YEAR OF THE SNAKE: AN ANALYSIS OF THE POLISH URBAN LEGEND OF THE VISTULA PYTHON

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Abstract: *Stories about wild and domesticated animals are among the most popular categories of urban legends. In modern folklore, they appear mysteriously, often following strange or scary happenings, like a quite recent tale, created in 2018, when the molted skin of a large snake (later identified as an Indian python) was found near the banks of the Vistula River in the suburbs of Warsaw. Owing to the extensive media coverage, the news spread quickly throughout Poland. For obvious reasons, people wondered where the snake was hiding. Several eyewitnesses, who could see the predator (or something that resembled it), wanted to give an account. Such animals then "disappear" forever but leave their mark on pop culture. The snake myth thus gave rise to numerous stand-up comedy acts, amateur music videos, and a comic book. This study analyses a number of such examples, obtained from the Internet. It also focuses on the mechanisms of the formation of urban legends, and their relation to fake news. One of the main questions of the article is therefore: why do these kinds of stories gain such wide popularity? Furthermore, the aim of the study is to analyse the reactions of Internet users to the news about the python. The topic was commented on by people with different world and political views, so it is worth considering whether the message about the python could play an important role in the integration of Polish society, or as a just another platform for the exchange of thoughts.*

Keywords: *urban legends, modern folklore, Polish culture, Internet studies, fake news*

Introduction

In the summer of 2018 the Polish media reported the discovery of the skin of an Indian python near Warsaw (Dachnij 2018). The news spread quickly, becoming a nationwide sensation because the media ceaselessly fed people shocking details (Bukłaha 2018). However, for observers of social life it was clear that much of the information was entirely unreliable. In addition, there were certain similarities in this case with the stories of another exotic animal running wild in Poland, namely the puma. Rumours about this wild cat roaming freely through Polish villages are revived every year during the holiday season (see Kozicki 2019). Furthermore, contemporary folklorists are thoroughly familiar with the motif referred to as "Big Cats Running Wild", narratives about large exotic predators living outside their natural habitats. Popular almost all over the world, they can be found in many collections of so-called "urban legends" – according to Jan Harold Brunvand's definition, these are "apocryphal contemporary stories, told as true but incorporating traditional motifs, and usually attributed to a friend of a friend (FOAF)" (Brunvand 2012, 60–61). The case of the Vistula python seems to be just another story of this kind.[1] Since the topic is quite recent, it has not been mentioned in any study on urban legends. However, it has become an exceptional inspiration for many cultural texts, such as memes, comic books, and even stand-up comedy acts.

This paper therefore focuses on verbal forms of contemporary folklore, such as urban legends, which appeared in the comments of Internet users, and it examines the sources of such folklore myths from which the public derives information that has little or no credibility. Moreover, in view of the massive expansion of online news media, it is impossible to also ignore the problem of fake news, which contributes to misinformation, disinformation, or mal-information (Marwick 2018, 479). News from tabloids will be analysed in particular – this type of media, focused on a sensational message, provides a space where unconfirmed rumours circulate freely and reach a large audience. Although tabloids are generally believed to be a low-quality source of information, they are important for folklorists when studying the spreading of fictitious messages.

Furthermore, my analysis of the Vistula python case is aimed at learning about the various types of responses of contemporary Poles to python reports.

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[1] The adjective "Vistula" came from the fact that the snake was found near the banks of the Vistula River.

In this way, the article also analyses active civic participation in an online public space. The purpose of the study is therefore to prove that the media chaos surrounding this topic led to the trivialization of the snake issue by provoking the previously mentioned diverse civic and artistic responses. Such projects also provided an excellent opportunity for the cooperation of people of different ages, because the subject intrigued both adults and children. Contemporary urban legends, as messages of intersocial folklore (Łuczeczko 2007, 97), can therefore be treated as an important area for research on social integration and citizen cultural engagement in current affairs. Although news media, and local news websites in particular, treated the issue with due seriousness, recommending that people not leave their houses (Wyborcza.pl 2018), public comments ranged from very serious to humorous and sarcastic (see comment section in Orszulak 2018a). The disrespectful attitude of society to the subject could be seen, among other places, in numerous pop-culture messages, which will also be presented in this article.

The non-participant online observation that I have been involved in since 2018 confirmed that web users not only observed but also created and spread python rumours and memes (Kozinets 2012, 14). Although the snake topic gained huge popularity on the Internet, it existed outside this environment as well. Moreover, the research on online communities can lead to conclusions that are useful for describing society in a broader cultural context, i.e., a community in general (Kozinets 2012, 49). This is especially relevant now, when our consumer needs are largely satisfied by the Internet. It should be emphasized that Internet users are primarily consumers of content available on Internet websites – therefore, under the influence of their preferences, customized advertisements appear in their computers. As the Vistula python becomes popular, it is not surprising to see advertisements referencing it. This issue will be clearly visible in the examples of real-time marketing in this article.

The choice of a non-participant online observation was dictated by the following conditions – the main object of research is the Internet community, which often becomes distrustful when the subject of the analysis is revealed to them. In addition, the article also analyses news from official portals. The choice of the Internet community was due to the fact that it is on the Internet that a large amount of data about the Vistula python could be effectively obtained in a short time. In order to find specific materials, I used the Google search engine, an extremely useful, although sometimes insufficient, tool. For that reason, while exploring texts on social networks such as Facebook or Instagram,

I used internal search engines, which allow the researcher to reach materials not always easily accessible from the level of the Google search. I also relied on the statistics produced by Polish media monitoring services and on articles from websites which gathered information about the python (for example in the form of memes: TOB 2018). The online media observation, which provides the basis for this article, has been conducted from the moment the Vistula python appeared in the network, in July 2018, and up to February 2020. Over the past year, however, official reports about the Vistula python have been extremely rare. Nonetheless, before investigating the python phenomenon and analysing a range of examples from the Internet, I first outline the mechanisms of the emergence and spread of contemporary folk tales, without which the Vistula python story would not exist.

Contemporary Folk Tales and Their Relation to Oral Tradition

Urban legends are contemporary stories told as true and attributed to a FOAF mechanism (Brunvand 2012, 60–61). Sometimes they are also called urban myths – the prefix "urban" appears here to distinguish them from the genre of traditional folklore, i.e. from myths whose action, unlike in urban legends, are set in the distant past, and are not based on actual events, and in which the presented world appears fantastic (Kosowska 1985, 75). On the other hand, urban myths are related to current, sensational events. However, in terms of functionality and structure, these dynamic and recurring contemporary narratives are similar to old folk tales derived from traditional folklore. Urban legends are therefore characterized by high variance and formulability, especially oral ones, which nowadays complement the stories circulating on the Internet (Hajduk-Nijakowska 2012, 10). The topics of urban legends are extremely diverse: from current events to pop culture themes borrowed from literature, films, and comic books. Moreover, urban legends often carry some specific functional features: they can be used for entertainment (telling them is then a form of passing time) or become a tool for educating the society (legends with a moral). Legends may also serve political and propaganda goals: the Colorado potato beetle from 1950 is a classic Polish example (PKF 1950).

Since legends appear suddenly and circulate freely, it is usually quite difficult to determine their origin. They evolve over time, making any verification impossible. In addition, their transmission is worthy of attention. In fact, it may be difficult to distinguish an urban legend from a simple rumour because they

are reproduced in a similar way, although the latter on a smaller scale (Jęczeń 2010, 155). For this reason, folklorists started referring to urban legends as "macrogossip" (Czubala 2014, 22).

The difference between this genre and other folk tales is the use of the "friend of a friend" or FOAF mechanism. The acronym of the "friend of a friend" phrase was proposed in the late 1970s by the English journalist and writer Rodney Dale (Dale 1978, 37). Dale pointed out that this formula is repeated in some of the contemporary narratives: people telling the story emphasize that they heard it from a friend, that they read about it somewhere, or that it has happened to "a friend of a friend" (Czubala 2014, 158). In this way the anonymity of the source of information (typical of folklore storytelling) is preserved. The teller disclaims responsibility, the legend circulates, and as the outline is retold, new details are added to refresh the storyline. This type of a "deaf phone" game eventually weakens the narrative and the legend disappears, only to reappear some time later (Czubala 2005, 7).

Similar folklore characteristics, such as FOAF and deaf phone, or their various types of functionality, can also be found in the narratives discussed in this article. A brief description of the urban legend phenomenon and the outlining of the mechanisms of its spread presented in this part of the article will be helpful in the study of the Vistula python phenomenon, which is the main subject of analysis in this paper. However, before I move on to the analysis of the snake, the narrative about the Polish puma living in the wild is also worth mentioning – it is a very similar thread, both in terms of official media coverage and public reaction.

The Role of the Media in Shaping "The Polish Puma" Story

One of the most popular examples of the "Big Cats Running Wild" theme is the story of the Surrey puma (Brunvand 2012, 211). This legend, known since the 1960s, enjoys unflagging popularity in the United Kingdom (Brunvand 2012, 61). According to witnesses, the beast appears suddenly in rather unfortunate places. There are many more similar accounts of other animal sightings, for instance of alligators in the New York sewers (see Brunvand 2012, 15). This particular type of urban legends is famous all over the world, and some of them can be compared to so-called migratory legends (Simpson and Roud 2000). A migratory legend is a "legend which is found repeatedly at different places, having the same plot in every case but with place names and/or topographical

details tailored to fit the individual site" (for more about migratory legends, see Simpson and Roud 2000, 252). Over time, they get tied to the local context (e.g., proper names and elements of culture are added) but this does not change the fact that they are of international recognition.

Although a puma roaming across Europe is a highly unusual sight, some reports may be based on facts. Problems with determining the source of information do not necessarily indicate the fictitious nature of the information. However, when the animal is seen in many different places at the same time (a macro-scale case), one may have reasonable suspicion that the majority of the accounts are not true.[2] In this context, the contribution of the media that publicize such events is indisputable. When public opinion is confronted with sensational news, the recommended course of action is to seek reliable sources. However, finding any trustworthy ones seems difficult nowadays, especially on the Internet. By publishing unverified messages, news websites add to the confusion instead of clearing it up. Quoting anonymous specialists (M.C. 2018) and referring to the accounts of mysterious eyewitnesses (Rakosz 2018) is extremely common. The existence of wild animals is "confirmed" by private videos and photographs, but these are usually blurry and unfocused. The captured shapes may well be of a puma or a large domestic cat (NTO.pl 2009). Nevertheless, stories about pumas or pythons are plausible because keeping exotic animals has become quite popular in Poland (Cieśla 2013). It sometimes happens that novice breeders cannot cope with the maintenance of demanding animals and abandon them (Portal 24jgora.pl 2017). This fact should be taken into account when trying to verify an animal legend.

The source-credibility problem is also related to the phenomenon of so-called fake news – unverified information intended to mislead the recipient (Palczewski 2018, 28). These false rumours contribute significantly to the popularization of legends about the puma or python. They include information presented in the mainstream media, messages shared in tabloids and local media, and satirical comments on current events (Marwick 2018, 475–476). Researchers indicate that fake news stories are generally created to intentionally spread lies or disinformation (Marwick 2018, 478), thus contributing to the formation of narratives that over time transform into urban legends. This phenomenon is strictly connected with online media, which face enormous time

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[2] Based on the information collected in 2009, Filip Graliński examined the puma's locations and marked them on a map (Graliński 2009).

pressure in terms of publishing news (Frank 2015, 328). An explanation of the mechanism behind the transformation of fictional news into legends can be found in Bill Ellis's article "Fake News in the Contemporary Legend Dynamic": "If the story is [...] passed on by others who find it credible, even when they doubt its truth, it becomes a type of legend. Thus, fake news becomes part of a cultural debate process, a claim that cannot be confirmed based on secure standards of evidence. In other words, it becomes a form of legendry" (Ellis 2018, 401). It is difficult to determine whether python narratives were created on the basis of fake news, since the animal was never found, as I explain later in this article. In the meantime, many variants have begun to appear, and moreover, the threat of the exotic animal running freely in Poland qualifies these narratives as urban legends.

When it comes to official news, many websites compete for readers' attention – in such circumstances fact-checking is minimal (Himma-Kadakas 2017, 29). As a consequence, the Web is flooded with unverified information, which is not necessarily aimed at misleading the reader (Marwick 2018, 478). However, misinformation does not come only from official media sources. Research on Internet user behaviour has shown that the credibility of news published on social media depends on who recommends or shares it (Marwick 2018, 504). Without knowing the source of the news, people can unknowingly pass on false information. This is especially evident with news about sensational and controversial events. Alice E. Marwick acknowledges these characteristics and describes fake news as follows:

> "Fake news" content is clickbait. The goal of the fake news producer is to have as many people spread their content as possible. The easiest way to do that is to find a news item that will be shared by people of different political proclivities. This can be a sensational claim about vaccinations or conspiracies or animals – topics that appeal across party lines – or it can be a story that includes both conservative and liberal points of view (Marwick 2018, 502).

It should be emphasized that readers form some preliminary assumptions about the news even before reading it (Frank 2018, 386). Headlines that attract the attention of readers with their unusual and sensational information play an important role here. The emotionality of the message begins to dominate over the issue of the credibility of the content – interestingly, not only in the case of tabloids. Research shows that big news services (see TVN Warszawa 2018)

are associated with what is referred to as "presumption of legitimacy": readers devotedly believe in the reliability of the source of information (Frank 2018, 386). However, this is frequently a misperception.[3] In addition, readers' faith in the credibility of the online media reflects their previous faith in the credibility of newspapers and television (Himma-Kadakas 2017, 29). Although it is recommended that Internet users should carefully investigate the sources and, if possible, compare reports from various websites, fake news has become a major threat to public trust in the media. However, this tendency seems impossible to eliminate, considering the diversity of the Internet environment (Palczewski 2018, 28). After all, the spread of fake news depends largely on Internet users, and particularly on how important a given issue is to them (Marwick 2018, 487).

The activity of Web users in transmitting unverified information about the wild puma is also notable, although on a slightly smaller scale. Fake reports about this animal are popular in Poland and often recur. The alleged sightings of the cat were reported in 2009, 2011 (Strauchmann 2011), and 2015 (mab/mk 2015). According to several reports, in 2009 as many as five pumas were spotted in different places. The cats, two of which travelled from the Czech Republic to Poland, were believed to have escaped from a zoo or an illegal breeding farm in the Czech Republic. Naturally, there was a lot of Czech media attention on this news as well (Štůsek 2009).

The topic returned in 2011: the media reported sightings of a big cat that supposedly travelled from Poland to the Czech Republic. The headlines read: "Sensational news! Puma runs wild in South Moravia. Slovak and Czech media have already reported three sightings of an American puma in South Moravia. The director of the Opole Zoo believes that the cat could be their property!" (Strauchmann 2011). The suggestions that Poland had its own puma were obviously absurd. It should be noted, however, that this type of news usually appears just before or during the summer season – that is, when journalists lack attractive topics to write or talk about. Sadly, fake news stories are rarely corrected, and a few exceptions (e.g., when the media [TVN24 2009] mentioned that the puma seen in Silesia Province turned out to be an ordinary cat) seem to prove the rule. These types of retractions, however, were rare in the case of the python.

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3 For example, *Washington Post* and *New York Times* journalists can also fabricate news (Frank 2018, 381).

"Python Goes Hunting!" Press Reports About the Vistula Python

The first information about the Vistula python was released at the beginning of July 2018. An over five-meter-long exuviae of an Indian python was found on the banks of the Vistula River in the town of Gassy, near Warsaw.[4] The first press articles contained photographs of several employees of an animal rescue foundation holding the snake skin (Konieczek 2018). After the discovery of the reptile traces, the police and other emergency services arrived at the site, and the river patrols started searching the area. The press warned people to be cautious and keep away from the restricted zone until the case was resolved (Konieczek 2018). The news spread quickly, becoming a nationwide sensation. News websites published maps and infographics showing the area of python activity in an attempt to answer the question about its whereabouts (see Figure 1). However, most reports, published mainly on Polish websites associated with the tabloid press, such as *Super Express* (Super Express 2020) and *Fakt* (Fakt 2020), were based on pure speculation and repeated the same information. That is a common mechanism of the spread of fake news – under time pressures, many websites publish unverified information based solely on dubious evidence.

These articles seemed to have a great potential to transform into forms similar to urban legends. The sensational accounts influenced public opinion and led to the creation of numerous rumours. Soon almost all press publications came from nonexperts. That was partly connected with the fact that Polish celebrities, including the famous clairvoyant Krzysztof Jackowski, were often involved in the search. In the article "Krzysztof Jackowski Shows Us Where the Python Hides" on the *rmf.fm* tabloid website, one could read:

> Krzysztof Jackowski had a vision in which there was a six-meter python, the one which had caused so much panic among residents of Mazovian towns on the Vistula River. Where is the reptile hiding according to the clairvoyant? [...] According to the clairvoyant [...] the python has not travelled far. The man indicated a small beach by the Vistula near the village of Dębina [18 km north of Warsaw] as the whereabouts of the reptile terrorizing the neighbourhood (Staroń 2018).

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[4] As a side note, it is worth adding that the Vistula python was mentioned in the entry about the town of Gassy in the Polish version of Wikipedia (Wikipedia 2020).

Figure 1. "The services are looking for a python near Piaseczno" – infographics showing the area of the snake search (Orszulak 2018a).

Another Polish celebrity, detective Krzysztof Rutkowski, also participated in the snake hunt (Solecka 2018). Gossip websites like *pudelek.pl* used the snake to gossip about showbiz personalities. People could learn that famous Polish singer Maryla Rodowicz was more worried about her cats than about her own life: "Maryla Rodowicz is not afraid of the python: 'I will eat the python before it eats me'" (Pudelek 2018). These types of celebrity responses to the news about the python were featured frequently in the news media. Some of these articles showed the supposedly bold attitudes of celebrities, while others presented a feeling of fear and uncertainty, but sensationalism dominated all of them. Nevertheless, these reports did not leave the reader indifferent to their content – most of the comments on this type of news were critical, as it turns out from my analysis of Internet users' responses in the next section of this article.

Soon, in the news media there were suggestions that the snake could already be very far from the place where its skin was found. Less than two weeks after the incident, the Toruń information website *ototoruń.pl* (the direct distance between Warsaw and Toruń is approximately 190 kilometres) published an account of a terrified resident:

> I was walking across the bridge when I saw a snake in the river!!!! THIS IS NOT A JOKE!!!! I called 112 [the emergency number] and they gave me the Toruń Crisis Management Centre phone number. [...] Please share! The snake was huge... Someone should take it seriously and do something about it! (TUB 2018).

Then when the whole nation was looking for the Vistula python, another snake went missing in the city of Bydgoszcz. The two-metre-long boa constrictor escaped from the breeding farm (confirmed information) but was soon captured (HW 2018). The power of gossip was so great and the relationship between the two events so obvious, that I received a message from a friend living in Bydgoszcz that the Vistula python was found in his hometown. In fact, the probability of encountering an exotic snake on Polish streets is very low, so these two facts were combined to make one story. This explains how event mixing leads to the emergence of subsequent variants of the urban legend; in a similar way, based on associations and randomness, numerous versions of the Polish puma stories were born (Graliński 2009).

Some time later, the news services reported on the aggressive behaviour of the python: according to *warszawawpigułce.pl*, an angler from Otwock saw something that resembled a snake attacking a beaver (Warszawawpigułce 2018a). The animal was also believed to have attacked a dog. The following article headline shocked the public: "The Vistula Python Ate a Dog! The Beast is Still at Large. Hunters Are at the Site" (Warszawawpigułce 2018b). Owing to the fact that some articles were based on foreign reports, the python issue was promoted to the international rank:

> The entire world is looking for the Vistula python. The issue is reported even in the Chinese media! [...] The whole world is interested in the fate of this dangerous animal living in the largest Polish river. The Vistula python has been mentioned by the British, German, and even Chinese media (AP 2018).[5]

The python's origin was also discussed. It was speculated that the animal escaped from an erotic photo session in Warsaw (Chełmiński 2018), but the photographer denied it (Patyk 2018a). At the same time a paraglider saw some men throwing a large snake into the Vistula River; as it later turned out, they

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[5] The text refers to both the media of Polish communities living abroad and big foreign newspapers, e.g. *Der Spiegel* and the *Daily Telegraph* (AP 2018).

were the same people who worked on the set of the aforementioned session (BF 2018).

Initially, the need to look for the snake was not questioned. Over time, however, some, including wild animal experts, began to wonder whether the python really existed. Several videos on YouTube refuted these rumours, like, such as one in which some veterinary doctors arrived at the site where the exuviae had been found (Zwierzętomania 2018). Unlike the news reports on many websites, these films were usually very professional and reliable, and they were aimed at criticising the media trend of spreading panic. In addition, they provided basic information about the python's diet (small mammals, not humans), argued that the snake could not travel from Warsaw to Toruń, and warned that it was the animal that was actually in danger. In one video, a real Indian python was released into the rushes and tracked for some time (Plucik 2018). In this way, the myths presented in the media were debunked. Moreover, there were also voices suggesting that the skin could have been planted by the snake owner as a joke (TVN Warszawa 2018). It should be noted, however, that generally sensation prevailed over reason in media, hence this type of reliable material was not used by the mainstream services.

Furthermore, the reaction of animal rights activists deserve special attention. Although they did not underestimate the need for a snake hunt, they were generally more interested in people's attitudes on the topic. For example, in the intensely titled article "Urgent: Deadly Dangerous People Are a Threat to the Python", Karolina Kuszlewicz discusses the issue of the inhumane treatment of exotic animals and the fashion of keeping them in entirely inappropriate conditions (Kuszlewicz 2018). These opinions contrasted the publicized comments, as they usually added an informative dimension, as well as an emphatic one.

The final piece of news about the python was broadcast at the end of September 2018. It was assumed that the snake had died because of low temperatures (Dolak 2018). Neither the animal nor its owner was ever found, and the topic, abandoned by the media, was quickly forgotten. It did not reappear the next summer, although it must be remembered that the puma theme does not recur every year either, at least not as a nationwide sensation. In 2019 the Vistula python was only mentioned in an article which summarized all previous studies, but which did not provide any new information (Niedźwiecki 2019). It is now too early to say whether this topic was just a single-season sensation. Further observations are needed to clarify the issue. What is certain is that the number of forums providing information about the snake is astonishing.

However, this is the nature of the so-called "silly season", a period (such as late summer) when the mass media often focus on trivial or frivolous matters for lack of major news stories.

It is also worth noting that in their comments on the snake, many Internet users recalled a similar event from the 1980s, with a fantastic creature called Paskuda, a Polish cryptid similar to Nessie, living in Lake Zegrze near Warsaw. Lake monster reports recurred for several years. According to eyewitnesses, Paskuda fed on contaminated water, so soon after the construction of a nearby sewage treatment plant, the topic was abandoned. Later, the truth finally came to light: Paskuda, so frequently mentioned in *Summer with the Radio* broadcasts (especially in 1982), had been invented by the journalists of the Polskie Radio Program I (Polish Radio Channel 1) (Mielnik 2018). Moreover, it was created primarily for marketing reasons. The purpose was to encourage listeners to frequently listen to Polish Radio. There were no other hidden intentions behind Paskuda. However, this hoax indicates that media can have a powerful impact on the thinking and behaviour of citizens. It is particularly interesting that some Internet users compare the Vistula python topic to the monster created by Polish Radio – such statements clearly indicate how critical some Poles are about the snake issue, and also how sceptical they are of the media.

Internet Users' Responses to Media Reports of the Python

Apart from journalists, Internet users also wrote at length about the snake. Their opinions can be found below articles on news websites and in social media. Since it would be difficult to analyse all these entries, I focus only on select examples.

This material can be classified into four categories. The first category includes the comments of Internet users who were mostly interested in the python's whereabouts. The majority started with the FOAF formula, which leads to the claim that these are legendary narratives, for example: "A friend says that he saw something big in the Kępa Potocka canal a few weeks ago. But how could he see this in the dark?" (Internet user nicknamed Żoliborz-Bielany; Patyk 2018b). The python sighting in Toruń was also reported: "Last night several people on the Toruń riverbank saw a snake. It was not a native species, it was huge and was swimming against the current" (Internet user nicknamed Ola, TOB 2018). This type of statement usually complemented official information.

The second category of the comments discussed the dangers associated with the python running wild. These entries were always filled with intense emotions: "This python killed someone's dog!!! And then it attacked another animal in the forest!!! The psycho owner of this snake will pay for that" (an anonymous Internet user, Pudelek 2018). They were also dominated by the frustration caused by the sluggish response of emergency services:

> To be fucking honest, they should organise bigger search teams and look for that python. If it is already in Toruń, then they should increase the search area. People are afraid to leave their houses. Any noise scares them. I have a son and I'm afraid to let him play outside [...]. What kind of rescue teams are they if they cannot trace this stupid beast? (an Internet user nicknamed Paulina, RED RMF 2018).

Sometimes the comments contained drastic descriptions and associated the python with the mysterious disappearances of people. For example: "Then a child or an adult will disappear without a trace, and after a few months they will find a half-digested body in the stomach of the snake [...]. That's horrible" (an Internet user nicknamed Makabryczny, Orszulak 2018b). People were also frightened at the very thought of the snake staying in Poland forever:

> The person who bought the snake and released it should be publicly whipped and severely punished. This is not funny. People here are not used to this like in other countries [...]. We have problems with ticks here in Poland. Do we need another one? Do we want to look around at every step for a snake, a venomous spider, etc.? (an Internet user nicknamed Przyroda (Nature), Orszulak 2018b).

These examples show how some of the Internet users write comments to express their fear of the snake. One of the main purposes of such statements, therefore, is to defuse anxiety (i.e., they fulfil an emotional function).

In the third category, some statements showed concern about the python and attention to animal rights. Similarly to animal experts, some Internet users pointed out that the Indian python would not survive long in the Polish climate, that it was harmless and in danger from humans: "From what I've heard in the news, you are going to kill it – what monsters are you??? The animal is not guilty! You can sedate it and take it to the zoo. Be humans, not monsters!!!" (an anonymous Internet user, Orszulak 2018a). Many comments touched upon people's responsibility for the python. One of the entries reads: "Hey, what are

you afraid of? This animal is harmless. A poor, scared animal that needs help, and all you do is panic" (an Internet user nicknamed fanśmierci9; Dziennik.pl 2018). However, the author's nickname (fanśmierci9, i.e., "fanofdeath9") may indicate irony; therefore the comment should not be fully trusted. This example shows that in addition to the informative function, such opinions may be created for entertainment purposes.

In the fourth and final category, there were sarcastic comments to the python story, with both extremely malicious and genuinely funny statements among them:

> Most certainly Russia started a hybrid war after being eliminated from the World Cup. First, Indian python troops set off. They are moving on at night towards the decision-making centres of the country. Such a python can be a threat not only for fishermen, but also for tank crews because it can get inside tanks through the gun (Internet user, Do Rzeczy 2018).

The phenomenon can also be turned into a first-person narrative, which requires additional creativity of the author:

> Hello people. It's me, the Python. My name is Jacek and I want to apologize for frightening the good people of this beautiful country and its cities. I've decided to run away from home, getting supplies in Toruń, and now I am going to my beloved girlfriend. Her name is Nessy, she lives in Scotland. Take care, Poles (an Internet user nicknamed Python Jacek from Wisła, Dziennik.pl 2018).

In some of the comments from the fourth category, the snake also emerged in political references and critical remarks to the government. In the Polish language the word "snake" is commonly associated with negative qualities and is therefore used to describe bad and deceitful people: "And I came across a real snake pit [pol. *kłębowisko żmij*] in the very centre of Warsaw on Wiejska Street" (an Internet user nicknamed Mnia, Patyk 2018b).[6]

Summing up, the comments of Internet users are varied. Most of them were informative, although some also passed for entertainment purposes, and some fulfilled the function of an emotional release. Although many of them made political references, they should not be treated as a separate category.

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[6] Sessions of the Polish Parliament and Senate take place in the building on Wiejska Street.

Despite the fact that the comments on the Vistula python can be considered as a democratic discussion in the public sphere, the references to politics, with few exceptions, were too superficial and general, and usually showed a negative attitude to any kind of authority. Moreover, it should be emphasized that the first official news about the python was full of emotions and could scare Internet users. However, the topic quickly found its way into the tabloids – apart from the element of sensationalism and inducing fear, texts included some information about the lives of celebrities at the same time, and this peculiar mixing made the information move towards the grotesque and absurd. Therefore, over time, the comments of Internet users began to express doubts, sometimes even empathic statements towards the animal – ones in which the python's defencelessness was emphasized. Ultimately, the subject was reduced to a joke, and thus the snake problem was trivialized.

One important feature was that Internet users' comments rarely referred to press articles directly. More often they expressed opinions and listed sightings of the Vistula python. Generally they were usually quite concise, although there were exceptions, like some comments presented in this section. Only a few bore a similarity to the style of urban legends, for example, by using the FOAF mechanism. It should be remembered, however, that this genre is still evolving, adapting to the rules of the online environment (Czubala 2014, 7). The example of the Vistula python indicates that in the online environment, these types of motifs are gaining a new performative dimension and means of expression that cannot be found in the oral tradition, like exchanges between people from different places and the non-simultaneous creating and receiving of content. It is recommended that further analyses should focus on these issues and evaluate how they affect the lifespan of a particular narrative over a longer period of time. Nevertheless, such diverse comments of Internet users about the python would be impossible if not for the numerous media articles under which the free exchange of ideas and information was possible. "No matter what you write, it is important that you write" – this unwritten social media rule applies to the news as well. Numerous, often contradictory reports on the whereabouts of the python, as well as grotesque information about the struggle of Polish celebrities with a dangerous animal, eventually led to the entire topic being ridiculed, introducing a category of sarcastic and humorous comments. This tendency, in which entertaining content was created, was also visible in the cultural texts based on python narratives, which I analyse in the next section.

The Vistula Python in Polish Pop Culture

The analysed case seems unique not only because it provoked huge amounts of press reactions. The python quickly became the subject of online artistic projects, including ones that were humorous and often critical of various social phenomena. Obviously, that would not have been possible without the Internet, which accelerated and extended their spread. According to the Polish monitoring media service Press-Service (Press Service 2018a), the total number of materials concerning the Vistula python found on the Internet from July 7 to July 16, 2018 was over 22,000 (see Figure 2). Unfortunately, comparing these data to other similar cases (e.g., Internet puma reports in 2015) is impossible, as there are no relevant statistics. Nevertheless, the number is impressive. The highest number of materials, almost 16,000, were shared on Facebook. Twitter came in second with 2128 results, followed by YouTube (348), Instagram (343), Wykop (101),[7] and then various blogs and forums (47). The Press Service infographic also included mentions on other websites (1829), radio and television texts (1209), and press reports (149).
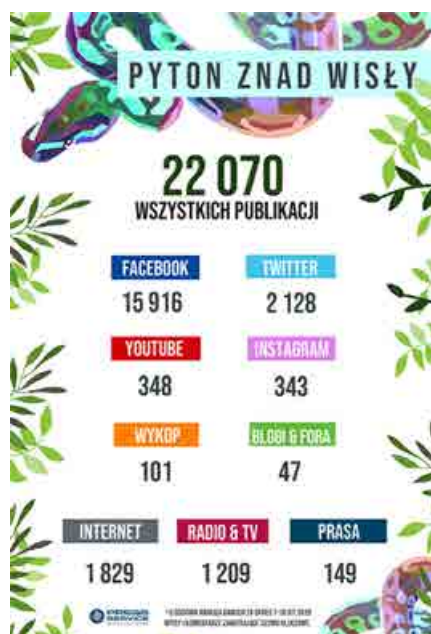

Figure 2. "Python from the Vistula" – infographic showing the number of all publications about the snake (Press Service 2018b).

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[7] Wykop.pl is a popular Polish news website.

Without a doubt, the most popular forms of expressing opinions about the hysteria associated with the python were Internet memes, which humorously portrayed the attempts to capture the snake and focused on the inefficiency of search services and tracking dogs (see Figure 3). The animal was also present in political memes; in 2018 the following phrase was popular in Poland: "How can I do that [various actions added to the meme] when the Polish constitution is being broken?" This text referred to the slogans of the political opposition to the constitutional violations of the Polish right-wing government – a constitutional court crisis began in 2015 and lasted long after. While the majority of these images featured well-known personalities, actors, athletes, and politicians, some showed the Vistula python, which could not "crawl" peacefully, apparently due to the Polish constitution being broken (see Figure 4). In this way, a political problem which had been circulating in the news media for a long time was trivialized and reduced to humorous memes.

Another category of memes includes sexual innuendo references, in which the snake was compared to a penis. Pictures of the so-called "Janusz Nosacz", a long-nosed monkey (lat. *Nasalis larvatus*) who is often referred to as the carrier of the flaws of Polish society, were used in this context. In one particular meme (see Figure 5), a monkey – a symbolic image of a Pole (Kurdyła 2020) – compares its penis to the python. This is an example that trivializes the case of the python, turning it into a playful jest.

Figure 3. "'The tracking dog confirmed the presence of the python. There are new traces'. 'Yes, I confirm'" – an example of a humorous internet meme (Wykop 2018).

Figure 4. "How am I to crawl calmly when the constitution is being broken in Poland?" – a meme on political issues (Express Bydgoski 2018).

Figure 5. "'A snake has escaped near Warsaw'. 'I did not fasten the fly, so it ran away'" – meme as an unrefined joke (Besty 2018).

Figure 6. A photomontage showing Detective Rutkowski and the snake (Red 2018).

In this context, memes related to the abovementioned Krzysztof Rutkowski seem particularly attractive. Media reports that featured photographs of the detective searching for the snake were quickly adapted by Internet users. On his Instagram profile, the detective himself shared a picture in which the python was hanging from his neck (see Figure 6). An obvious photo montage, it was funny enough for the celebrity to show it to his fans and followers. Since there was a plethora of concepts associating the snake with the famous detective, one of the news websites listed the most interesting ones (TOB 2018).

The huge popularity of the Vistula python ensured its entry into the world of advertising. Real-time marketing, a current trend on the Internet, is used by many companies for product promotion (Maddala 2017). Therefore the python appeared in supposedly humorous commercials of plastic pipes, which were supposed to serve as cases for a snake (see Figure 7), then in ads for pickled cucumbers because they looked just like a snake (see Figure 8). A python also appeared as the mascot of a well-known furniture company (Pinkbesyja 2018).

Figure 7. "Imet recommends: a six-meter-long python case" – advertising in real-time marketing (Imet 2018).

Figure 8. "We got him" – another example of real-time marketing (Krakus 2018).

Figure 9. "Vistula python – eat a python before it eats you" – Python in the form of a roll (Picuki 2018).

The python was also used to promote commercial services: one of Warsaw's restaurants has put it in their menu (Natkabistro 2018). One of the escape rooms created a picture informing that in their room the python would be found within one hour (Escape Room 2018), a language school shared graphics to teach the currently popular word "python" (EDGARD jezykiobce. pl 2018), and even a beauty salon referred to a python encouraging women to paint their nails the colours of the snake (We Love Nails 2018). More often, however, this seemed forced and unnatural; the companies simply wanted to seize the opportunity to gain some recognition. Nevertheless, there were also ingenious references among them: the owner of the Wanda bakery in Otwock started selling snake-shaped braided yeast buns, advertised with the following slogan: "Eat the python before it eats you" (see Figure 9). The entrepreneur said in an interview: "Especially children like these buns. Grandparents buy them for their grandchildren. We are surprised by the social media interest" (Śmigiel 2018). As can be seen, after the snake story had been exploited to the fullest extent, it returned as a casual and amusing element attracting customer attention.

However, humour did not appear only in commercial advertisements. Articles published on the popular ASZdziennik.pl website had a similarly light-hearted tone. I did not intend to put this example among the press materials, because ASZdziennik primarily has an entertainment function, not an informational one – the website is the equivalent of the American satirical service theonion.com. ASZdziennik, famous for its sarcastic fake news, also brought up the snake topic. It is worth noting that 2018 was another year of unrest caused by the European migration crisis, so the python also appeared in this context. One of the headlines related to the migration crisis read: "Indian python stopped by the police near the Vistula. Its blood alcohol content was a whooping 4.7%. The animal insulted the policemen and some refugees" (ASZdziennik 2018). These pieces of information are considered by some researchers as a fake news, though created with the intent to amuse (Frank 2018, 379). Readers, misinterpreting the ironic statements, share them with their friends (Brodie 2018, 454). However, the reputation of ASZdziennik seems so well established in Poland that hopefully the online community recognizes its satirical attitude to reality.

Amateur films about the snake were also very popular. The Internet was flooded with videos about the snake hunt, including materials prepared by Urbex History, a group of explorers who visit mysterious and abandoned places (Urbex History 2018). Most frequently, however, the explorers were not very well equipped, and they made up for the lack of high-quality cameras with exaggerated acting and heavy editing (Dodo 2018). Such pilgrimages to places known from news reports associated with urban legends are called legend-tripping (Kinsella 2011, 28). They are aimed at verifying the accounts, which commonly abound in supernatural elements. Although no variants of the python story based on supernatural phenomena were produced, these journeys progressed according to a similar scheme: the search team visited the place mentioned in the legend and tried to reconstruct the circumstances of the actual event. In addition, a number of humorous podcasts and comedy acts revolving around the python motif can also be found on YouTube (see Cerstve Zarty 2018; Dwóch Typów 2018).

One of the most delightful python-inspired video films is *Snake Busters* (Snake Busters 2018). The adaptation of the popular theme song for the 1984 movie *Ghostbusters* was made by some children and the father of one of them. This shows that the topic of an urban legend can promote cooperation between generations: the father recorded the film in which the children played the busters of the snake. Without intergenerational dialogue, such a film would probably

never have been created. *Snake Busters* is an extremely interesting case because through co-creation and cooperation, both adults and children can comment on the python tale (and have a good time). Intergenerational cooperation is visible here in the division of responsibilities – the father deals with technical and logistic issues, while the children contribute their creative input. Popular culture also plays a very important role here – although only the father can remember the release of *Ghost Busters* in the 1980s, this movie has become a permanent part of the pop culture canon. Thanks to this, references to the original will also be familiar to younger audience.

Another example showing that urban legends reach the youngest is a short, 16-page comic book entitled *About a Python That Terrorized Warsaw and Scared Tourists*, published in 2018 (Jasiński and Jasiński 2018). It was created by Maciej Jasiński, a Polish screenwriter and comic book writer and his seven-year-old son Ksawery. This is yet another interesting example of the collaboration between an adult and a child: Maciej wrote the text, while Ksawery illustrated it (Gildia.pl 2018). Owing to the boy's efforts and illustrations, Batman was employed to fight the snake. Nevertheless, the python topic was not taken lightly – the superhero presents his opinions about the snake and knows that he faces a situation similar to those known from urban legends. Batman says that the python feeds on media energy and that the media itself makes the fight against it so tough – referring here to the popularity that rumours spread from media circulation, which makes it difficult to debunk them (see Figure 10). Ultimately, Batman advises Poles to find a replacement topic which will make the python fall into oblivion. Paradoxically, even for the youngest readers, this simple comic can be a valuable source of knowledge about urban legends and critical media literacy – it teaches them how to approach media and fake news. However, since only a limited edition of 50 copies was published, the book did not achieve widespread popularity. Still, it is another example of how urban legends enable intergenerational communication.

As is apparent from the analysed examples, the python had a huge humorous potential. Other examples include Andrzej Milewski's series of comic drawings (Andrzej Rysuje 2018), famous for political references (see Figure 11). Another reaction came from Mateusz Ożyński (fanpage Czcij niedźwiedzia [Honour the bear]; see Figure 12). These concepts are definitely unique and noteworthy. Some of these comics link the topic of the python with current political problems. However, it is difficult to find in them any deeper reflections on political or ideological issues – they are limited to criticisms of the current

Figure 10. "I discovered that the python feeds on energy from the media" – the Vistula python in the comic (Jasiński and Jasiński 2018).

Figure 11. "'And this, my son, is the Warsaw mermaid'. 'No idiot, it's a python'" – another example of the python in a comic (Andrzej Rysuje 2018).

Figure 12. "'The snake from the Vistula', the services warn. 'The snake is hungry and the weather is good for him'. 'He can eat a child or a dog'. 'Do not take apples from him'". Example from a comic book (Czcij niedźwiedzia 2018).

government of the Law and Justice Party, which is criticized by both the left and the right side of the Polish political scene. In this case, the python thread becomes merely an excuse for superficial political references. Surprisingly, according to some researchers, the Vistula python issue united people with different views and interests. This phenomenon, observed by journalist Małgorzata Karolina Piekarska just a week after the first media reports, was commented in her blog:

> The Indian python, whose skin was found in Gassy near Konstancin, was widely discussed by both right-wing and left-wing portals, pro- and anti-government ones. The reptile united us [...]. Everyone joked about it, or used it to comment on Polish social and political issues. And thus during the press meeting I learnt from memes, jokes, and other humorous comments that the snake had escaped because of the violation of the Constitution, or possibly from the hospital, perhaps joining the protest of resident doctors (Piekarska 2018).

Although the examples presented by the journalist are clearly associated with one side of the political dispute, it should be remembered that not all humorous content about the python was political. Mockery of authorities looking for a python, or comments below online articles about how the writers had nothing better to write about so they wrote about the snake — these are some of the non-political examples of activities practiced by many people in regard to the Vistula python stories, and in this context they represent a discourse that reaches beyond political divisions. In this regard, the serpent narratives became a public platform through which different, not only political, perspectives were expressed, and therefore it brought people together in a discussion, although not necessarily uniting them.

Conclusions

The Vistula python occurrence, initially known and distorted by official media reports, soon evolved into an artistic theme. This was probably caused by public frustration over the prolonged and unsuccessful search for the reptile, as well as by the media's saturation with the topic. Owing to the accumulation of dramatic and contradictory media messages, the topic was often perceived as grotesque. Instead of arousing fear, the snake began to amuse people, and was incorporated into many Internet memes, YouTube videos, and comedy acts. Discussed by

both adults and children, the topic encouraged creativity, providing space for intergenerational dialogue and solidarity.

The great popularity of the python narrative did not come out of nowhere – Internet news services wrote a lot about the snake. The comments of Internet users were usually a reaction to that news, and the content of those comments is characterized by high variability. When it comes to their functions, we usually find the informational and entertainment purposes, along with the emotional function of discharging anxiety. At the beginning, many reactions were streaked with uncertainty and fear, but over time, irritation and exhaustion over the topic became clearly visible. Ultimately, the serious topic of the dangerous snake was trivialized, as evidenced by numerous ironic and humorous reactions. Stories that have not happened to the Internet users personally also prevailed – the information was usually second-hand, as is typical for urban legends. Finally, the Vistula python also became a symbol used in real-time marketing processes as the Internet is an environment focused on content consumption. Therefore, it can be concluded that the financial intentions of companies creating their advertisements based on python reports contributed to a further broadening of the customers for the serpent narrative.

As has been said, the python story facilitated social integration. It must also be mentioned that it was an element of intercultural dialogue, because although this particular theme was of Polish origin, the motif of the puma crossing Polish borders is known to Poles, Czechs, and Slovaks. In 2019, when the information about a dangerous puma in the Czech Republic was announced in Poland, a Polish-Czech phrase book entitled "How to Chase Away the Czech Puma" was published in the Polish tabloid *Fakt* (Kwejk 2018). It contains useful phrases for a possible encounter with the animal, but the translation is sloppy – the author most probably used the available online Polish-Czech translator, therefore the text contains mistakes. In Poland, the Czech language seems particularly interesting because of the extensive similarity of both languages. Interestingly, the facetious text was noticed by the Czech media (Pisingerová 2019). Although the motif of a puma crossing borders requires further research, these examples may be a starting point for a comparative analysis of how the theme developed in different countries.

When comparing the origin of the python phenomenon with the previously mentioned fantastic creature called Paskuda, they seem to be different. Paskuda was an example of fabricated, satirical fake news, disclaimed after some time. While in the case of the python, the first published photos and the snake search

were real. In fact, it has not yet been determined whether the python was just a hoax. In this case, only three months after the first reports (October 2018), the sensational theme was forgotten. However, the question remains: will the theme ever reappear? The snake is much more realistic and believable than other imaginary creatures that often occur in different folk tales. It should also be remembered that motifs associated with urban legends rarely disappear forever. Instead, they re-emerge from time to time.

Nevertheless, an excellent summary of the phenomenon of the 2018 Vistula python is provided by the poem by Kajetan Kusina "Epitaph for the Vistula Python" found on the *Kusi na kulturę* fanpage on Facebook (Kusi na Kulturę 2018). According to the author of this text, finding the snake is the goal that causes people to bury the hatchet and unite for a "better cause":

"Epitaph for the Vistula Python"
O, mighty Python, you ruled the Vistula this summer
but suddenly disappeared – what a bummer!
How many warriors tried to catch you
To slay your body – for sure a few.
It was just ninety days
But our hearts thumped in wild ways
You were as fast as a thunderbolt
No one could capture you, just your molt.
Maybe that was your advice
That we shout "Get the nasty-nice"
What you gave our nation
was a common goal creation.
Hidden in the river hole
You played an important role.

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