INTERNET
CULTURE OF INSULT?

2016/2017

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Partners of the study

Invitations to the survey

Fieldwork

Substantial support

Scientific support

Foreword

Contrary to the common belief that there is no culture of speech on the internet, once again, the research of IAB Polska proves that this is not the case. Crossing the borders of culture on the net is still a marginal occurrence. Unfortunately, because of universal accessibility, the internet has the worst image among all means of communication in this context. Since the phenomenon of insulting on the net remains inconsequential, it is obvious that the best form of prevention is constant education of internet users. It is worth noting that indeed, thanks to the appropriate education, the perception of online anonymity has changed. The percentage of web surfers convinced that the internet allows anonymity has decreased by half over the last five years, reaching 26%. Since the definite majority of internet users already acknowledge that the web is a public space, they certainly care more about the culture of their own expressions online. Our newest report gives hope that in the future, we will no longer discuss the internet culture of insult, but rather the culture of speech.

Włodzimierz Schmidt
CEO
IAB Polska

Already for the third time, we invite you to read the report concerning the borders of culture on the internet. Facing various phenomena, discussions and publications, it must be emphasized that we did not focus on so called 'hate speech', which is understood as an attack on a particular social group, and close to terms such as social stigma, resentment or xenophobia. Likewise, we also did not focus on so called 'hate', meaning offensive online content, usually affecting particular individuals. The starting point for the IAB Polska project was a general approach towards the culture of speech, its scope and the ways of crossing its boundaries, as well as the image of various means of communication. Once again, the results of the study lead to various after-thoughts. Did the internet bring upon the origin of new phenomena or rather – as the first medium given over to the hands humanity – show the real human condition in the context of culture? The question arises whether to hide what the internet shows, leading to censorship and restrictions against freedom of speech, or to educate? To punish, whom and what for? In the newest IAB Polska report, concerning "Internet culture of insult", we encourage you to exactly such reflections.

Paweł Kolenda
Research Director
IAB Polska

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Key findings

- The analysis of internet posts shows that the percentage of statements crossing the borders of appropriateness is still marginal. It is worth noting that definite majority of such posts refers to politics. This area is one of the key topics which heat up the discussion on the internet.
- The scale of discourtesy is confirmed in a survey conducted among internet users – only a few percent declare that they occasionally cross the borders of appropriateness, use vulgarisms or offend others. A similar percentage admits that they often regret what they wrote and delete such posts (3%).
- During last 5 years, a decrease in the percentage of Web users declaring that online content crosses the borders of appropriateness was observed. At the same time, the number of internet users who think that impoliteness often appears in traditional media has increased significantly.
- Despite the aforementioned marginal scale of online discourtesy – both in posts and declarations – the internet has the worst image among all forms of communication. At the same time, however, freedom of speech online is linked not only to a lack of manners – internet users more frequently make jokes online.
- The perception of online anonymity has definitely changed. In 2011, 54% of Web surfers declared that the internet permits anonymity of speech, while in 2016 the percentage decreased to 26%. This observation coincides with the changes in perception of privacy observed and described in another report of IAB Polska, (vide: Privacy in network 2016/2017) showing that the Web is perceived as a public space and internet users are becoming increasingly aware and experienced in terms of privacy protection.
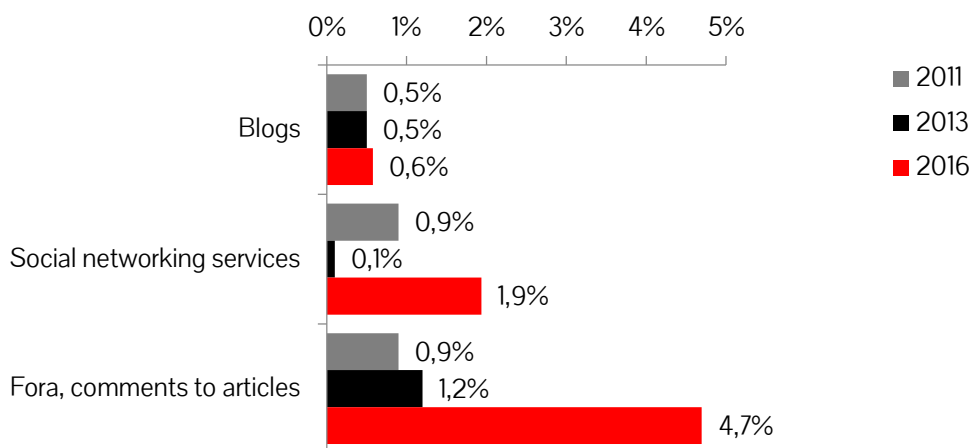
I. Scale of the phenomenon

Percentage of posts crossing the borders of appropriateness still marginal

The analysis conducted in 2011 showed that – depending on the type of online service researched – from 0,5% to 0,9% of posts were inappropriate. In the next measurement, the percentage stayed on similar level. However, in 2016 some significant changes were observed. Although the overall lowest percentage of inappropriate posts was observed on blogs (remaining under 1%), and in case of social networking services it slightly rose to 2% in November 2016, the distinct increase was noted in case of posts on forums and in article comments(from around 1% in 2011 to almost 5% in the last wave).

Notably, the definite majority of inappropriate posts refers to politics. This area – discussed in-depth in the 2011 report – is one of the key topics heating up online discussions. The above-mentioned results find grounds in the currently observed strong polarization of social debate, related to political– worldview topics, visible in all media. The results are also confirmed in findings related to media image, presented in the further part of the report.

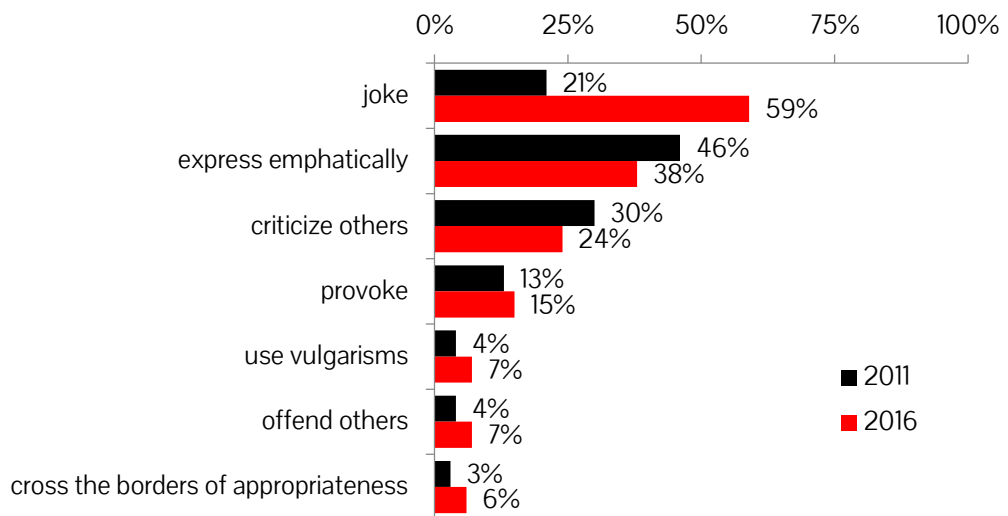**Percentage of inappropriate posts on the Polish internet depending on service type**

	0%	1%	2%	3%	4%	5%
		■ 2011				
		■ 2013				
		■ 2016				

Blogs — 0,5% (2011), 0,5% (2013), 0,6% (2016)

Social networking services — 0,9% (2011), 0,1% (2013), 1,9% (2016)

Fora, comments to articles — 0,9% (2011), 1,2% (2013), 4,7% (2016)

Source: IAB Polska, Internet culture of insult?, posts analysis.

Post analysis and self-evaluation still consistent

Despite the changes observed in post analysis, the percentage of inappropriate online comments is still minute. The diagnosed scale is confirmed in respondents' declarations, reflecting their own self-evaluation of the level of appropriate manners – only a few percent declare ("definitely yes" or "rather yes"), that in their posts they happen to cross the borders of appropriateness, use vulgarisms or offend others. Similarly as in the post analysis, the amount of such declarations has increased only slightly in comparison to 2011. The scale is also consistent with percentage of those who admit that they tend to regret what they wrote and delete such posts (3%).

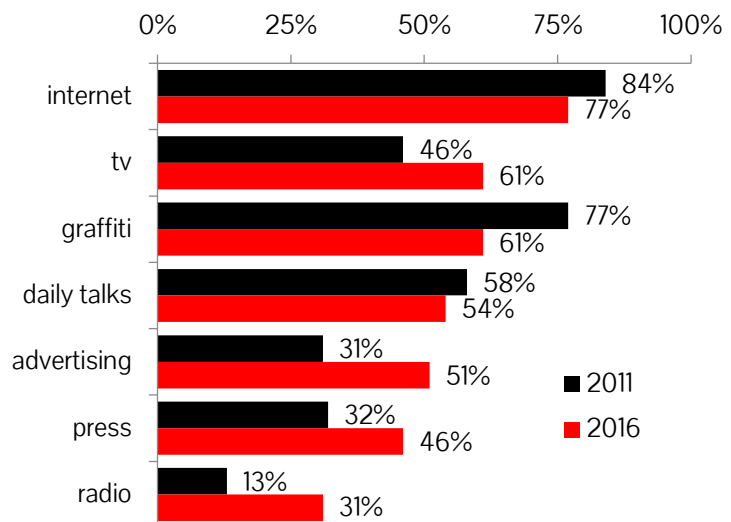To what extent do you agree with the following statements: In my posts I tend to …

joke	21%	59%
express emphatically	46% / 38%	
criticize others	30% / 24%	
provoke	13% / 15%	
use vulgarisms	4% / 7%	
offend others	4% / 7%	
cross the borders of appropriateness	3% / 6%	

2011
2016

Source: IAB Polska, Internet culture of insult? (2016: N=1121, 2011: N=2093), "definitely yes" or "rather yes".

II. Web image against other means of communication

Web image still negative, however other media suffer loss

An analysis of the survey results shows that the internet image – similarly to the wave conducted in 2011 – remains in contradiction with both post analysis and self-evaluation of Web surfers' behavior. Although the percentage of posts and declarations considered as inappropriate comments is marginal, the internet still has the worst image among all researched forms of communication.

How often content crossing the borders of appropriateness appears in/on …

internet	84% / 77%	
tv	46% / 61%	
graffiti	77% / 61%	
daily talks	58% / 54%	
advertising	31% / 51%	
press	32% / 46%	
radio	13% / 31%	

2011
2016

Source: IAB Polska, Internet culture of insult? (2016: N=1121, 2011: N=2093), "definitely yes" or "rather yes".

At the same time, it should be emphasized that during the last 5 years, a decrease in the percentage of Web users declaring that online content crosses the borders of appropriateness was observed, and more respondents think that impoliteness often appears in the traditional media – TV, press and radio.

The results – also mentioned in terms of post analysis – show a general deterioration of public debate quality in media, while discussion in daily talks remains on a similar level.

Anonymity of speech on the Web to a limited extent

When analyzing detailed dimensions of public image concerning discussion on the internet, it is necessary to note that the perception of online anonymity has definitely changed. The percentage of those declaring that the internet permits anonymity of speech has distinctly decreased over the last 5 years from 54% to 26%. The data further confirms the results of the other IAB Polska report, (Privacy in network 2016/2017, March 2017) showing that the Web is perceived as a public space and internet users are increasingly aware and more experienced in terms of privacy protection.

To what extent do you agree with the following statements…
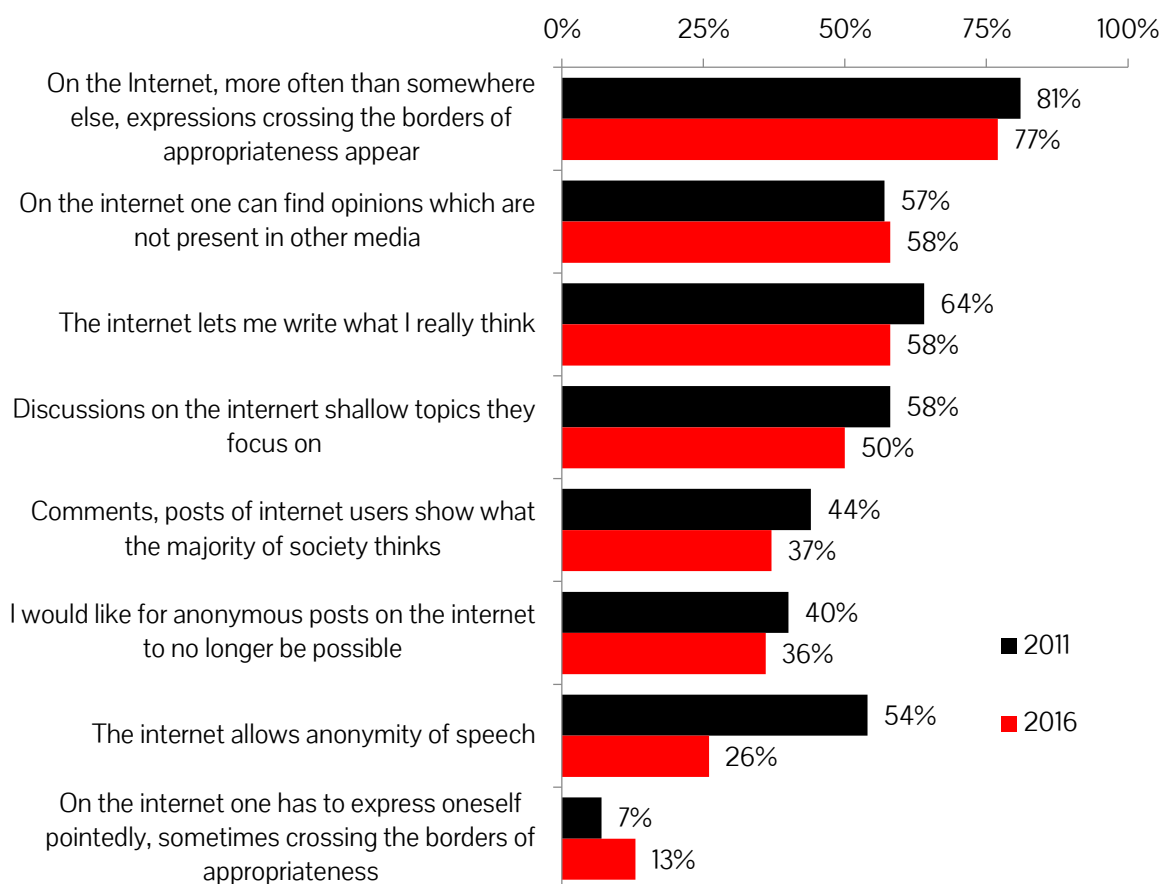
Source: IAB Polska, Internet culture of insult? (2016: N=1121, 2011: N=2093), "definitely yes" or "rather yes".

III. Summary

Reaching the final conclusions of the research project, there are three key insights to be combined. They refer to:
- post analysis,
- self-image of internet users,
- the image of the internet.

As it was pointed out above, post analysis is coherent with the declarations concerning crossing the boundaries of appropriateness and show the marginal scale of the phenomenon. Nevertheless, the internet has the worst image among all researched types of communication. This results from many factors, not only connected with subjectivism of perception or nature of the medium itself.

Content distribution

According to the idea of the internet 2.0, this medium is co-created by its users. Their posts are not edited by specialists before publication, as is done in the case of other media publications and professional publishers online, who try to respect the law as well as ethics and etiquette. Only in the case of some environments (e.g. professional portals) is there so-called moderation, automatic or partly automatic, that selects content before it appears in the Web. Moreover, in case of many mass environments (e.g. social networking services) verification of content is executed sporadically and post-factum, e.g. when reported by internet users. However, even in such cases, reported posts are not always deleted, due to the service providers' concern for freedom of speech, and censorship happens rarely, e.g. only in case of unequivocal law violation charges. Thus, crossing the borders of appropriateness on the internet is more visible – freedom of speech often precedes good manners, although both are based on the same democratic grounds.

Anonymity also plays a substantial role in the discussed phenomenon, allowing relative impunity when commenting on the internet. It is particularly visible in the increase of inappropriate posts appearing in spaces, where identity can be hidden (e.g. forums, article comments). In the more personalized spaces (e.g. profiles in social networking services or blogs), where internet users take the floor by name, offensive expressions appear much less often.

Access to content

A detailed posts analysis conducted in 2011 showed that the subject matter of a post extremely influences appropriateness. At the same time, inappropriate posts are often related to the most popular, read and commented topics (e.g. politics or worldview). As a result, such posts are the most visible, while in fact a lot of discussions or comments found online, related to very narrow areas (e.g. fishing, gardening, mountain tourism, photography etc.) extremely rarely cross the boundaries of appropriateness.

The internet is a non-linear medium, contrary to e.g. TV or radio. In these traditional media programs, if highly diverse and even if disputable, controversial, extreme, shocking or even inappropriate information appears, it is surrounded by a whole range of various information. On the internet, such content is not lost in a stream of information, and some of this information never disappears. Moreover, the internet is a copy of the most important information appearing in all other media and the more disputable this information is, the more often it is copied and – as a consequence – commented on. These mechanisms stimulate discussion and influence speech culture.

Commentary: Jakub Kudła (Grupa Onet-RAS Polska)

The recent results of the IAB research on speech culture show that the internet is still perceived as the medium where the rules of cultural behavior are broken most often. However, it is noteworthy that in comparison to 2011 the prevalence of this opinion among participants has diminished. There was also a high increase in negative opinions on the culture of speech in TV, advertisement, press and radio, which significantly decreased the distance between them and the internet. A particularly severe loss was observed for the radio, which was considered the most cultural medium. These results may indicate that the general perception of culture in the public debate in Poland is bad.

In comparison to 2011 participants significantly more often declared that they use humor in their posts. However, they also more often use foul language, and slightly more often cross the borders of appropriateness or offend others. This is consistent with the analyses of internet posts which showed a significant increase in rude comments on public forums and, albeit smaller, in social media. However, at the same time a smaller number of participants than in 2011 declared that they have personally experienced verbal aggression or observed such aggression towards groups similar to them. Therefore, it seems that foul language is currently less often directed towards specific people or specific groups of people. This may be a result of nationwide educational programs against hate speech on the internet that were maintained over the last few years.

In comparison to 2011, users significantly less often believe that internet provides anonymity. This is probably related, among others, to the introduction of the 2013 changes to the law which oblige websites to inform users about their privacy policy. The subject of privacy on the internet was the subject of yet another research project by IAB Poland.

Jakub Kudła
Head of Media Legal
Grupa Onet-RAS Polska

Commentary: Anna Miotk (PBI)

Media - not just the internet, but also traditional media - go far beyond good manners in social perception, as the research shows. It is caused by the democratization of the internet in Poland and transferring the public debate to the web, often very strongly antagonized by opposite ideological options. It can be seen in the results - most of the content going beyond good manners refers to political issues. Moreover, other studies show that all extremes are quite good for the internet, and moderate views do not have a special interest.

Perhaps there is great social acquiescence to go beyond good manners online. Respondents believe this is the way it should be. There is a large acceptance for it among internet users, judging by the results of the study. We let the internet be like that. Furthermore, we do not regret if we go too far in online discussions.

Judging by how internet users assess their manners, it is possible that they do not have a clear sense that they could go far beyond them. Perhaps because the sense of anonymity and lack of sense of simultaneous contact with a live person on the other side of the screen cause more aggression. If the person we are discussing so sharply in the network stood in front of us and looked us straight in the eyes, many words would stick in our throats.

Anna Miotk
PBI
Instytut Edukacji Medialnej i Dziennikarstwa UKSW

Commentary: Piotr Sadowski (Webankieta)

According to the analysis of Pew Research Institute, based on the results of 165 various studies, we definitely prefer to listen to bad news rather than good news. It is an uncontrolled behavior which has stuck ever since the times of living in the caves. The knowledge that the threat was near decided whether we would survive. Therefore, bad news attracts our attention without our awareness of this fact and immediately until this day.

Insulting people, hate, vulgarisms, and unfavorable opinions draw our attention on a similar basis. It is powerful to such an extent that in order to neutralize a single negative opinion about the brand it takes as many as five positive ones. It shows how harmful and costly black PR is for a brand. One critic costs a company as much as gaining five followers!

It can be seen that we slowly start to learn that it is not always fine and worthwhile to express insults on the internet. It even happens to be unfashionable. Hate can also be hated on. A public complaint against the brand on Social Media is often preceded by an attempt at solving the problem via classic channels, such as customer service. Only when no result is achieved, it comes to public hate on the brand. The example of Poland-wide lynching on the hater Filip Chajzer provided significant food for thought. None of us is anonymous on the internet. The research concerning the Privacy online, conducted by IAB Polska, shows how aware we are of this phenomenon.

In my assessment, it is the internet that will set the maximum level of hate and vulgarity in the media which we are able to accept. Over the last five years one see how dramatically the standards of speech have dropped on television and on the radio. Discussions between politicians are a particular plebiscite for the most elaborate hate. Perhaps it results from the conclusion that language used on the internet is a way to gain the electorate. It results from the fact that the society accepts it and allows it. Even if we do not entirely like it, on a sub-conscious level we are the most interested in the conflict, the sense of threat. Hence, the internet determines the maximal acceptable level of hate and the minimal level of culture of speech.

Piotr Sadowski
CEO, Webankieta.pl

About the study

The research project "Internet culture of insult?" consists of two analyses – a survey conducted among internet users and an analysis of posts existing on the Polish internet.

Survey

- The first of the analyses is based on the questionnaire dedicated to internet users. The last wave of the study was conducted between 15th–30th of November 2016 via Computer Assisted Web Interviewing within the "Borders of freedom online", covering topics related to privacy and culture of speech on the internet. A sample size was collected by invitations displayed (ROS) on the webpages of Onet-RASP and Wirtualna Polska, allowing us to reach 70% coverage among Polish internet users. Researched individuals are aged 15 years old or more, according to regulations concerning the minimum age limit in such surveys. The data was collected by Webankieta through a programmed questionnaire. The margin of error, with a sample size of 1121 collected interviews, is 2,43% on the 95% confidence level. The sample was weighted with analytical weight based on gender, age and frequency of internet usage. Substantial support was provided by Polskie Badania Internetu (PBI), and scientific support by University of Social Sciences and Humanities, and Instytut Przetwarzania Informacji – National Information Processing Institute.
- The first wave of the study, used for historical comparisons, was conducted between 18th of August – 20th of September 2011. The sample size consisted of 2093 interviews. Methodology, recruitment and analysis of the sample are the same as in the study conducted in 2016.

Posts analysis

- The second study was the analysis of posts, based on the sample of internet users quotes coming from three sources: social networking services, blogs, forums and comments on articles found in various portals. They were coded by 4 independent judges, to conduct a detailed analysis of the content of posts and to measure their percentage, including phrases crossing the borders of appropriateness. Compliance between judges was also assessed (on the basis of 100 coded posts it resulted in above 92%), as well as between judges notes and perception of internet users (on the basis of 10 selected posts the level of compliance was 90%). For coding, a proprietary standardized book of codes was used. It was created for the needs of the project by researchers and experts from scientific circles (e.g. social psychologists, media experts, linguists, sociologists, culture experts) as well as from the internet branch.
- Posts from the Polish resources of the internet selected for coding were automatically generated with the use of a tool provided by NewsPoint. However, it must be emphasized that not the full content was available. Thus, the results are only an approximation of content generated by Polish users of the internet, especially taking into account the answer to the question 'What is the scale of crossing the borders of culture in the Polish internet?" A very important limitation of data used in such analyses is a lack of access to some posts in social media which are not public.
- The basis for the choice from the whole range of services monitored by NewsPoint were words and key expressions. The list, chosen by the above-mentioned experts, was created to catch five thematic areas: politics (e.g. elections, Poland in EU), science/technology (e.g. internet, flight into space, Microsoft), pop-culture (e.g. Harry Potter, gossip), social trauma (e.g. Warsaw uprising, death of Pope, military state) and worldview (e.g. abortion, in vitro, homosexuality). Samples of posts selected in particular waves of the study consisted of:

- 2011: starting sample ~190 k posts, 3800 coded,
- 2013: starting sample ~250 k post, 448 coded,
- 2016: starting sample ~290 k posts, 1326 coded.
- The whole process, preparation of codes book, list of analyzed key phrases, details of sampling and coding of posts, as well as other details concerning methodology are presented in the detailed report from the first wave of the study conducted in 2011.

About IAB Polska

Związek Pracodawców Branży Internetowej IAB Polska is an organization merging more than 200 major Polish internet market companies, including the largest portals, advertising networks, media houses and interactive agencies. Its main purpose is broadly understood market education in terms of using the internet as an effective tool for conducting business and promotion. The organization promotes effective e-marketing solutions and creates, presents and implements quality standards. It prepares research reports and publications on online market, including Strategic Report or AdEx, which is the basis for analysis of advertising expenditures. IAB Polska organizes conferences (Forum IAB, MIXX), workshops and trainings (Internet Week, IABHowTo, FutuLab). One of the flagship projects of IAB Poland is DIMAQ – a program that certifies knowledge in the field of e-marketing.

IAB Polska has been operating since 2000. It is a part of the global IAB organization and a member of IAB Europe, Union of Associations Advertising Council and the National Chamber of Commerce.

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