

BIWEEKLY MAGAZINE “WHITE EAGLE” AS AN EXAMPLE OF THE IMPLEMENTATION OF POLISH-LANGUAGE MEDIA PROJECT IN THE UNITED STATES

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Abstract

The article describes the idea of creation and development of Polish biweekly magazine “Biały Orzeł” (“White Eagle”), originated in Boston in 2002/2003 by the White Eagle Media LLC publishing house. The periodical, which has been published until today, was at the time one of the largest projects in the segment of so-called ethnic media in the United States. The work’s aim is to present the title’s history, identify factors affecting on creation of the Polish diaspora press, diagnose components determining the success/failure of the project, as well as local conditions that had a direct impact on decision to launch described press title. The methodology used in the implementation of this material includes in-depth interviews with project co-founders (publishers and journalists) carried out over 2017 and 2018, executed jointly on a group of 9 people, providing quality data from staff directly involved in described publishing project from its very beginnings. A valuable source of data was also open access to archives of the “White Eagle” hard copies, dated between 2003 and 2008.

Keywords: ethnic press, Polonia press, Polish community in the USA.

The project of creating a new printed medium for the Polish community in the USA began in the early 2000s as the initiative of two young Polish-American entrepreneurs, who lived permanently in Boston, MA, United States - Marcin Bolec and Dariusz Barcikowski. The idea of a tandem of originators focused primarily on the fact, that at the beginning of a new century there were in fact only two relatively large, leading press centres - going out in Chicago “Dziennik Związkowy” and appearing in the states of New York and New Jersey “Nowy Dziennik” [Leonowicz-Bukała, 2012] playing major role on the Polish-American printed media market.

Both of the titles mentioned above, strongly related to historic Polish organizations and institutions (Polish American Congress [PAC website, 2019], Polish National Association [Dziennik Związkowy, 2019] and others), offered mainly materials regarding events from Poland (beginning of the 21st century found the Polish ethnic press in USA in the stage of almost complete lack of preparation for new technologies, such as web edi-

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tions). A part of these publications were also most important world headlines, as well as news and local content - trimmed to the coverage area of a given title. "Nowy Dziennik" and "Dziennik Związkowy" owed their success primarily in the existence of deep roots in historical organizations associating Polish immigrants and Americans of Polish descent. Also a considerable circulation and availability were a part of this good performance (ranging from a few to a dozen or so thousand copies in weekdays, and tens of thousands of copies of weekend releases), as well as the practical lack of direct competition, especially in the areas of "traditional" large Polish communities on the East Coast of the USA and in the state of Illinois and its surroundings. Naturally, in other centres and regions, where the number of residents identifying with their Polish roots was significantly smaller, various periodicals appeared on a completely local scope, usually having a small group of readers concentrated mostly in one locality, functioning however without much substantive journalist background, often focused mainly on publication of regional announcements, advertisements of goods and services, matrimonial announcements, etc.

Bearing in mind a number of factors, including from the field of the ever-growing model of information society [Dawson and others, New York 1988, p. 51–67], as well as those resulting from growing prestige of Poland on international arena, including a perspective of joining the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (1999) and increasingly approaching prospect of joining the European Union, in some Polish diaspora communities remaining outside the two above-mentioned large metropolitan centres in the USA, there was increased need to reach for Polish-language print media. In the early 2000s, such a centre was also a city of Boston and the entire state of Massachusetts with officially estimated over 300,000 inhabitants of Polish origin [US Census, 2019] - Poles or Americans with Polish roots, while unofficial data (e.g. from parish priests, missionaries or administrators of Polish Roman Catholic parishes in the state) said about the number reaching 400 to 500 thousand, including persons without legal status of residence in the United States, as well as persons temporarily staying on a tourist visa, allowing a single stay up to a maximum of 6 months. In such social circumstances a project was established, in which the undersigned, then full-time employee (as leading editor and journalist) of the Podkarpackie "Super Nowości" daily, also associate of the regional Polish National TV branch, and the Polish National Radio Rzeszów.

Initially, the intention of the publishers, who at the end of 2002 set up a publishing company White Eagle Media LLC based in Boston, lay a draft of a weekly magazine, appearing in Boston and the surrounding area, and distributed through a network of Polish stores, delicatessens, so-called "Polish agencies" (mainly focused in shipping parcels and money transfers), cultural centres and parishes. An important feature of the project was the plan to create a thoroughly bi-lingual medium (taking into account the needs of people who do not speak Polish after many years of emigration or already born outside Poland), in which content will appear in both Polish and English, as well as the emphasis on the strictly informational sphere [Wolny-Zmorzyński and others, Warszawa 2009, p. 30-47], contained in two basic areas: information about Poland and social, political, economic and cultural life in the "native country", as well as local information, assigned geographically to a given place in America, which were important from the point of view of local communities, but not directly related to the Polish-speaking ethnic group.

As time passed, largely devoted to consultations with representatives of the local Polish community in Massachusetts, the "White Eagle" publishing project began to crystallize around the idea of a biweekly, distributed free of charge at the above-mentioned points, with a circulation of around 10,000 copies. Thus, a decision was made to allocate about 50 per cent of the publishing space of the emerging periodical for the emission of commercial advertisements and announcements, which - as more advertisers were acquired - were to become a sufficient economic base for the entire project.

Regarding journalistic content of the "White Eagle", decisions were made to focus

on the information layer (according to previously indicated assumptions), as well as on the publication of columns and comments focused on current events in the political and economic sphere, mainly regarding Poland. An extremely important role, which later became one of the “trademarks” of the upcoming biweekly, was a close co-operation with representatives of local Polish diasporas, and ethnic leaders from smaller towns, launched by publishing house from the very beginning. Thanks to that no anniversary party, cultural event, important for the Polonians and their communities, or even opening of a new business, has not escaped the attention in the context of publication in “White Eagle”. This mainly concerned Boston, but also smaller towns from other Massachusetts counties: Worcester, Springfield, Cambridge, Lowell, Brockton and others.

The remaining thematic sections of the biweekly were devoted to broadly understood journalistic layer, according to Lippmann’s idea of shaping public opinion [Lippmann, New York, 1922, p. 148] for broadening horizons and knowledge without issuing controversial and extreme judgments on particular topics. Therefore, there was no lack of in-depth political analyses, articles on economic and business matters, taking into account specificity of Polish-American relations, also historical articles, and these related to culture and art, education, as well as other areas of life. All content was proportionally supplemented by “add-ons” in form of satirical drawings, crossword sections, health and beauty corner, letters from readers, photo reports from local events, etc. The bi-weekly “White Eagle” welcomed its first free readers in the spring of 2003, initially only in Boston and its surroundings [White Eagle Media, 2019].

The publication of a new magazine, attractive in form and, what is not insignificant – free of charge, caused a thunderous effect, which even optimistic publishers and a small editorial team did not expect. Most of distribution points of the magazine from first live day reported need for additional copies of newspaper, which was also signalled by readers, willingly and collectively using telephones, e-mails and office address of the editing house. For obvious reasons, Polish-American advertisers were also interested in seeing the chances of expanding their businesses in the new publication due to possibility of reaching a significant group of potential customers.

“White Eagle” in a short time conquered and enraptured the Polish community north of New York, gradually expanding its range and circulation outside of Massachusetts, reaching the states of Connecticut, Pennsylvania, Maine, Rhode Island, New Hampshire and Vermont. In each of the above-mentioned states, efforts were made to reach activists and leaders of local Polish community in order to empower their involvement and co-operation with the editors to publish information about activities of local Polish communities, according to the broadly understood idea of civic journalism [Citizen Journalism, 2019] (although of course defined in terms of the ethnic community needs). In this way, the new Polish biweekly magazine gained its first steps as a newspaper, which gradually gained new regional editions, with a clear separation of information sections (published in both Polish and English) divided into Polish-American and general news. Also, from economical point of view, the variant in choosing the scope of advertising and advertisement publication gave businesses the opportunity to choose right offer for themselves, and for publishers a chance to create an attractive package offer addressed to potential customers. At this stage of the magazine’s development, it was fully justifiable to speak about the firm success.

The “White Eagle” magazine, with time, has acquired a wide range of readers, expanding its reach further to total eight subsequent mutations – zoned editions [Abernathy, UNC Report, 2018], including states of Arizona, Nevada, California and Florida. As a caveat, the emergence of a new printed Polonia medium in 2003-2007 largely activated Polonia communities in the US in places where “traditional” Polish-language printed media did not reach them. The group of co-workers of the newspaper was also gradually enlarged by joining of people from both local Polish diasporas, as well as journalists and students of journalism. The White Eagle Media publishing activity, as described in

this way, was in line with the development of practical training of journalists in Poland and in the USA, by activating students and graduates of journalism, who made their first professional steps in publishing for this Polish biweekly magazine [Gawroński, "Studia Medioznawcze" 2010, s. 11-22].

Press projects, addressed to niche, or selected recipient groups, have become an interesting area of research for the author, who is closely watching the processes of changes on contemporary media market. Despite the dynamic development of technologies and new media, in some narrow market areas the existence of a traditional printed press seems to be still justified, both from the point of view of the publication's content as well as from the perspective of economic viability.

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