

PIOTR NIEWIECHOWICZ'S MYSTERY. HOW CREATED EXPERT PUBLISHED PRESS ARTICLES, COLLECTED NON-PUBLIC INFORMATION ON BALTIC PIPE AND EXPOSED COUNTRY'S WEAKNESS

Have you ever had an imaginary friend? Children sometimes create in their imagination artificial characters to keep company to them. We, editors of Energetyka24 website and authors of this article, went one step further and create an expert who managed to enter the mainstream, collect sensitive information regarding energy companies from a source near to a Polish Minister and even publish a text on one of the biggest business websites in Poland. And we did it all using only Twitter and e-mail address, to find out how watchful journalists, politicians and experts are. Effects are shocking and clearly exposing weakness of Poland, unsuccessfully facing any potential information war.

by Piotr Maciążek and Jakub Wiech

Is it possible to 'create' an expert on energy, who in a few weeks builds a significant professional network and impacts energy debates, in just a few hours? Yes, it is. Let's meet Piotr Niewiechowicz, specialist on gas & oil, made from the very beginning in scope of journalistic provocation in the quiet of our office.

Operating only through Twitter and e-mail address, our expert was able to obtain sensitive and non-public data regarding one of the most important investments in Poland's history, publish totally incompetent press article, make one of the opposition's politicians interested to material full of manipulations and to get in touch with many representatives of the energy sector.

Ministerial link

Niewiechowicz managed to contact *via* Twitter a member of Piotr Naimski's group, who is a government representatives for critical strategic infrastructure. It is worth mentioning that it was the member who wrote first to our expert. Niewiechowicz was receiving from that person sensitive information on Baltic Pipe, the most principal energy project. The mentioned pipe is fundamental and openly associated with Poland's' potential independence from Gazprom.

During talks with the member of Naimski's group, Niewiechowicz was being informed on dialogue conducted with Nord Stream 1 and Nord Stream 2 consortium. Subject of talks was clear from the context, however, out of concern for the public good, we decided not to reveal details.

We were also shocked that Niewiechowicz was made aware of the project's schedule, prepared by Minister's associate. The member of Naimski's group estimated probability of project's realisation -

and it was not complying with the given schedule.

We cannot make such a sensitive and detailed information public due to risks it may pose. It is worth pointing out that any delay in the schedule may result in necessary renewal of the contract between Polish PGNIG and Russian Gazprom, and probably under unfavourable conditions.

Mr Niewiechowicz in media

In the scope of our provocation, we decided to check not only politicians' counter-intelligence protection, but also quality of work of our professional colleagues. That is why we prepared press article on possible impact of harbour porpoises on Baltic pipe construction. Information included in the text was intentionally uncertain and easy enough for checking, especially for a journalist specialising in energy. To catch the interest, we published on Niewiechowicz's fake Twitter account an 'professional' advertisement on seeking a platform for text publishing. To make our expert more credible, we also posted a comment on information campaign conducted by some ecological organisation with reference to harbour porpoises. Then we wrote to the editor-in-chief of one of the biggest business websites in Poland to offer Niewiechowicz's article for publication. We got a positive answer and after just a short period of time the article was indeed posted.

Niewiechowicz and friends

We were frequently discussing energy topics with other experts and spread gossips *via* Niewiechowicz's Twitter. We were also publishing information and photos suggesting Niewiechowicz's frequent presence on various energy conferences. Thanks to it, we increased his credibility in the eyes of journalists, businessmen and officials active in the sector.

It opened up the door to give misinformation to other people interested in energy. Of course, it was not our aim, yet we were impressed by how short it took us to have the chance. What is surprising is that no one publicly asked who Piotr Niewiechowicz was.

Niewiechowicz is going to the parliament

In the final stage we decided to check if our expert may gain influence on Poland's political life. What we did was dispatching to some politicians a poor quality and inconsistent article. Since we decided to stop our provocation and make its effects public, we did not pay particular attention to the task. Yet, we received one reply from one of the opposition's leaders. He thanked for materials and invited our expert to further cooperation, indicated 'Niewiechowicz's expert knowledge in the area'. He also promised his assistant would contact Niewiechowicz soon.

The contact was indeed made. We received an e-mail with request of a deeper insight from the politician's assistant just a few days later. If Niewiechowicz was a cover for some foreign intelligence officer, he would easily introduce to the parliament's debate fake information. Fortunately, we only cared for checking the political system's 'tightness'.

What did go wrong?

The Niewiechowicz case shows us huge problems of the Polish state's institutions which must face information war, for instance in the energy sector. As it turns out, officials directly involved in the key projects concerning energy security are not sufficiently protected from foreign intelligence. When it comes to media, they cannot 'separate the wheat from the chaff' and spread fake news without fact-checking. One may observe gaps in the parliament's protection, too. But what exactly does not work in the public sector?

Information war not so far from us

Many opinion leaders in Poland underestimated or even denied information wars carried out by a few powerful centers. This kind of war strongly differs from its common understanding – rifles, tanks and missiles are replaced by tweets, propaganda and fake news. Yet, it is wrong to think that bloodless conflict means less important one. Information wars influence our life not less than the conventional ones. They may replace borders, decide on billion in profits or losses and, primarily, on human life.

Niewiechowicz's activity puts into question counter-intelligence protection - officials directly involved in the key projects, in terms of the state's security, come into contact with completely unknown expert *via* Twitter with whom they share non-public information, concerning even international relations.

The rejuvenation of staff

In Polish administration politicians often see their Cabinets as logistical and organisational resources. They are full of young, inexperienced people, perceiving their job as the door to great political career. Due to their ambitions, lack of experience and young age they become a potential target for foreign intelligence.

Chasing the sensational

Principal rules of journalism say that a person, who is in possession of sensational news, has to do his/her best to verify the information before publication. Fact-checking should relate not only to merits, but also to the source of information. In Niewiechowicz case neither was done.

Article on harbour porpoises, which had been sent to one of the biggest Polish business portal, was published on the most exposed place on the website. It was probably not read before posting. No comments or adjustments were made, whereas verification of the content (and coming to a conclusion that the article does not seem right) would take no longer than a few hours.

So why the article was published without any changes? In our opinion – due to its sensational character. Niewiechowicz's tweet related to harbour porpoises gained a significant number of shares. The article itself was a subject of debate, where leading journalists of the sector addressed the issue. We also heard that it was discussed by some environmental organisations. Unofficially, we learnt that Denmark took some steps to clarify the issue, too. Astonished by the reactions, we decided to write our text on harbour porpoises to clear up the question.

The whole situation clearly revealed the weakness of our media. As it turns out, it is really easy to publish an article, even on a very popular site and even by no-name.

It's just a negligence

Thirty seconds of Internet surfing is enough to realise that Niewiechowicz is a fictional character. Google browser gives us only 2 pages of results for 'Niewiechowicz' inquiry and they are full of Twitter comments. And that is not surprising since Niewiechowicz is a fake surname, thought up for the provocation's purposes and examining vigilance of our interlocutors. Unfortunately, none of them passed the exam. What puzzles us, is an attitude of journalists for whom intellectual curiosity and fact-checking are basic work tools.

Of course, we may premise that people involved in our provocation saw the trickery and were trying to uncover Niewiechowicz's intentions. Yet, this theory is rather far-fetched. While we can agree that politicians' willing of information sharing may be to some extent explained, we do not completely

understand behavior of editor-in-chief of a popular and influential business portal, who decided to published an article from an unknown person.

Let us remind once again that Niewiechowicz's success was achieved with a minimum workload in a very short time. As we can see, within a few weeks anyone can become an expert with an access to people in media and politics. Thanks to it, Niewiechowicz was with ease intoxicating these circles. Just imagine what professionals with money and know-how can achieve. Awareness of this seems to be the most important, and the most dreadful, that Niewiechowicz left behind.