Cats, Constitutions and Crises: Dissemination of Research on the Rule of Law Crisis in Poland in a Social Media Age

Jakub Jaraczewski

21.12.2017 doi: 10.17176/20171221-165613

***V**: Voilà! In view, a humble vaudevillian veteran, cast vicariously as both victim and villain by the vicissitudes of Fate. This visage, no mere veneer of vanity, is a vestige of the vox populi, now vacant, vanished. However, this valorous visitation of a by-gone vexation, stands vivified and has vowed to vanquish these venal and virulent vermin vanguarding vice and vouchsafing the violently vicious and voracious violation of volition. The only verdict is vengence; a vendetta, held as a votive, not in vain, for the value and veracity of such shall one day vindicate the vigilant and the virtuous. Verily, this vichyssoise of verbiage veers most verbose, so let me simply add that it is my very good honor to meet you and you may call me V.*

***Evey**: Are you like a crazy person?*

***V**: I'm quite sure they will say so.*

"V for Vendetta" (2005)

The Constitutional crisis in Poland has many villains and heroes. Regarding the former, for now, let's keep to the rule that one should speak of people either highly or not at all. The latter are a diverse bunch: politicians, journalists, academics, professional associations, some trade unions, many churches and religious organisations, most of the civil society and other actors, old and new.

The academia and NGOs have all responded in their usual ways, highlighting critical developments, offering commentary and condemning violations of domestic, regional and international standards. Academics, in particular, are now being tested, not so much for their capability for research, which was never in doubt, but much so regarding their ability to disseminate their results. Traditionally, legal sciences in Poland, not unlike elsewhere in the world, have a hard time reaching the general public. Some law professors in Poland, such as Verfassungblog's frequent contributor Marcin Matczak, are highly successful in getting out there into general view. But their insights have, as far as I can tell, been received, discussed and forwarded by people who are inclined to give academia a chance: 35+ years old city-dwellers who picked up a degree along the way. An important demographic, but far from the only one which could be swayed either way.

We live in the age of people communicating using GIFs and memes, a visual landscape of pop culture reference, with millennials, a geek generation of people who grew up on Lord of the Rings, coming of age and becoming an economic political force. Reaching out to those people requires, as with every generation, communicating using their language. Memes, images, references, short videos, social media and a healthy dose of humour are pretty much required.

Enter the Cat

"Ceiling Sejm" is a Facebook page with some 6.000 likes, ran by one or more persons under the name of "*Kot Sejmowy*" (Parliamentary Cat). The posts on that page combine analysis of Polish legislation and the inner workings of both chambers of the Polish Parliament with cat memes, humour and a healthy dose of geek culture references. The profile photo of the page depicts a cat sticking its head out of a hole in a ceiling with the caption "*Przechodzimy do trzeciego czytania*" ("We're now moving on to the third parliamentary reading"). Who doesn't like cats, anyway? They're as close to being a universal value of humanity these days as it gets, it seems.

"Ceiling Sejm" updates frequently, offering highly detailed analyses of the legislative in the lower (Sejm) and upper (Senat) houses of the Polish parliament. Though transparency of the legislative process was swiftly enshrined in Polish law after 1989, the actual implementation is much like everywhere else: a byzantine website of the Parliament with scores of documents which require at least a B.A. in law or a related degree to navigate and little in the way of explanation or visual aids to help. For a scholar, this is perfectly sufficient. For a person without legal education, less so. "Ceiling Sejm" turns this labyrinth into something easy to navigate without merely presenting dry data. It also spells out the practical implications, the consequences, the specifics, the ins and outs which leads me to suspect that the author likely is an employee of the Parliament or someone working very closely to it. Additionally, each post contains the ultimate abstract: a "TL;DR" (Internet acronym lingo for "Too Long; Didn't Read", used to highlight short summaries of long walls of text) which humorously answers the most burning questions related to the matter at hand.

Each post, no matter how grave in substance, regardless of how dire the assault on the rule of law in Poland it details, is both written and illustrated with a sense of humour that makes you instantly want to share it with your social network. "The cat apologizes for an atypical post, but it just almost choked to death on tuna" is the opening of one post. A post on legislation concerning the Polish Aerospace Agency (your "Poland can fly into space" jokes may commence now) is backed up by a graphic of a cat, wearing sunglasses playing a synthesizer while floating through space. You get the drift.

In addition to the quality of research and the humour, there is a third aspect that adds to the appeal the site: It is run by a mysterious stranger. Back five years ago, the Guy Fawkes and the Anonymous movements inspired imaginations worldwide during the anti-ACTA protests. The young people who protested against ACTA felt the appeal of an anonymous avenger striking against the "oppressive" government and "shadowy" practices. The Cat seems to be a much more refined, focused and credible iteration of the masked vigilante. The Staffage here is the conveyor belt for the knowledge to reach its audience, not the end in itself.

The Cat's tackling of the procedural aspects of the Polish crisis is particularly important, given the multi-pronged nature of the assault on the rule of law. Apart from the encroaching infringement on domestic, regional and international standards and the ongoing "hollowing out" of state institutions by means of appointing people with questionable qualifications and dubious morals to lead them, there's the abuse of procedure. The examples run the entire gamut: from bypassing the need to widely consult the government's draft laws thanks to the liberal use of parliamentary legislative initiative (which does not require jumping through as many hoops as it does when the government presents the draft bill), to stupendous en bloc voting on proposed amendments during the legislative process, with all the opposition's amendments rejected en masse in a single vote. Such procedural nuances are not easy to convey and describe, and seldom do they make attractive soundbites for the traditional media.

Which brings me to the point, salient for Polish and foreign scholars alike – how do we communicate our research in the times like these? The situation clearly requires us to reach a wider, popular audience. Over the years the academia has, with varied progress, tackled the value of social media, infographics, YouTube clips and other ways of disseminating the results of our work, which the European Commission duly requires to be outlined and implemented in order to give us a shot at EU funding. But how are we, in these times of tension and crisis, to reach out to wider populace? NGOs employ PR specialists and social media mavericks, but even the most respected NGO will not have the bedrock we stand on, our academic independence.

Perhaps it is the time to realign our ways of communicating our formidable knowledge so that the people who are in fact used to and capable of having a meaningful conversation by means of a string of GIF memes are able to receive our message? In the times of crisis, agility and speed are of the essence, especially when faced with a government using all of its state-owned and allied media to boost the credibility of its

actions and to discredit the opponents. In order to punch through that, the message needs to go viral and quickly start a life of its own, spreading across social networks and reaching to those who would not listen otherwise.

Legal education has made much headway in recent years, and more and more people are exposed to what we have to say. But we might run out of time, particularly us Poles. A battle of hearts and minds, which will ultimately shape the future of our country, is underway. Perhaps, with the European Commission finally triggering the art. 7 procedure, this battle has entered its decisive phase. In a few decades, somebody will pen a treatise about the brave and smart people who fought to keep Poles informed and educated during these testing times. That author will surely mention the likes of brilliant researchers, resolute journalists and fantastic NGOs. I hope with all my heart, that he or she will remember the good work of "Ceiling Sejm" and the Cat.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jakub Jaraczewski

Jakub Jaraczewski is the Senior Research Coordinator - Rule of Law at Democracy Reporting International (Berlin, Germany)Jakub Jaraczewski is a Senior Research Coordinator at Democracy Reporting International (Berlin, Germany).

SUGGESTED CITATION

Jaraczewski, Jakub: Cats, Constitutions and Crises: Dissemination of Research on the Rule of Law Crisis in Poland in a Social Media Age, Verfassungsblog, 21.12.2017, doi: 10.17176/20171221-165613.

Licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0.

Langzeitarchiviert bei IntRechtDok unter: doi.org/10.17176/20171221-165613.