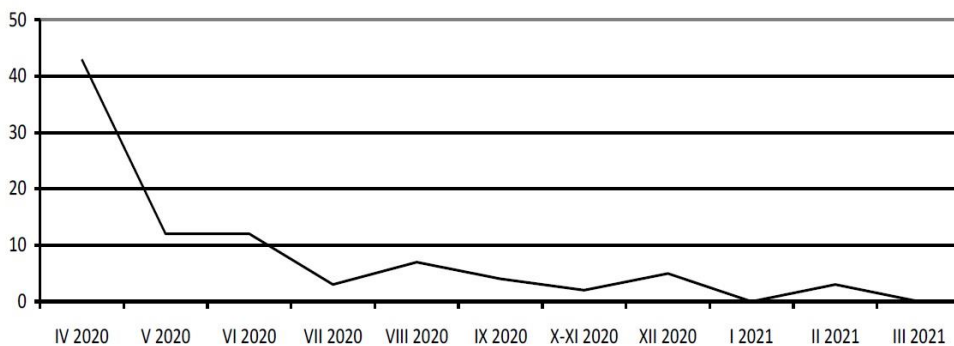


Chart 1. Number of posts published monthly on the social profile “Siedlce Archives for Teachers, Students and Enthusiasts” between April 2020 and March 2021

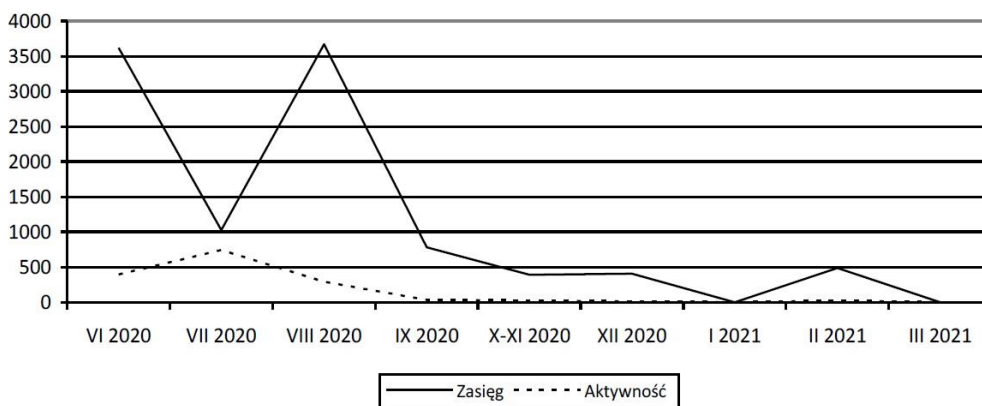


Chart 2. Monthly reach and activity in respect of posts published on the social media profile “Siedlce Archives for Teachers, Students and Enthusiasts” between June 2020 and March 2021

The situation is slightly different in the case of the fan page of the State Archives in Siedlce, which – with a decrease of approximately 40% in the number of posts (an average of 6 per month, which means a return to the situation before March 2020) – increased the number of people following the profile by 30% during the year of the pandemic, almost doubled the reach of posts (an average of 6,127 per month), while the activity of Internet users decreased more than twice (to an average of 658 per month). In this case, one can clearly see a gradual decline in value progressing over time (Chart 3).

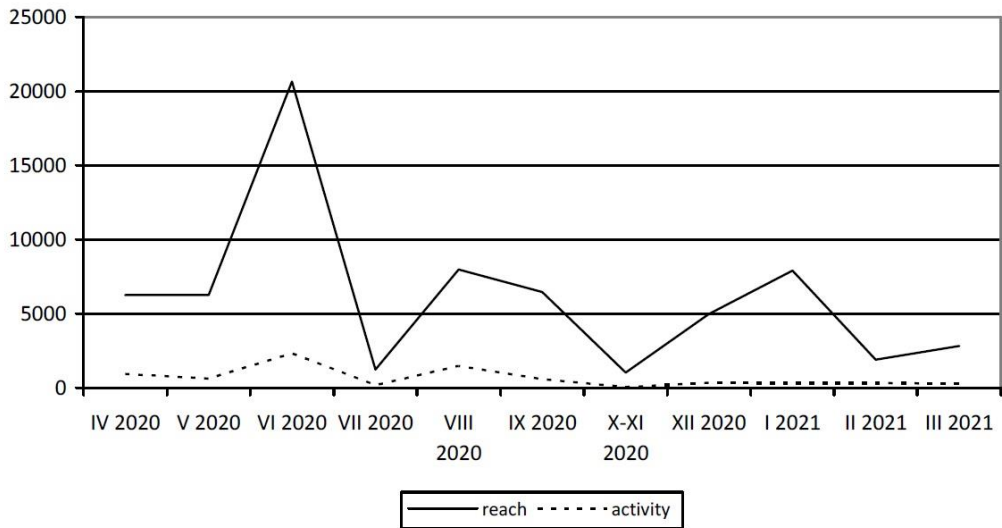


Chart 3. Monthly reach and activity in respect of posts published on the social media profile “The State Archives in Siedlce” between April 2020 and March 2021

Summing up these considerations and answering the question which I posed a month after the first lockdown, i.e. in April 2020, it seems that the significant increase in the reach of posts posted on Facebook profiles of the State Archives in Siedlce at that time was mainly due to the activity of archivists whose daily work efforts were directed to this particular area for some time. It drove the values reflected in the statistics, although it was probably influenced to some extent by the fact that many spheres of social life were moved to the Internet. The withering away of the ‘pandemic profile’ titled *The Siedlce Archives for Teachers, Students and Enthusiasts* is the effect of the normalization of archival life and the phenomenon of *pandemic fatigue* in both the bureaucratic and social areas. Therefore, it can be treated as a completely natural process. An unquestionable plus and an irreversible effect of the activities of the Archives in Siedlce during the pandemic period is a significant increase in the community watching its fan page. This year, on average, over 4 thousand people a month have been informed about undertakings and interesting facts from the resources of the State Archives in Siedlce on its social networking profile, which means an increase in comparison with the period before the first lockdown by over 40% (with the same number of posts). And these are quantities that can make an impression on the archival promotion of the indeed small Archives.

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