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Hashtag as a message? The role and functions of hashtags on Twitter

KEY WORDS

hashtag, Twitter, Internet, communication, new media, social media

ABSTRACT

The article presents hashtags as a new communication model. The author explains what hashtag is and what its functions are. She gives examples of hashtag application – both disadvantages and advantages. Furthermore, she describes the importance of hashtags in international and intercultural communication and also shows its categories. In the article you can also find many examples of the use of hashtags in communication.

When on 7 January 2015 in Paris the editorial office of the French satirical weekly “Charlie Hebdo” was attacked by terrorists¹, the whole (and not just virtual) world heard the words “Je suis Charlie”. It was an expression of solidarity with the victims, the editors, and above all a protest over the attack on the freedom of speech, as the terrorist attack was described. It was in the community networking media that the international community was particularly active in manifesting its objection against attacks on the freedom of the press. How has it happened that so many people expressed solidarity with the events in France via Twitter? What the hashtags really are and what is their purpose? This article will most certainly help you find answers to these questions.



¹ “Charlie Hebdo” is a French satirical weekly, founded in 1970. It is best known for its publication of caricatures and satirical drawings that attack religions (Christianity, Islam, Judaism), for which has often been criticized.

Figure 1. The slogan which appeared on the “Charlie Hebdo” website soon after the attack

Source: www.telegraph.co.uk

#JeSuisCharlie

Shortly after the attack on the “Charlie Hebdo” offices, its website showed the slogan “Je suis Charlie”, the French for “I am Charlie” (Fig. 1). These words were quickly taken up by Twitter users, taking the form of *#JeSuisCharlie* and *#IAmCharlie* hashtags. It was via Twitter and using these hashtags that the international public opinion protested against the assault on the freedom of speech. In a short time, *#JeSuisCharlie* became one of the most popular hashtags in the history of Twitter. It appeared there at the frequency of 6500 times per minute and was included in 3.5 million tweets within 24 hours after the attack, reaching about 5 million by 9 January 2015². The campaign was joined not only by the editors of other periodicals around the world and well-known politicians (like the President of the European Council Donald Tusk) but ordinary citizens too, from the US, to Europe and Asia, to Australia. *#JeSuisCharlie* became both an international message, popularized and understood all around the world, and the topic integrating the international community faced with the terror that struck in Paris. Apart from the Twitter campaign, manifestations and marches were organized in many cities in France, the UK, Australia, and the US to protest against the attack on the freedom of the press. The protesters carried banners saying “Je Suis Charlie”. Many institutions commemorated the victims of the attack with a minute of silence. Hollywood stars also expressed solidarity with the victims at the Golden Globe Awards ceremony on 11 January. Many actors, like George Clooney and Diane Kruger, posed to pictures holding a piece of paper saying “Je suis Charlie” or wore badges with this slogan. These words could also be found on the cover of the first issue of the weekly after the attack (Fig. 2).

² T. Whitehead, *Paris Charlie Hebdo attack: Je Suis Charlie hashtag one of most popular in Twitter history*, “Daily Telegraph” 2015, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/france/11336879/Paris-Charlie-Hebdo-attack-Je-Suis-Charlie-hashtag-one-of-most-popular-in-Twitter-history.html> [accessed: 12 Feb 2015].



Figure 2. The cover of the first issue of “Charlie Hebdo” after the attack

Source: www.charliehebdo.fr

Thus, the hashtag became immensely popular and not only expressed solidarity with the victims but also showed the strength of the whole society. Indubitably, this can be described as a case of international or even intercultural communication carried out via the community media. Intercultural communication takes place when there is a “process of exchange of thoughts and meanings between people from different cultures”³, whereas international communication involves “communication relationships occurring between entities belonging to different nations and ethnic groups”⁴. The described case meets the above criteria, as it is understood by people from various countries and speaking different languages, and the communication takes place where the cultures meet. Thus, *#JeSuisCharlie* has become a universal symbol of the struggle for the freedom of the press and speech, and an example that the international community is able to integrate around important matters, if only using the Internet.

³ H.D. Fischer, *Forms and functions of supranational communication*, in: *International communication, media, channels, functions*, eds. H.D. Fischer, J. Calhoun Merrill, New York 1970, p. 99; as quoted in: B. Ociepka, *Komunikowanie międzynarodowe*, Wrocław 2002, p. 23.

⁴ B. Ociepka, *Komunikowanie...*, op. cit., p. 13.

Hashtag war

Still, not everybody supported the *#JeSuisCharlie* campaign. A competing hashtag appeared on Twitter, *#JeNeSuisPasCharlie* (“I am not Charlie”), mostly promoted by the critics of the “Charlie Hebdo” weekly. This group included mostly those who felt offended by the satirical pictures published in the magazine and accused its editors of racism or offending their religious sensitivities. “The New York Times” daily published the article “I am not Charlie Hebdo” by David Brooks, in which he stressed that if anyone had published satirical drawings of this kind in the US, they would be accused of hate speech, and the magazine would be shut down⁵. Also, the solidarity campaign was not supported by Janusz Korwin-Mikke who, during the minute of silence in the European Parliament, when all other European MPs held sheets of paper saying “Je suis Charlie” to commemorate the victims of the attack, displayed on his laptop screen the words “I am not Charlie, I am for death penalty.” The campaign was also opposed by the inhabitants of Pakistan and Algeria, among others, who protested with the slogan “I am not Charlie, I am Mohammed.” Also, the Turkish president concluded that the satirical pictures published by “Charlie Hebdo” had nothing in common with the freedom of speech⁶.

⁵ D. Brooks, *I am not Charlie Hebdo*, “New York Times” 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/09/opinion/david-brooks-i-am-not-charlie-hebdo.html?_r=1 [accessed: 12 Feb 2015].

⁶ *Anti-Charlie protests turn violent in Niger, Pakistan and Algeria*, Euronews 2015, <http://www.euronews.com/2015/01/16/anti-charlie-protests-turn-violent-in-niger-pakistan-and-algeria/> [accessed: 17 Feb 2015].

Hashtag, or

We should explain here what a hashtag is and how it is used. For instance, you cannot find it in a Polish dictionary, even though it is commonly used in Poland, especially by Internet users. According to an online English-Polish dictionary, a hashtag is a “tag preceded by the # symbol” or, simply put, “the # symbol”⁷. Next, a tag is a text marker or simply a slogan or phrase. It can be said thus that a hashtag is a short message preceded by the # symbol; this is the key. It can consist of one word (e.g., *#politics*), several (*#JeSuisCharlie*), or an acronym or initials (*#TDF* = Tour de France). Initially they were used only on Twitter, a community networking portal with microblog features, which enables both posting on-line diary entries and exchanging opinions with other users. A message posted by a user on Twitter is called a tweet and may contain more than a meagre 140 characters. Since this number is further decreased by the hashtag length, tweets must be extremely precise, and slogans must be brief. The hashtag later gained popularity on the Instagram, a service where users can publish pictures captioned by hashtags. It is a very popular form of captioning pictures, and the hashtags are often humorous. The application also enables other pictures to be searched by hashtags used to caption them. Recently, hashtags began to be used in the Facebook community portal to supplement one’s posts or caption photos. As is the case of the remaining community networking sites, the posts can also be searched by hashtag.

Moreover, it is worth paying attention to trends, or the most popular posts and hashtags on Twitter. Each user is shown these trends in her account. They are customized based on a selected location, which enables the user to know which posts and hashtags are the most popular in her chosen area (usually where she is located). There are also many websites monitoring these trends worldwide. One such example is www.trends24.in, where the most popular posts from the previous 24 hours are gathered, at 1 hour intervals. What is more, the site offers not only global data but also data for chosen countries and even cities. The number of companies specialized in studying the Internet is growing as well. The Polish site www.sotrender.pl, which publishes monthly *Twitter trends* reports, can serve as an example here. These reports contain not only the most popular hashtags in each months but also the data on the largest profiles, most active brands in various categories (sport, media, people, blogs, journalists, finance, etc.), most frequently mentioned profiles, and best tweets as well.

It is based on these reports that the data on the most popular hashtags in Poland were prepared (Table 1). As seen here, the popularity of hashtags changes from month to month,

⁷ “Hashtag”, the *bab.la* language portal, <http://pl.bab.la/slownik/angielski-polski/hashtag> [accessed: 17 Feb 2015].

depending on the most important national and worldwide events. For this reason in September 2014, during the 2014 FIVB Volleyball Men's Championship, the most popular hashtag was the official tag of the event, #FIVBmensWCH. Then, in October, the hashtag #JakTo, referring to a new song by Dawid Kwiatkowski, a singer popular among teenage girls, enjoyed record popularity. In November, as local government elections were held in Poland, the most popular hashtag was #PKW (for the National Electoral Commission, Pol. *Państwowa Komisja Wyborcza*), which was largely associated with the blunder during the counting process. Finally in January, the charity activities associated with the Great Orchestra of Christmas Charity (Pol. *Wielka Orkiestra Świątecznej Pomocy*) were the most popular on Twitter: #MasterCardGrazWOSP. The report for December 2014 has not been compiled yet.

Table 1. The most popular hashtags in Poland in chosen months

Rank	September 2014	October 2014	November 2014	January 2015
1.	#FIVBmensWCH	#JakTo	#PKW	#MasterCardGrazWOSP
2.	#TeamPoland	#Kopacz	#MTVEMA	#wosp2015
3.	N/D	#wspomnienia9893tour	#PiS	#RT

Source: own compilation based on Twitter trends reports (www.sotrender.pl)⁸

Twitter and hashtags became a convenient tool for political communication too. Many politicians open their accounts there and communicate with their voters through them. Twitter has frequently been the arena of political rows and sharp exchanges, be it between politicians or between politicians and journalists. However, while the profiles of politicians are followed by many users, they are not the most popular accounts in the world. The largest numbers of people follow celebrities. For instance, recently the first place has belonged to the singer Katy Perry (70.5 million followers), followed by the vocalist Justin Bieber (65 million), with the President of the United States Barrack Obama in the third (short of 60 million). He is the only politician among the top ten most popular people on Twitter; the remainder are exclusively stage artists (such as Taylor Swift, Lady Gaga, Rihanna, and Justin Timberlake)⁹. It seems therefore that Twitter is not just a tool used by politicians. To the contrary, it is the celebrities who use it the most.

⁸ *Twitter Trends* reports, www.sotrender.pl/trends/twitter [accessed: 25 Feb 2015].

⁹ Twitter popularity statistics, www.socialbakers.com/statistics/twitter/profiles/ [accessed: 25 May 2015].

Hashtag, or a message

In the case of hashtags, we are looking at communication. Notably, communicating is a “kind of contact established through senses as well as specially prepared tools (means of communicating) between at least two persons, one of whom (the sender) conveys to the other (the recipient), using signs comprehensible to both of them, certain notional content or emotions meant to entice a specific reaction in the recipient”¹⁰. Using Twitter, the sender sends the recipient a message (which may contain hashtags). Here, all those who read the post are the recipients. Whether there is any reaction to the message, and what it is, can be verified if it is commented on or shared by other users. It is worth stressing, however, that just as is the case of mass communicating, the recipients of this kind of messages very often form an anonymous collective, “whose direct impact on the behaviour of the sender (feedback) is reduced to minimum”¹¹. Sometimes, however, the reactions are visible, like in the case of *#JeSuisCharlie*. Here, not only the reactions on Twitter could be observed (like posting the hashtag to express solidarity with the victims of the attack and to fight for the freedom of the press), they transcended the virtual reality as well (expressions of solidarity in the form of manifestations or the slogan being displayed by celebrities during the Golden Globes ceremony). Thus, hashtags can be considered as a form of communication (albeit usually virtual), since in the age of the Internet it is difficult not to be concerned with this increasingly popular aspect of communication between Internet users.

Hashtag functions

The basic function of hashtags is the already mentioned tagging, that is marking one’s own posts. This way, the remaining users of community networking portals can find a given post more easily by searching the entries containing the hashtag that interests them. Such a post becomes highlighted, and its subject is underlined. When the user clicks on the selected hashtag, all posts containing it are displayed. In short, users find it easier to follow a conversation if it is tagged.

Apart from their basic function, hashtags can serve other purposes. They are often used to supplement statements, for jokes and irony. Users, especially from the younger generations, also use hashtags for various kinds of games; e.g., *#WywiadZTwitterowiczami* (*#InterviewWithTwitterUsers*) means talking to other users on Twitter. If you put this hashtag

¹⁰ M. Mrozowski, *Media masowe. Władza, rozrywka i biznes* [Mass media: Power, entertainment, and business], Warszawa 2011, p. 15.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 31.

in and ask a question, other users who want to play will reply. Sometimes also the fans of a certain musician or band send birthday wishes to their idols over Twitter (e.g., *#HappyBirthdayRihanna* or *#HappyBirthdayEdSheeran*). Yet another example, this time of a political struggle, can be found in the two hashtags: *#wygaszone* and *#wybudowane* (“phased out” and “constructed”). They gained popularity after the Prime Minister Ewa Kopacz said in January 2015 that the unprofitable coal mines would be phased out, not closed. In response to these words, users began to post pictures of abandoned industrial facilities from the whole country with the caption *#wygaszone*, while others published pictures of new companies captioned *#wybudowane*. Hashtags can also be used to gather a greater number of followers, i.e., increase popularity, like the *#F4F*, or follow for follow. Posting such a hashtag means that we would follow the profile of a user, provided she follows us as well.

Additionally, hashtags enable users to comment on television programmes and current events by including their names in a post. For instance, if you watch the *TV Theatre* (Pol. *Teatr Telewizji*), you should type *#TeatrTelewizji* and the comment on the play on Twitter. However, hashtags are perhaps most commonly used by various companies for advertising: “Very often the brands create UNIQUE hashtags themselves to create new trends, hold competitions (...), or simply gather statements related to a particular event in one place”¹².

Twitter is a very good place to promote a brand by creating a hashtag with its name. Being shared, they allow companies to gain new customers. It is increasingly common for specific events to have an official hashtag created, as was for instance the case of the Volleyball World Championship in 2014. The organizers encouraged users to tag all posts related to the championship with *#FIVBMensWCH*, and to show support for national teams during matches by using tags as well, e.g., *#TeamPoland*. On the other hand, if some person or company wants to hold a competition, it is enough to type *#competition* or *#prizes* (Pol. *#konkurs*, *#nagrody*), or *#promotion* (*#promocja*) if they want to sell something.

More and more often, hashtags are used for voting in various campaigns. A good example here may be *#NBABallot*, used to vote for the basketball players who should play in the NBA All Stars game. It was enough to type the full name of the player and add this hashtag. Similarly, hashtags enable carrying out charity actions as well. This took place during the Great Orchestra of Christmas Charity gala, when the MasterCard Polska company offered PLN 5 for each tweet with the hashtag *#MasterCardGrazWOSP*.

¹² J. Kwiecień, *Czy 140 znaków to za mało? Kilka praktycznych porad jak działać na Twitterze* [Is 140 characters not enough? Some practical advice how to act on Twitter], <http://socjomania.pl/czy-140-znakow-to-za-malo-kilka-praktycznych-porad-jak-dzialac-na-twitterze> [accessed: 17 Feb 2015].

Additionally, hashtags are used for various social campaigns, such as *#JeSuisCharlie*, to express solidarity with the victims of a disaster or support for someone or something. There was a campaign organized in Poland, modelled on the French slogan: *#JestemAnia* (*#IAmAnia*) and *#JeSuisAnia*, which became the expression of solidarity with Anna Grodzka, member of the Sejm, after the publication of the article in the weekly *W Sieci* which described her private life. The campaign in the community media was a protest against the false information, according to the organizers, published by the magazine. However, sometimes there are more dubious campaigns, like the one invented by the fans of actor Benedict Cumberbatch, who follow their idol and post a hashtag on Twitter each time they meet him. “Cumberbatch-related posts on Twitter gained a peculiar hashtag *#cumberwatch*. Not without a reason. One of the users of the community network took his overwatch responsibility so seriously that he peeped on the star through his flat in Hampstead, in the north of London, reporting in tweets what Cumberbatch was doing at the time. At the intervals of a few minutes”¹³.

To sum up, the purpose of hashtags is:

- tagging;
- communication;
- supplementing messages (joke, irony);
- playing;
- increasing the popularity of the profile;
- commenting on current events;
- promoting a brand (creation of official hashtags for events);
- holding competitions;
- voting;
- organizing charity and social campaigns.

Based on the listed functions, general hashtag categories can be identified (Table 2). These categories were developed based on the reports from Twitter Trends¹⁴ and the Huffington Post website¹⁵ concerning the most frequently used hashtags on Twitter. These most frequently

¹³ K. Pasternak, *Śliczna inteligencja. Seksowny umysł Benedicta Cumberbatcha* [Beautiful intelligence: The sexy mind of Benedict Cumberbatch], *Polityka* 2015, No 3 (2992), <http://www.polityka.pl/tygodnikpolityka/kultura/1604995,1,seksowny-umysl-benedicta-cumberbatcha.read> [accessed: 17 Feb 2015].

¹⁴ *Twitter Trends* reports, op. cit.

¹⁵ T. Mitchell, *Top 10 social activism hashtags of 2014*, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/tasha-mitchell/top-10-social-activism-ha_b_6331648.html [accessed: 25 Feb 2015].

used hashtags were assigned to the categories of advertising, charity, intervention, entertainment, politics, and sport.

Is it worth using hashtags?

Beyond any doubt, communication with hashtags has many advantages, as shown by the examples above. Their strong points are directly tied to their functions. They are an easily accessible means for promoting companies and organizing charity and social campaigns; they may also be used for entertainment. Moreover, they provide short and concise communication, often being limited to key words. Furthermore, thanks to being used in community media, they enable reaching a wide spectrum of recipients and are easy to use.

One cannot fail to notice, however, that hashtags are entering more and more into our lives, and not just the virtual ones, and overusing them (especially by the younger users of the Internet) is being ridiculed. Simply put, it is difficult to read a message full of # symbols, which precede all words of the message (you are not supposed to write, e.g., “#I #went #shopping #today”). You should also consider if a few words, from which hashtags are usually constructed, can contain the whole message. Most certainly, there is no definite answer to this question. There are some hashtags which say very little on the meaning of what is said (individual slogans, random words), but there are also some which carry an enormous amount of meaning on their own, strengthen the whole communication and highlight its meaning, or even show its depth, like the *#JeSuisCharlie* discussed above, which was a message on its own. It seems, therefore, that in the virtual reality the use of hashtags brings many advantages and it is worth to include this component in your tweets, in particular if you use Twitter for marketing purposes.

Table 2. Hashtag topic categories

Category	Examples of posts
Advertising	#iPhone6, #Apple, #Samsung, #TheSims4, #vevopolskarozdajeplyty
Charity	#MasterCardGrazWOSP, #wosp2015, #IceBucketChallenge
Intervention	#JeSuisCharlie, #BringBackOurGirls, #JestemAnia, #BoycottClippers, #BeenRapedNeverReported
Entertainment	#MTVEMA, #BRITAWards, #TopWszechCzasow, #Oscars2015
Politics	#PiS, #PO, #PKW, #Wybory2014, #Kopacz, #wygaszone, #StrajknaŚlasku, #Arlukowicz
Sport	#FIVBmensWCH, #NBABallot, #PlebiscytPS, #Handball2015

Source: own compilation based on Twitter trends (www.sotrender.pl) and www.huffingtonpost.com.

Hashtag in international communication

The example of *#JeSuisCharlie* shows the enormous power of hashtags. There are many similar examples where people from all around the world connect to one another with hashtags. One of them is *#BringBackOurGirls*: the tag meant to draw attention to the abduction of more than 200 female students from a secondary school in Nigeria in April 2014. It originally appeared in Nigeria, as its creators wanted to pressure the national authorities to take care of the abducted girls. They also hoped that the Twitter users worldwide would notice the problem. And so it happened. Even Hillary Clinton included this hashtag in a post on her profile. In time, 44% of all tweets came from the USA and 22% from Nigeria. The post was retweeted over a million times in total¹⁶. It was yet another example of international solidarity. There is one more popular hashtag in international circulation on Twitter, used

¹⁶ A.M. Tomchak, *#BBCTrending: How a million people called to #BringBackOurGirls*, <http://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-trending-27298696> [accessed: 17 Feb 2015].

rather for entertainment. “Beyond doubt, the most popular hashtag is *#FF*, with its extended form *#FollowFriday*. It is a tradition according to which each Friday Twitter users tell their followers whom it is worth to follow”¹⁷. There are many similar examples to be found on Twitter.

It could thus be concluded that there are universal hashtags, understood by all users. As the examples above show, they are usually created in English (although *#JeSuisCharlie* shows that not only English) and are used either for entertainment or, in the case of social, protest, or charity campaigns, to draw attention to substantial problems or important events. This way the international community is unified and integrated, and the Internet users can show their force. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine any other way in which so many people from so many countries could express their attitudes. The Internet provides this capability.

It may be worth to present the most popular hashtags in the history of Twitter (Table 3), and thus in the international communication. Due to the lack of access to complete data, the table shows only the selected most popular tags. One of the most frequently used hashtags was *#vote5sos*, which appeared in roughly 78 million tweets. It was associated with the 2014 MTV Video Music Awards. Then came the *#WorldCupFinal* hashtag, related to the 2014 FIFA World Cup (32.1 million), followed by the *#JeSuisCharlie* described above (about 5 million). The next place went to *#IceBucketChallenge*, which identified a charity campaign involving pouring a bucket of icy water over one’s head and nominating subsequent persons who were supposed to do the same and also donate money to organizations caring for people suffering from amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS). The last hashtag in the compilation, *#Ferguson* (3.5 million), concerned the case, very loud in the US, of the fatal shooting of Michael Brown¹⁸.

Table 3. Selected most popular hashtags in the history of Twitter

Hashtag	Number of tweets in which the hashtag appeared
#vote5sos	78 million

¹⁷ SMS, *Co to są hashtagi na Twitterze?* [What are the hashtags on Twitter?], <http://blog.trendbirds.pl/co-to-sa-hashtagi-na-twitterze> [accessed: 17 Feb 2015].

¹⁸ L. Ulanoff, *#JeSuisCharlie: Popular but not Twitter’s biggest hashtag of all time*, <http://mashable.com/2015/01/09/jesuischarlie-hashtag-popularity> [accessed: 17 Feb 2015].

#WorldCupFinal	32.1 million
#JeSuisCharlie	5 million
#IceBucketChallenge	4.2 million
#Ferguson	3.5 million

Source: own compilation based on the data from the www.mashable.com website¹⁹

Competencies necessary to understand hashtags

Even though there are universal hashtags, in order to understand each individual tag one needs to have specific communication competencies understood as the “ability to communicate, including the body of knowledge, skills, and abilities which determines the range of capability of a human to communicate with his/her environment, both from the position of a sender and a recipient of verbal and nonverbal messages”²⁰. It is difficult to discuss communication at all when its participants are unable to communicate or, in the case of Twitter, often do not know the peculiar language or the rules upheld on this portal (e.g., the aforementioned *#FF* and *#F4F* activities). Another equally important component for the understanding of hashtags consists of cultural competencies, defined as “the predispositions of an individual to participate in his/her own culture and in foreign cultures, as well as the way he/she uses the knowledge and skills developed at the given stage of life”²¹. Namely, the decoding of a message requires the knowledge of a broader cultural context and access to information. The recipient must be well acquainted with the discussed events – have current information. Otherwise, it will prove impossible to properly read some of the hashtags. It is difficult to understand the *#JeSuisCharlie* or *#BringBackOurGirls* campaigns without any knowledge of the events in Paris and Nigeria. Thus, using Twitter requires not only knowledge of new technologies and broadly understood entertainment but also politics, sports, and the most important domestic and international events. As can be seen, using hashtags is not simple and can be associated with having a number of skills. If well trained, they can bring tangible benefits, both economic and social, even on international scale.

Because of all this, on the one hand, hashtags are best understood by people well-versed in the current events and skilled in this type of communication. On the other hand, then, by those who do not understand such messages will try to improve their knowledge, to learn them. Obviously some people (young people, in my opinion) do not consider hashtags

¹⁹ Ibidem.

²⁰ M. Mrozowski, *Media masowe...*, op. cit., p. 27.

²¹ B. Kietlińska, *Słownik teorii żywej kultury* [Dictionary of live culture theory], <http://ozkultura.pl/wpis/962/5> [accessed: 17 Feb 2015].

as a source of knowledge. In the games mentioned above (such as *#cumberwatch*), mock-communication takes place. By creating various activities of this kind, the young people do not communicate any valuable content. They are just playing using hashtags, which does not present any real value. Alas, so far there has been no in-depth research on this subject.

What is more, in the case of communication via Twitter, one could discuss not mass communication but rather mass self-communication. This notion was coined by Manuel Castells to refer to new forms of communication via the Internet (using Facebook, Twitter, or YouTube). Owing to the web, information can reach a significantly greater number of people than would be possible with the radio or TV. Users are not only recipients of content but very frequently they produce the information themselves, curate it, and establish the rules to govern such communication. Their actions escape the control of authorities and regulators. This is why Castells says that a network society has emerged, one ruled by its own laws. Twitter subscribes into these notions. Its users can not only read the messages of others but also become senders of content themselves.

Research perspectives

The considerations presented here do not exhaust the topic. Even though Twitter was launched in 2006, there have been no in-depth analyses or publications on this topic. In further investigations it will certainly be worth paying attention to the issue of mock-communicating and verify whether hashtags really make the users who do not understand them to improve their knowledge or if they actually rather give up such activities. Yet another question for analysis is the impact of hashtags on the media agenda. It would seem that, on the one hand, they reflect the content of the media and are a reaction to that which appears there (like *#JeSuisCharlie*, which was a reaction to the events in France), but sometimes it is hashtags which influence the mass media, on the other. It occurs sometimes that the Internet users are first to notice an issue, and the interest of the press in this topic only develops with time (this can be illustrated with the example of various Twitter games becoming so popular that the media describe them). Yet another interesting question is whether users are active on Twitter because they want to inform others and become involved in communication or rather they only do it because it is fashionable and others do it (according to the principle that if everybody does it, you should too), or because it is inappropriate to be silent (with *#JeSuisCharlie* as an example). Thus, it would be worth studying the motivations of Twitter users.

Conclusion

Community media, especially Twitter, have gained much popularity. They are used by people all around the world. For these reasons the methods with which Internet users communicate became new forms of communication. Beyond doubt, hashtag is one such a new model of communication. It has many uses and can serve various purposes: from completely insignificant ones like games and competitions to important ones like marketing and social campaigns. Using hashtags confers many advantages and may contribute to fast and easy communication. What is more, hashtags enable international and intercultural communication, as people from various countries and cultures find a common language, in particular when faced with threats and important events. Universal hashtags are created, understood by everybody across language barriers. The strength of hashtags was exemplified by the *#JeSuisCharlie* campaign. In the face of an attack upon the freedom of the speech and press, millions of people protested against terrorism via Twitter. The slogan Je suis Charlie crossed the boundary of virtual reality and spread throughout the world. It seems therefore that the hashtag has become an important part of communication, and its use in community media is quite necessary. It has already found many uses and functions, and its further capacities will most certainly be discovered.