THE NEW COMMUNICATION REVOLUTION

edited by
Małgorzata Winiarska-Brodowska

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

PART I.
MEDIA, IMAGES, VALUES
– INFORMATION AND DISINFORMATION
IN POLITICAL COMMUNICATION
AND BEYOND

PART II.
COMMUNICATION
DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

LIST OF TABLES

LIST OF FIGURES

PREFACE

T his volume is the result of discussions held during the 13th Central and Eastern European Communication and Media Conference (CEECOM), organized by the Central and East-European (CEE) Network of the European Communication Research Association (ECREA) and the Jagiellonian University in Krakow, Poland[1]. Researchers from Central and Eastern Europe debated on media and communication in the region in the light of political and social challenges. The CEE Network seeks to strengthen co-operation between the CEE scholars. The works of the CEECOM participants have been brought out by several publishing institutions: the Institute of Journalism, Media and Social Communication of the Jagiellonian University which was the local organizer of CEECOM 2021 and issued this book, as well as by the 'Media Research Issues / Zeszyty Prasoznawcze' journal, published by the Jagiellonian University Press, which devoted a volume to topics related to culture[2], and by the Central European Journal of Communication as the co-organizer of the event was the Polish Communication Association.

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed many spheres of our lives, among others the way we communicate. One could say that communication has undergone revolutionary changes. We have observed the use – on a massive scale – of technology in communication, emerging innovations and improvements and constant online presence which enabled us to juggle space and time. The volume 'The New Communication Revolution' presents scientific reflections on these changes and their socio-political

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1   CEECOM – YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O04bDBY5Kms [access 12.12.2022].

2   Zeszyty Prasoznawcze 3 (251) 2022 (ejournals.eu) , https://www.ejournals.eu/ Zeszyty-Prasoznawcze/2022/3-251/ [access 12.12.2022].

consequences. The publication discusses both the advantages and drawbacks of the issues raised. The conference participants accentuated these challenges in their debates, which are explored more closely in the texts. The book is divided into two parts: the first one dwells on information and disinformation – the latter in particular has gained momentum in recent years, especially in political communication; the second part of the book is devoted to communication during the pandemic.

The part titled 'Media, Images, Values – Information and Disinformation in Political Communication and Beyond' opens a text on media and non-consolidated democracy regimes, presenting a view of the Western Balkans. Irina Milutinović discusses media harmonization processes in the Western Balkans in the context of contemporary malformations of democracy, terminologically defined as a populism, hybrid regime, unconsolidated democracy and competitive authoritarianism, paying attention to phenomena such as disinformation, misinformation or dissemination of various kinds of deception, as well as abuse of media for the purposes of manipulative and polarizing distribution of information with a strong emotional and ideological charge. The second chapter focuses on Bulgaria and the relation to the European Union there. Ralitsa Kovacheva explores the creation and dissemination of a sustainable anti-EU narrative exploiting the gender issues and using specific new language. Roksana M. Zdunek, on the other hand, concentrates on Poland and studies a case of COVID-19 pandemic and women's strikes. She examines political social media use among Polish first-time voters in the period of increased civic activity. The coverage of Romanian presidential campaign is analysed by Teodora Felicia Şandru and Andreea Mogoş. They look at a Romanian language media outlet funded by the Russian Federation in their study and discuss media frames emerging from the analysis. Another chapter considers the disinformation issue and the use of artificial intelligence in media, where I and Weronika Świerczyńska-Głownia reflect on journalism, media organizations and AI. Jindřich Oukropec, instead, looks at the issue of disinformation from a different angle.

He describes proper marketing actions in companies' responses to the communication crisis caused by disinformation. The chapter provides evidence-based recommendations for practitioners to combat a commercial disinformation crisis. The first part ends with a text written by Maciej Zweiffel, which is devoted to considerations regarding the digital revolution.

The second part of the book entitled 'Communication during the COVID-19 Pandemic' presents texts on infodemic, social media use as well as political and social campaigns and media consumption during the pandemic. Victoria Leszczyńska writes about the overabundance of information including false or misleading information during a disease outbreak which causes confusion and risk-taking behaviours harming health. Lora Simeonova in her chapter on the rise of influencers offers a new, upgraded metamorphic multi-step flow theory of communication – a natural prolongation of the evolving concept, observing opinion leadership and the limited effects paradigm in a public sphere, shaped by social networks. László Petrovszki-Oláh gives insight into Viktor Orbán's Facebook activity related to COVID-19 during the first wave of the pandemic, showing his approach to governance and communication applied to COVID-19. Also, Edina Kriskó displays in her analysis how the Hungarian government was managing the coronavirus epidemic by comparing their communication practices with the definitions of the press conference as a press genre, previous information policy principles of the Hungarian press history, and professional recommendations of the crisis communication experts and academic literature. Marita Zitmane and Elza Lāma bring the reader closer to the Latvian experience. They employ discourse analysis and a netnography approach to Facebook threads that are discussing arguments concerning vaccination of children to discuss anti-vaccination sentiments, conspiracy theories and false news in the online environment and how notions about femininity and motherhood relate to decisions about vaccination. Martyna Dudziak-Kisio and Wojciech Dudziak devote their text to participatory culture during the pandemic in Poland. Emphasizing the fact that social media played a crucial

role in transforming everyday life they investigate the realization of ideals of the civil society on the example of Facebook and local groups of the movement providing mutual, broadly understood, neighbourly help. The Polish perspective is also presented in the last chapter, where Marlena Sztyber and Katarzyna Piórecka focus on the importance of access to reliable and truthful information in times of crisis, television as one of the main sources of information and related consumer habits during the COVID-19 pandemic, also raising the question of the significance of journalistic ethics.

Małgorzata Winiarska-Brodowska
CEECOM 2021 Organizer
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PART I.

MEDIA, IMAGES, VALUES – INFORMATION AND DISINFORMATION IN POLITICAL COMMUNICATION AND BEYOND

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MEDIA AND NON-CONSOLIDATED DEMOCRACY REGIMES: A VIEW OF THE WESTERN BALKANS

ABSTRACT

The aim of the research is to examine the relationship between the classical-liberal values of media freedom and pluralism, on the one hand, and the modern non-consolidated democracies of the Western Balkans, on the other. The research starts from the fundamental values of the single European regulatory framework for the media, with which the Western Balkan countries are required to align within their *accession negotiations process*.

Media harmonization processes in the Western Balkans are discussed in the context of contemporary malformations of democracy, terminologically defined as a populism, hybrid regime, unconsolidated democracy and competitive authoritarianism. Special attention is devoted to the aspects of media populism that erode the quality of social debate, antagonizing the public opinion in societies of fragile and unconsolidated democratic attributes.

By using comparative and analytic-synthetic research methods, the study leads to the conclusion that the issues faced by media policies in the Western Balkan countries do not differ much from those in European ones. However, phenomena such as disinformation, misinformation or dissemination of various kinds of deception, as well as abuse of media for the purposes of manipulative and polarizing distribution of information with a strong emotional and ideological charge, seem to have more intense and detrimental impacts in the Western Balkan societies of non-consolidated democracy, characterized by frail democratic institutions and rule of law, as well as by a steady decline in media freedom and pluralism.

Keywords: Media freedom, Media Pluralism, Non-consolidated Democracy, Transitional (Hybrid) Regime, the Western Balkans

According to the Thessaloniki Declaration (2003), the term 'the Western Balkan Region', initially referred to the states of Southeast Europe described by the formula "the former Yugoslavia, minus Slovenia and plus Albania" (European Commission, 2003). By this document, the Western Balkans was officially promoted as an entity of interest for the European Union i.e., full membership in the EU for the states of this region was affirmed once they had met the set criteria.[1] Afterwards, by signing the EU Stabilization and Association Agreement, the Western Balkan countries (North Macedonia, Albania, Montenegro, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina (B&H), Kosovo[2*]) committed itself to a defined framework for the implementation of reforms. Thus, these countries mapped their strategic European orientation, committing themselves to alignment with the European Union's public policies, including the European regulatory framework for the media.

The democratic transition of the media is part of the overarching process of systemic post-socialist transformation of the Western Balkan societies after 2000. The initial stages of this process were driven by external international organisations, the European Union and other donors, while local policymakers relied on the examples from stable Western democracies by following their normative solutions. However, this process has not resulted in an adequate democratic transition of the media in the region, prompting the term "imitative transformation" to gain common usage among authors in order to shed light on this process from the current perspective. In the present research, we seek to understand some of the causes of the partial success of media democratization in the Western Balkan countries. It starts from the fundamental values of the single European regulatory framework for the media that the Western Balkan countries are

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1   To date, only the Republic of Croatia succeeded in achieving this goal, so it is no longer regarded as part of the Western Balkan region.

2   [*] The asterisk denotes the special status of Kosovo under the 1999 UN Security Council Resolution 1244. In the referenced reports by Freedom House, Reporters Without Borders and others, Kosovo is treated as a state. This status is not recognized by the Republic of Serbia, several European Union Member States and half of the permanent United Nations members.

required to align with as part of their accession negotiations process. The aim of the research is to examine the relationship between the classical-liberal values of media freedom and pluralism, and modern non-consolidated democracies of the Western Balkans.

THEORETICAL FRAME

Pluralism and media freedom are among the core pillars of democracy; they are postulated within the core values of a liberal democracy. The modern European approach to media policy has been standardized on these values, enshrined in the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union (Article 11), and their protection is based on Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UN, 1948) and Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights (Council of Europe, 1950), which guarantee the right to freedom of expression associated with duties and responsibilities.

An ideotypical model of a stable representative democracy implies free, independent and pluralistic media. In democratically consolidated societies, free and independent media act as intermediaries between citizens and their political representatives, or as watchdogs of the political process for which their elected representatives are responsible. Media freedom first of all requires the functioning concepts of the legal state and an adequate regulatory environment, with the capacity to effectively counter the government's tendencies to influence the content of media reporting and curb media work. The disposition of media independence implies editorial autonomy in relation to political or economic control (Rozumilowicz, 2002, p. 14; McConnell & Becker, 2002, p. 3–5), while media pluralism implies a diversity and variety of competing or opposed ideas and attitudes in public space, reflected by media (McQuail, 1992, p. 144–145). This concept emphasizes the role media play in framing the public sphere, as social integration infrastructure through public discourse; a way in which media supply information to citizens influences the

way in which citizens understand phenomena and processes in their society; also, democratic media, as fora, stimulate debates on different attitudes, or opinions, and interests on issues of public importance are discussed, questioned or challenged.

The current empirical research projects show that democracy is deteriorating worldwide precisely because of the global decline of freedoms and pluralism. The latest Freedom House Report entitled "Freedom in the World. Democracy under Siege" (2021), states that in 2020, the number of Free countries has reached its minimum (82) since the beginning of a 15-year consecutive global decline of democracy, while the number of Not Free countries reached its maximum (54) (Repucci & Slipowitz, 2021, p. 4). In the 2019 report, among the countries designated by Freedom House as free, one-fifth register a lower self-score of press freedom over the last five years, which is regarded as a plausible indicator that other civil liberties, as well as political rights are also in danger (Repucci, 2019). Consequently, the watchdog function of media, projected in a liberal democracy system as a corrective of state power (media understood as the "fourth estate" or "guardians of democracy"), is also jeopardized.

Across the world, the COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated multi-annual negative trends. The Centre for Media Pluralism and Freedom (CMPF) of the European University Institute (EUI) in Florence, in its 2020 Annual Report states: "The first pandemic in the social media era has triggered an 'infodemic'– that is a rapid spread of disinformation, sometimes boosted by political actors themselves" (CMPF, 2021, p. 13). In Europe, such a crisis has emphasized both the key role media play in democratic societies, as quality news providers, and has deteriorated the ongoing challenges facing the media sector: the economic crisis; political risks to media pluralism, and extensive use of digital platforms for circulating disinformation. In response to the infodemic, restrictive instruments in the media policy domain were applied in at least 91 countries worldwide, including the EU Member States Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria and others (Repucci & Slipowitz, 2020, p. 7; CMPF, 2021, p. 2). Governments projected a set of normative restrictive measures in the area of information;

uncommon practice of restricting journalists' presence at media conferences, or even suspension of newspaper printing or blocking of certain websites was recorded. The problems with legal and regulatory measures for preventing the spread of false or distorted pandemic-related information adopted by some governments', are recognized as potentially having "long-term implications for freedom of expression and the right of access to information, and, ultimately, for the journalists' ability to fulfil their monitorial role" (CMPF, 2021, p. 2).

Summarizing the literature on the role of media in the democratization of society, McConnell and Becker (2002) discuss four stages of its democratic transformation: pre-transition, transition, consolidation and stability (pp. 6–11). While the transitional (interim) phase marks the historical moment when the previous (undemocratic) regime no longer wields political power, a consolidated state respects and implements standards of democracy and is considered stable when democracy functions over an extended period of time. Analysing the current status of democracy in Central and Eastern European countries[3] (where the Western Balkan states are also placed), Freedom House points to a drop in the number of democratic regimes from 15 (in 2010) and to a rise of hybrid regime from three to 10 (Csaky, 2020, p. 2) over the same period of time. The most commonly identified areas affected by the erosion are the legal concepts of freedom of speech, conviction and the rule of law (Repucci & Slipowitz, 2020, p. 7–8). Following the regression of Serbia and Montenegro (2020) from the category of partially consolidated democracies (regimes characterized by practicing high standards of election democracy and some flaws in the domain of political rights and civil liberties), the entire region now falls under the same category – the so-called transitional or hybrid regimes (typically combining democratic and authoritarian governance instruments and an even

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3   Which started to break away with their undemocratic past in the late 1980's and early 1990's, while the Balkan states did so one decade later.

weaker protection of rights and freedoms) (Csaky, 2020, p. 3, 12).
According to the Global Freedom Score, all states of the region are
also qualified as partly free (Table 1).

Table 1. Global Freedom Status and Democracy
Status in the Western Balkan Countries

Country	Serbia	North Macedonia	Montenegro	Albania	Bosnia and Herzegovina	Kosovo*
Democracy Percentage	48 / 100	47 / 100	47 / 100	46 / 100	39 / 100	36 / 100
Democracy Score	3.89 / 7	3.82 / 7	3.82 / 7	3.75 / 7	3.36 / 7	3.14 / 7
Global Freedom Score	64 /100	66 /100	63 / 100	66 /100	53 /100	54 /100

Source: https://freedomhouse.org/countries/freedom-world/scores.

In Serbia and Montenegro, among all indicators of democracy[4],
media independence ranks lowest (with the index score of 3.25 on the
scale of 7); the same score is recorded in B&H but it is not the lowest
score on all democracy indicators in this country; media indepen-
dence score is slightly better for North Macedonia (3.5) and Albania
(3.75) and is also not the lowest score of all other categories in these
countries (Csaky, 2020, p. 24).

Freedom House and other think-tanks define the Western Bal-
kan regimes as hybrid (transitional), based on a clear methodology:
these regimes hold median positions on the scale between the most
successful – consolidated democracies (countries that embody the
best policies and practices of liberal democracy, but may face chal-
lenges often associated with corruption) and those with the lowest
scores – consolidated authoritarian regimes (closed societies ruled
by dictators who prevent political competition, pluralism and commit
political and human rights violations) (Csaky, 2020, p. 23). Hybrid

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4   The Report measures and compares the following categories: national democratic
governance, electoral process, civil society, independent media, local democratic
governance, judicial framework and independence, corruption.

(transitional) regimes function as electoral democracies with fragile democratic institutions and fundamental risks for the exercise of political rights and civil liberties. Anyway, these are unconsolidated democracy regimes (it is also correct to say pseudo-democratic regimes), since they practice formal features of electoral democracy: multi-party elections, party competition, division of power into three branches – legislative, executive and judicial; but in a such way that the institutions and processes of democracy have become empty shells (facades) that lost their democratic essence.

But are these regimes still closer to autocratic (i.e., undemocratic) rules, according to a set of common features described by Andreas Schedler (2013)? Namely, this author argues that electoral authoritarian regimes "establish the entire set of formal representative institutions we associate with liberal democracy – while deploying a broad range of manipulative strategies that prevent them from being effective" (p. 54), and emphasizes authoritarian aspects of modern hybrid regimes: "(…) these new forms of 'hybrid' regimes have turned into the most common type of non-democratic regimes in the contemporary world" (p. 4). According to Schedler, electoral authoritarianism can be competitive and hegemonic (p. 383), and the central difference between them is the degree of electoral uncertainty – competitive authoritarianisms manipulate the electoral game, but do not control it as tightly as hegemonic regimes (pp. 106–107). The authors in Serbia identify the current type of hybrid regime (since 2012) as competitive authoritarianism (e.g., Vladisavljević, 2019). We draw upon this assessment in our research, finding empirical analogies with the Levitski & Way (2002) theoretical model: "Instead of open repression against its opposition and the media, this type of regime resorts to corruption and subtle forms of persecution: incumbents routinely abuse state resources, deny the opposition adequate media coverage, harass opposition candidates and their supporters; (…) the use of tax authorities, compliant judiciaries, and other state agencies to 'legally' harass, persecute, or extort cooperative behavior from critics; (…) Journalists, opposition politicians, and other government critics may be spied on, threatened, harassed, or arrested" (p. 52–53). However,

since all attempts at a precise terminological definition are complex and subject to multiple nuances in governance models, while the notions themselves are sometimes fuzzy, we decided to capture all current Western Balkan regimes by what we could define as "common denominators" for all countries and all theoretical sources, so we are using the working term – unconsolidated democracies.

RESEARCH DESIGN

The research combines descriptive, analytic-synthetic and comparative methods. The focus is on the Western Balkan countries holding candidate status for membership in the European Union (Serbia, North Macedonia, Montenegro and Albania) and available (scarcer) empirical indicators for the situation in countries with potential candidate status (Bosnia and Herzegovina[5] and Kosovo*) are also included. Used descriptive comparative methods (Esser & Vliegenthart, 2017) contained comparisons regarding the presence of a set of indicators and sub-indicators for assessing the risks for media pluralism in the countries under investigation. For candidate countries larger quantitative datasets were used, which were systematized, quantified and analysed within the annual national reports of the MPM (Media Pluralism Monitor) project for 2020, implemented by the Center for Media Pluralism and Freedom of the European University Institute. The risks to media pluralism were compared in the areas of normative protection, market plurality, political independence and social inclusion of the media. Since B&H and Kosovo* were not included in the European MPM project, the data for them were taken from the reports of Freedom House and Reporters Without Borders for the reference year, as well as from relevant scientific papers. The reports of Freedom House and Reporters Without Borders have also been consulted for other Western Balkan countries, due to their methodological relevance and high level of consistencies in definitions.

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5   In the meantime, the Republic Bosnia and Herzegovina got the candidate status as well (in 2022).

In this paper, media harmonization processes in the Western Balkan countries are discussed in the context of contemporary malformations of democracy. First, in the "Results" chapter a comparative analysis of indicators of pluralism and media freedom among the countries of the Western Balkans is presented. Then, in the "Discussion" chapter the situation in the region is illuminated in the context of a broader European perspective.

RESULTS: MEDIA PLURALISM AND FREEDOM INDICATORS IN THE WESTERN BALKAN COUNTRIES

The results of the annual project "Media Pluralism Monitor" (MPM2021), which assessed risk levels for media pluralism and freedom in 27 European Union Member States and in candidate countries in 2020, show the fragility of media pluralism across Europe caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and constant disruptions in the digital sphere (CMPF, 2021). Some areas of the Western Balkan countries' media environments have certain specificities.

In the Republic of North Macedonia, urgent amendments to media laws were recognized as reform priorities to address the 2015 political crisis. As a consequence, political democratization contributed to general improvements in the status of the journalistic profession, standards, and protection in North Macedonia compared to the previous period associated with the government of Nikola Gruevski. The World Press Freedom Index has recorded an upturn in the ranking of this country, from 116 / 180 in 2013 to 92 / 180 in 2020. However, a fallback to the 90th position on the Reporters Without Borders scale was also noted in 2021: "senior government officials continued to threaten and insult media outlets, while cyber-harassment and verbal attacks against journalists increased on social media" (RWB, 2021). Similar to Serbia, Montenegro and other countries across

the region, impunity culture persists. One of the main problems for media pluralism in North Macedonia concerns the funding of PSM, as budget allocated to PSM was reduced and its revenues have been declining for the last 5 years (Trpevska & Micevski, 2021). Consequently, the state is still unable to guarantee the PSM stability and independence, within an otherwise fragmented media market characterized by economically weak media entrepreneurship.

Among the Western Balkans candidate countries, Albania remains the highest-risk country in the area of journalistic profession, standards and protection (CMPF, 2021, p. 31). Albania's specificity in the regional context is also a high risk in terms of media ownership transparency: "because the legal provisions do not apply to all media and are scarcely effective and there is an absolute lack of disclosure of ultimate ownership" (CMPF, 2021, p. 48; Voko & Likmeta, 2021). Also, the indicator measuring the universal reach of traditional media and Internet access – shows the highest risk score only in Albania. The country is showing some positive signs by improving its existing media policy framework in the field of media literacy, including it as a priority in the Strategic Action Plan 2021–2023. Aside from the referenced CMPF documents, Reporters Without Borders indicate a variable status of media freedom in Albania, ranking it as 83rd on the 2021 World Press Freedom Index scale. An increase of pressures from the government by various means is noted, including: threats by introducing a new defamation law; also, the government refused to help the media during the pandemic and, as a consequence, some stopped producing print editions for about six weeks; physical attacks against journalists are common, as well as attempts to criminalize journalism, with the authorities failing to punish them (RWB, 2021).

Although Montenegro changed its media legislation in 2020 in order to bring it closer to the EU standards, in practice "some of the changes potentially constituted a step backwards" (Vukovic & Brkic, 2021, p 8). First of all, the provisions on the disclosure of journalistic sources are problematic and directed against investigative journalism; furthermore, the provisions on the election of PSM management (that over the years have been under direct state control)

leave it firmly in the hands of the parliament and further weakening its independence. Similarly to Serbian mainstream media, they are largely marked by political affiliation (Vukovic & Brkic, 2021, p. 9, 13). The situation is worsened by the fact that more than 54% of the media are funded directly from the public local and national budgets (Vukovic & Brkic, 2021). Montenegrin media experts recommend establishing a single ownership register and a single regulatory authority "that would monitor compliance with cross-ownership rules" (Vukovic & Brkic, 2021, p. 20), emphasizing the necessity to develop the media strategy through an inclusive debate. Reporters Without Borders report that: "the authorities continue to harass the media and professional journalists, while the main cases of violence against journalists remain unpunished"; therefore, the Press Freedom Index score remains consistently low, with the ranking of 104 / 180 on the global scale (RWB, 2021).

In some countries, harmonized media regulation exists only on paper, but it is not quite functional. For example, in the Republic of Serbia journalists and editors are under political and economic pressure, directly (through public procurement and state advertising) and indirectly (through political connections), so the majority of Serbian media supports the ruling party (Milutinovic, 2021). Despite de jure legal protection for journalists and their sources, intimidation is widespread in practice. Some murders of journalists from 1994 and 2001 remain unsolved. When it comes to market plurality, "although vertical concentration of a single company is prohibited, laws do permit ownership of another type of media or distribution through an affiliated legal entity" (Milutinovic, 2021, p. 10), thus diminishing access of the public to diverse media. Although a new Media Strategy was adopted last year with an aim to achieve a functional, sustainable and fair media market, protected from political influence, its implementation is still missing. All of these facts weaken "confidence in the state's determination to ensure the safety of journalists on their assignments" and improve media freedom and pluralism, as well as their democratic capacity on the whole (Milutinovic, 2021). These CMPF findings are

supported by Reporters Without Borders reports, which, year after year, show a steady decline in the media freedom index in Serbia – down by 3 positions compared to 2019 (from 90th to 93rd place) (RWB, 2021), or 17 positions compared to 2018 and even 30 positions compared to 2013, when the monitoring began.

Bosnia and Herzegovina has not gained candidacy for EU membership yet and is not covered by the CMPF Report. This country currently ranks as 58th in the World Press Freedom Index for 2020 and 2021, and has advanced five positions compared to 2019 and 10 positions compared to 2013. Experts explain this progress mainly by an absence of murders of journalists (Turčilo & Masnica, 2020), since Reporters Without Borders record "a polarized political climate, constant verbal attacks and nationalist rhetoric, which creates a hostile environment when it comes to media freedom" (RWB, 2021). A certain number of journalists and editors have put themselves directly at the service of politics; editorial policies reflect the society's ethnic division and hate speech is common; media ownership (especially in the online sphere) is opaque; media and journalists face economic pressures and direct threats, which encourages self-censorship and deterioration of professional standards (Turčilo & Buljubašić, 2017; Bogdanić, 2015), while keeping society "stranded" in an undemocratic model (Turčilo & Masnica, 2020, p. 158–159).

In regard to the Democracy Score and Global Freedom Score (Table 1), Kosovo* is definitely the lowest positioned in the Western Balkan region. Unrecognized as a state by several EU Member States and around half of the United Nations members, Kosovo neither holds the EU candidate status nor is it covered by the CMPF survey. Reporters Without Borders point to a drop from 2020 to 78th position on the World Press Freedom Index list and list the following key risks for media pluralism and freedom: "Access to certain information is often limited to a particular ethnic or political group, and media outlets tend to focus on issues concerning their own nationality and cover them solely from their own viewpoint. Serbian journalists from Serbia were denied entry to Kosovo in early 2021 on the grounds that they gave the Kosovar authorities no prior warning. Kosovar

journalists and media are exposed to a hostile environment that includes physical and verbal attacks, cyber-attacks, pressure to censor themselves and a lack of transparency about media ownership. The financially fragile media are susceptible to political influence and, as a result of the pandemic's impact, many newspapers had to stop producing a print edition. (…) The fate of many journalists who disappeared, especially those who went missing or were abducted during the 1999 conflict, is still unknown" (RWB, 2021).

Overall, the dynamic of media freedom index trends in the Western Balkan countries points to the constant erosion of the democratic capacity of the region's societies. It is possible to identify several common indicators of the deterioration of media pluralism and freedom across the region: despite a legal and institutional framework relatively harmonized with the European regulatory framework for the media, inconsistent implementation of regulations leads to increased risk for media pluralism, measured by different indicators. Namely, the implementation of existing laws is poor; clientelism, politicization and corruption, as well as a lack of political will to promote media pluralism and independence are common (European Parliament, 2017); obstructions of public services in the exercise of the citizens' right of access to information exist and the COVID-19 pandemic has further exacerbated the situation, especially in Albania, Montenegro and Serbia (Voko & Likmeta, 2021; Vuković & Brkić, 2021; Milutinovic, 2021); whistleblowers are not adequately protected in practice; working conditions for journalists are generally poor, taking into account a mixture of low wages, poor job security and work without a contract; the safety of journalists is threatened by both physical violence and increasingly frequent online threats and harassment; there is no developed legal framework against SLAPP; the largest and most influential media are not autonomous and are linked to politicians in power; party-political advertising during elections poses a serious risk; pressures from media owners in favour of particular economic and political interests encourage self-censorship of journalists region-wide; quality investigative journalism is therefore hampered and tabloidization is widespread. The regional SafeJournalists

Network (safejournalists.net) has registered a combination of political and economic pressures as core problems over the past few years, while the incidence of labour rights violations, as well as attacks on journalists, has increased compared to the previous years. Aside from the risks characteristic of traditional media that have not been overcome, new issues arise in regard to the spreading of misinformation and the so-called illegal and harmful speech, especially in the digital media domain, for which these countries have no adequate regulatory response.

DISCUSSION: THE WESTERN BALKANS MEDIA WITHIN THE EU PERSPECTIVE

All countries of the region covered by the CMPF project show considerable similarities with general risks to media pluralism and freedom within certain EU states. The comprehensive MPM report sends two key messages regarding the risks to media pluralism and freedom in Europe; the pandemic has shown how important the role of quality professional journalism is in times of crisis. Yet, violence against journalists still persists, as well as cyber threats and other incidents against the safety of journalists; furthermore, professional journalism is threatened by a growing uncertainty of the media outlets' economic sustainability. These trends affect media capacities to perform their important social functions, both in overcoming the health crisis and in furthering democratic discourse.

The CMPF's assessment in the area of fundamental protection shows a deteriorating situation at the European level relative to last year on indicators of freedom of expression, protection of the right to information and journalistic profession, standards and protection (Figure 1).

Figure 1. The Western Balkans Media within Europe:
the Assessment on Fundamental Protection
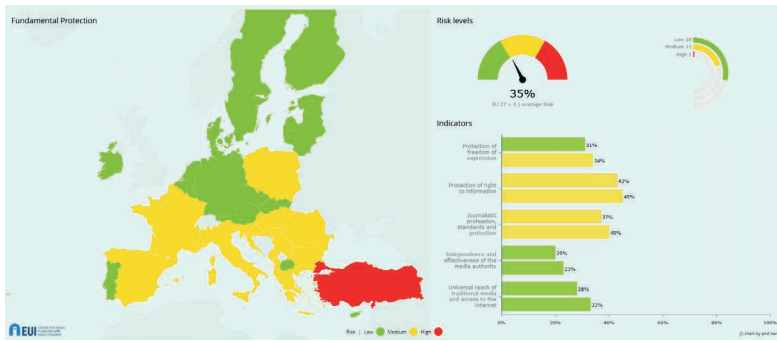
Source: https://cmpf.eui.eu/mpm-2021-interactive/

Deterioration in the freedom of expression is explained by the governments' responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, especially in several country reports (Bátorfy & Szabó, 2021; Milutinovic, 2021; Popescu et al., 2021; Spassov et al., 2021), where governments adopted restrictive regulatory measures for traditional and/or digital media. When it comes to the Western Balkan countries, they individually scored medium risk in the field of fundamental protection, with the exception of the Republic of North Macedonia which achieved the best result – a low risk score (CMPF, 2021, p. 19). Within Europe, the COVID-19 pandemic has substantially affected the working conditions of journalists (including their physical safety and social security), showing significant deterioration compared to the previous year (p. 2–3, 31). The MPM2021 seems to confirm the trend of an increasing number of attacks against the safety of journalists and media workers in recent years. Montenegro, Serbia and Albania were among eight European countries with the highest risk scores on the sub-indicator on safeguards to physical safety (next to Bulgaria, France, Greece, Spain, and Turkey) (pp. 32–33). Physical attacks on journalists, online harassment and threats related to investigative reporting on corruption, and journalists' coverage of mass protests, occurred in several EU countries (Spassov et al., 2021; Popescu et al., 2021), as well in the Western Balkans. In the region, these incidents often involved journalists who covered polarizing issues related

to politics, organized crime or ethnic and religious issues. In many EU states and candidate countries, attacks on journalists arose from political actors (CMPF, 2021, p. 3, 14, 33–34), who used vulgar and threatening rhetoric but also strategic lawsuits against public partici- pation (SLAPP). Likewise, during protests, in several countries the violence came not only from protesters but also from police forces (e.g., in France and Serbia) (p. 2, 20). Regarding the right of access to information, it is legally guaranteed in one way or another in all the EU members and candidate countries assessed, but "implementa- tion and enforcement of this right, in practice, varies widely across these countries" (pp. 146–147). Hence, its improvement is necessary, particularly in light of the fact that the COVID-19 pandemic caused a deterioration in access to public-sector information within the region, but also in the EU.

The Western Balkan region largely conforms to Europe on the main risks to media pluralism within the field of market plurality, and "traditionally, this area shows, on average, the highest level of risk" (CMPF, 2021, p. 4). Of all the indicators within the field of market plurality, this area scores a high-risk level for 18 European countries (p. 44) including Serbia and Albania, while Montenegro and North Macedonia are better positioned, achieving a medium risk (Figure 2).

Figure 2. The Western Balkans Media within Europe:
the Assessment on Market Plurality
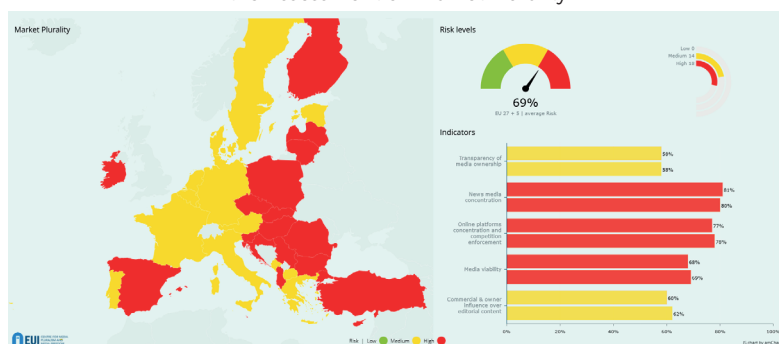
Source: https://cmpf.eui.eu/mpm-2021-interactive/

When it comes to the indicator of media ownership transparency, candidate countries score a medium risk, except for Albania with a high risk, but several EU states (Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania, Spain, Cyprus, Finland, and Latvia) also show a high risk (p. 48). Across Europe, the situation is inconvenient particularly regarding news media concentration, due to the fact that: "no country scores a low risk, and only three countries (Germany, Greece and the Republic of North Macedonia) have a medium risk score" (p. 49). High risk is recorded on the indicators of cross-media concentration (with only two countries with a low-risk score – Germany and North Macedonia), and online platforms concentration (26 countries including the region) (pp. 51–55). In media viability, no country scores a low risk and 21 countries show high risk scores (p. 58), while two regional countries – Serbia and Montenegro score a medium risk, thanks to the governments' regular direct and indirect subsidies – largely in the form of tax exemptions during the pandemic (p. 82). However, criteria relating to distribution of direct support to media outlets are either not clearly set or the practice is not fully transparent. The COVID-19 shock accelerated the downward trend in news media revenues, exacerbating risks to the economic independence of editorial content from commercial and/or owner influence, too (p. 4). High commercial and owner influence over editorial content is registered in the Region (except in Macedonia and Montenegro), as well as in the broader environment of Central and East Europe: Croatia, Slovenia, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, Greece, and Turkey (p. 64–65).

As regards the indicator of the media's own political independence, 11 countries, including EU candidate countries, score a high risk: Cyprus, Greece, Hungary, Malta, Poland, Romania, Slovenia, Albania, Montenegro, Serbia and Turkey (p. 70). But, within the broader field of political independence (judging by a number of indicators), the Western Balkan region scored a medium risk level for media pluralism and freedom (Figure 3).

Figure 3. The Western Balkans Media within Europe:
the Assessment on Political Independence
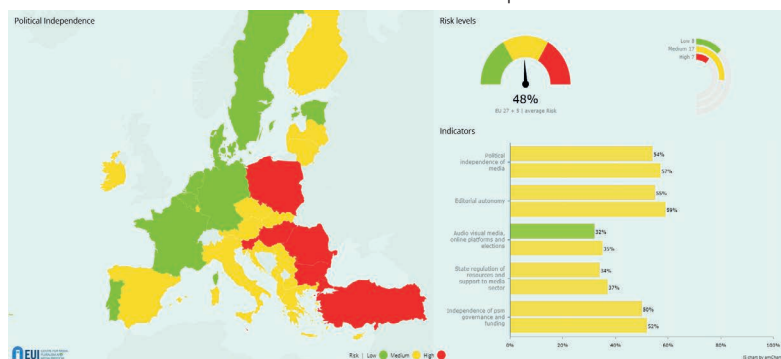
Source: https://cmpf.eui.eu/mpm-2021-interactive/

There are several key problems across the region. First, systemic political influence on the news media content is severe in the candidate countries (p. 74). A similar situation is also observed throughout Central and Eastern Europe (with the exception of Slovakia). The second common problem in former socialist countries is state advertising, often used as a means of covertly subsidizing news outlets (p. 5), therefore, risks related to state advertising "continue to be present to a greater extent in Central-Eastern European countries, and in the candidate countries, than they do in other members of the EU" (pp. 84–85). And, the third one: there is very little regulation of online political advertising (only France) (p. 79). The independence of public service media governance and funding shows an insignificant division between the region's countries: while North Macedonia and Montenegro share a high-risk score (like most EU states in their close environment), Serbia and Albania are positioned among medium risk countries (p. 87). The independence of regulatory bodies in the region is, on average, assessed as significantly worse than in the EU states (p. 36). Consequently, despite a medium risk score on political independence in general, the overall picture of the Western Balkan countries is not favourable. Increasing dependence of media reporting on the government agenda corresponds to the decline of media freedom and independence, and is a phenomenon

characteristic for transitional (hybrid) regimes. Various studies show a high degree of media dependence on the political agenda across the Western Balkan region (Milutinović, 2020; Turčilo & Buljubašić, 2017). Mainstream media frame social reality in a way that they maintain and reproduce political hegemony. Critical voices on issues related to the rule of law, democracy and media freedom remain marginalized, losing their capacity to contribute to resolving public problems in a democratic way. Tabloid media are systematically used as instruments of populist polarization of the public on various matters of public importance, especially those concerning sensitive topics of nation and religion.

The Western Balkan countries: Albania, Serbia and Montenegro are assessed to be among 8 countries (next to Bulgaria, Cyprus, Romania, Slovenia and Turkey) with high-risk scores on social inclusion, while North Macedonia achieves a medium risk in this area (Figure 4).

Figure 4. The Western Balkans Media within Europe: the Assessment on Social Inclusiveness
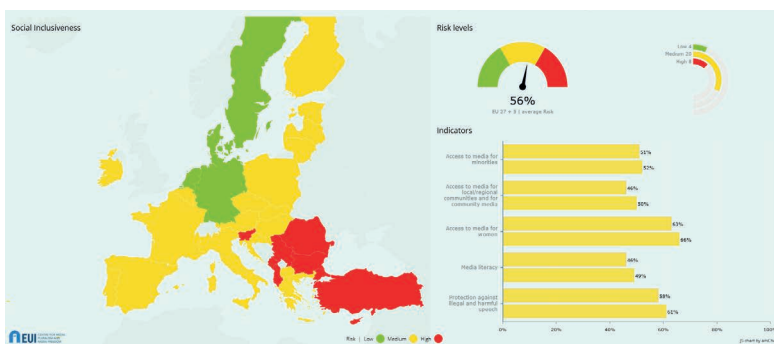
Source: https://cmpf.eui.eu/mpm-2021-interactive/

Minorities do not have adequate access to airtime across Europe; South-Eastern European countries – Serbia, Bulgaria, Greece and Turkey are especially high-risk in this category (CMPF, 2021: pp. 92–93). Similarly, representation of women in general records high risk scores, both in the EU countries and candidate states, while gender equality in media scores is in the medium risk band (p. 98). In most European countries, there is no efficient policy framework to fight the spread

of disinformation, except for Germany and Finland which have de-
veloped a solid framework (p. 7–8). Additionally, all of the Western
Balkan countries (except North Macedonia), are within the high-risk
band regarding protection against disinformation (p. 104). The same
result is reached within protection against hate speech at the European
level: "the existing framework is not efficient in fighting against hate
speech online in most of the countries studied" (p. 8) and only four
European countries developed a low-risk level for protection against
illegal and harmful speech (Belgium, Finland, Germany, and Sweden)
(p. 103). Unlike Europe in general, media literacy is underdeveloped
in the region of the Western Balkans (p. 100–102).

CONCLUDING REMARKS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Judging by some practical effects of harmonization or its poor ap-
plicability, the Europeanization of national media regulations within
the region has been treated mostly as a bureaucratic necessity to har-
monize the formal conditions for starting the negotiation processes
for the EU accession and opening chapters. Practical consequences
of the described state of media transition are illustrated by a number
of studies which show the declining trend in media pluralism and qual-
ity of journalism throughout the region: instead of the consolidation
of independence of journalism, clientelism has gradually blossomed;
instead of media pluralism, corporatism has been growing; instead
of media exercising their role as the "fourth estate" and "watchdogs
of democracy", financial and political interests influence the editorial
policy of dominant commercial electronic and print media; at the
same time, independent regulators do not fully exercise their mandate
when it comes to safeguarding public interest.

There are improved legal frameworks mostly in line with European
standards covering traditional media (especially in Serbia, North
Macedonia and Montenegro), but their full enforcement is missing.

The indicators of fundamental protection and political independence of media hold medium position in general, and especially the political independence area was slightly better positioned than in several EU members during the last year. When it comes to the market pluralism area, the Western Balkans countries face general European problems, while in the area of social inclusion, the situation is considerably worse than in the EU countries.

Since the MPM2021 report almost continuously shows a relatively clear division between Northern and Western Europe, on the one hand, and Central, Eastern and Southern Europe, on the other (CMPF, 2021, p. 86), it seems that the issues faced by media in the Western Balkans do not differ much from the main media problems within several EU countries, especially in Central and Eastern Europe states with a common totalitarian past. However, phenomena such as disinformation, misinformation or dissemination of various kinds of deception, as well as the media abuse for the purposes of manipulative and polarizing distribution of information with a strong emotional and ideological charge, seem to have more intense and detrimental impacts in the Western Balkan countries – they are more destructive due to more fragile democratic institutions, weaker rule of law, a devastated culture of democratic pluralism and public dialogue, in all democratically unconsolidated regimes of the Western Balkans, as well as due to the inheritance of national conflicts from the past. This is the main conclusion of the study.

In order to improve basic conditions for strengthening democratic capacities of the Western Balkans media such as media pluralism and freedom, we outline several recommendations, derived from analytical-synthetic, comparative and critical processing of the available data:

- The main recommendation is that the existing legal framework should be urgently implemented by all relevant institutions and improved in the fields of political and state advertising, while digital media legislation should be comprehensively improved in line with the European regulatory framework.

- As the working status of journalists is unstable, safeguards for journalists should be improved and attacks on journalists efficiently prevented and sanctioned. There is also a need to improve the working conditions for journalists, particularly by strengthening the autonomy of newsrooms. Institutions should take measures to prevent online threats and harassment against journalists. Media law frameworks should be improved by introducing anti-SLAPP provisions.
- Co-financing of media from state funds should be transparent and fair, under effective control.
- Full financial and operational independence of the regulatory authorities should be ensured, and safeguards strengthened to secure editorial autonomy of media outlets from political pressures and commercial influence.
- As regards PSM stability and independence, they need to be ensured by adequate funding models and new legal solutions that prevent any political authorities to influence the selection of managers and editorial teams in the PSMs.
- Improve transparency of party-political advertising in online platforms and introduce a clear set of rules and limits in the area of political advertising.
- As the market plurality area has the highest risk score on almost all indicators, transparency of media ownership should be improved and guaranteed, and some horizontal and cross-media concentration restrictions should be considered.
- Develop policy measures to ensure better access to media by minorities and local communities.
- Media literacy should be consistently designed at the state level and integrated into formal and non-formal educational programmes.
- There is a need to improve the legislative framework in the area of countering disinformation, hate speech and other harmful content online, without restricting or harming freedom of expression as a liberal democracy value.

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THE *GENDER DANGER*: HOW THE EU BECAME AN ENEMY OF TRADITIONAL VALUES IN BULGARIA

ABSTRACT

The chapter explores the creation and dissemination of a sustainable anti-EU narrative in Bulgaria based on the supposed contradiction between European values and traditional Bulgarian values. The outcomes presented in the text are based on the author's own empirical studies, conducted in 2014, 2017, 2019 and 2021 and underpinned by other studies and secondary data. The chapter presents the basic claims of the *gender danger* narrative and its prominent advocates. A whole and specific new language is coined due to this issue, in order to proclaim that the EU is imposing a policy of "gender ideology", "gender propaganda" or even "genderism". The central notion of this narrative is "gender" meaning a person (usually male) with fluctuations or deviations in sexual orientation and/or gender identity. It is also used to name the activists and NGOs supporting "the genders".

Keywords: Anti-EU Propaganda, Bulgaria, European Union, European Values, Gender, Kremlin Propaganda

FRAMING THE EU 2014–2017

The narrative of *European vs. Bulgarian traditional values* appeared in the Bulgarian public space at the end of 2017 and early 2018. As earlier studies show (Vatsov et al., 2016; Kovacheva, 2017, Neikova

& Kovacheva, 2017), it could not be found as a general frame in the EU issues media coverage prior to this period. The study presented embraces the social constructivist perspective of European integration as a value-based process. It is based on the author's own empirical studies conducted in 2014, 2017, 2019 and 2021 using the method of content analysis and political claims analysis.

In 2014, I studied the media coverage of the EU and EU-related issues in four Bulgarian and four British media outlets for five months (1.02.2014 – 30.06.2014). The study results based on more than 3350 news articles showed that the main topic in Bulgarian media was the elections themselves (news related to the campaign, candidates and election events), followed by "Economy" and "Energy". The topic of Bulgaria's EU membership was almost absent and the topic "European institutions and European integration" (news related to the debates on the future of the EU and the European institutions) was barely present, with the exception of Dnevnik (Figure 5).

Figure 5. Issues-News Articles (April-May 2014)
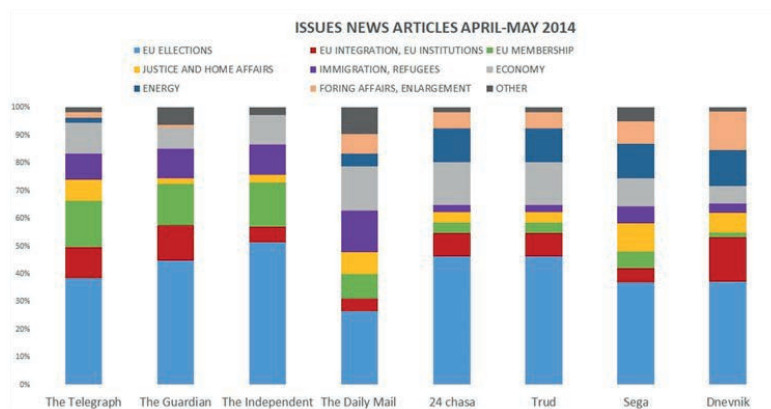
Source: Kovacheva, 2020a, p.124.

These are the main frames of the EU's media representation in the European election campaign 2014, established by the study (Kovacheva, 2017, pp. 227–227):

- The EU (the Centre) treats Bulgaria as a periphery, Bulgaria should oppose the "Brussels's" dictate;

- The EU as a source of money (EU funds, higher income/stan-
  dard of living);
- The EU as a source of justice (it corrects and punishes the
  national authorities);
- The EU as the (only) alternative to Russia.

The prevailing attitude towards the EU in the opinions published
by the observed Bulgarian media was neutral. One of the reasons
for this was that the EU was simply not the main object of analysis,
and it was often only barely mentioned (Figure 6):

Figure 6. Attitude towards the EU I
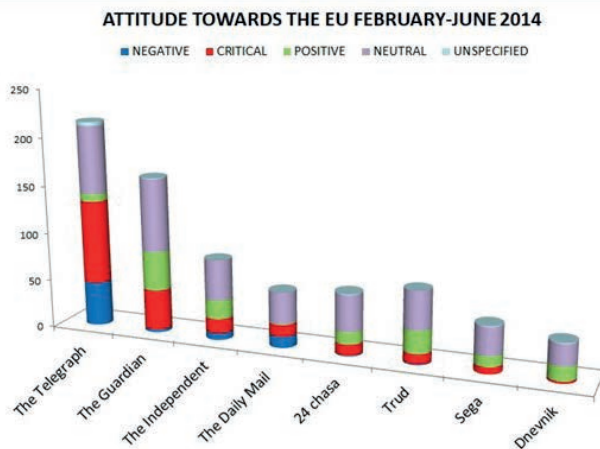
Source: Kovacheva, 2020a, p.140.

In 2017, during the campaign for the early parliamentary elec-
tions (February-March 2017) the three main EU-related issues
discussed by the candidates were "two-speed Europe", Bulgarian
EU membership and the EU-Canada Comprehensive Economic
and Trade Agreement (CETA). The cited study based its findings
on a political claim analysis of 429 claims made in nine programs
of the biggest Bulgarian TV stations (BNT, bTV and Nova) during
the election campaign (24.02. – 24.03.2017) (Neikova & Kovacheva,
2017, p. 104). Compared to 2014, the main frames of the EU cover-
age remained the same – the "two-speed" debate was framed on the

perspective of national dignity, the EU membership was measured mainly according to the EU funds received, the CETA agreement was presented as a great injustice brought to us by the EU; and Russia was still a part of the picture, because of the issue of the EU sanctions imposed on Moscow.

The "two-speed Europe" debate was the most popular of the three (although the EU was not among the main issues of the campaign). It appeared on the agenda due to the publication of the "White Paper on the Future of Europe" on 1 March 2017 (European Commission, 2017). The document, developed by the European Commission, discussed five "scenarios" for the EU integration process until 2025. The White Paper, although not discussed in detail by Bulgarian politicians, was presented in the center-periphery frame, where two camps were formed: the parties and politicians who stated that Bulgaria has been placed in the periphery (by "Brussels", by the big countries) and those who claimed that Bulgaria has placed itself in the periphery, by its actions or inactions as an EU member.

A new nuance in framing the issue of "two-speed Europe" was added by some centre-left parties (Bulgarian Socialist Party, BSP and Alternative for Bulgarian Revival, ABV) as they presented it as a demonstration of the EU's "double standards" in regard to the EU sanctions against Russia: "Brussels" imposes sanctions, but Bulgaria's export is suffering from these sanctions, while Germany (and other member states) are profiting from its own trade with Russia. This was presented as an argument to oppose "Brussels" on the issue and to insist on lifting the sanctions. Another big group of parties, the so-called patriotic formations (then called in the United Patriots coalition) was not especially interested in the topic but used it to address another issue which was more important in their agenda – the migrants (and especially the Muslim migrants). Angel Dzambazki (VMRO, MEP): "This is not about speeds; this is about being first hand or second hand (member state, note by me, RK). If there will be first hand and second hand (member states, RK), we absolutely

oppose it. If Bulgaria has to be a backwater for illegal immigrants – we definitely oppose it. If they tell us, you are second class, so stay there and just send us workers – we strongly oppose it."

Based on the political claims on the EU-related issues, the following picture of the attitude towards the EU was revealed (Figure 7):

Figure 7. Attitude towards the EU II

POSITIVE RATHER POSITIVE RATHER NEGATIVE NEGATIVE NEUTRAL
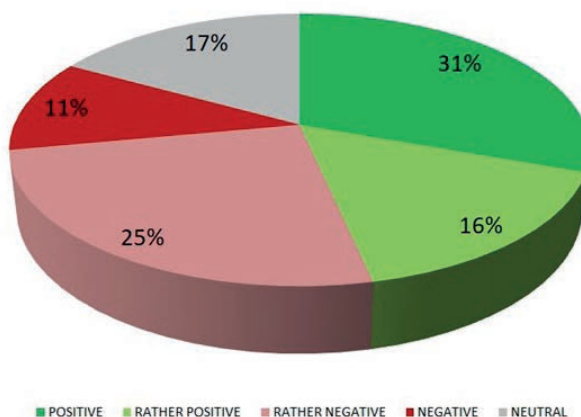
Source: Neikova & Kovacheva, 2017, p.129–130.

The positive attitude (47%) prevailed, but the negative attitude was significantly more visible (36%), especially when compared to 2014. These results show that beyond the declarative support for Bulgaria's EU membership, political claims made during the campaign revealed a far more nuanced picture and called into question the sincerity of the stated support for the country's EU membership. The claims with a negative attitude towards the EU were made by the representatives of BSP, ABV and VMRO. The first two focused mainly on the EU sanctions against Russia and CETA, and the later on migrants, but together the three parties were the most vocal critics of "Europe's double standards", "Brussels dictate" and the EU's "unrespectful treatment" of Bulgaria. They claimed that Bulgaria should oppose this "foreign influence" and develop an independent foreign policy according to its own national interests.

Based on the arguments presented above we could conclude that prior to the end of 2017 neither the EU nor the Bulgarian membership has ever been discussed from a value point of view in any way. And yet, I started by saying that the narrative of *European vs. Bulgarian traditional values* appeared in the Bulgarian public space at the end of 2017 and early 2018.

"THE DECLINE OF EUROPE" NARRATIVE

In order to trace back the emergence of the value based anti-EU narrative in Bulgaria, we have to go back to 2014. We see a sharp increase in anti-European and anti-liberal messages in Bulgarian media after the annexation of Crimea by Russia in March 2014, as the report on the study on "Anti-Democratic Propaganda in Bulgaria" demonstrates (Vatsov et al., 2016). Although the main messages were focused on Russia (Russia's might, Russia's enemies, the power of Russian weapons, etc.), a narrative of "The decline of Europe" has also been detected in Bulgarian media. Here we find the aforementioned clichés of Europe's double standards, the Brussels dictatorship, etc. But since the topic of migration made the headlines at the time, the disintegration of the EU ("The decline of Europe") was interpreted more in that aspect than through the *anti-gender narrative*.

However, the report does present a vocabulary of "keywords and phrases, most of them pejorative, which are commonly used to stigmatize civil society (civic protests, human-rights and other NGOs) and pro-European and pro-liberal politicians/magistrates/ media in Bulgaria" (Vatsov et al., 2016, p. 43). They all are described as undermining the national interest and serving "foreign interests", as "foreign agents", Brussels' "yes-men" and/or "bought" by George Soros ("Sorosoids"), "grant-spongers", "grant eaters". In 2015 the narrative of "Geyropa" (Europa of same-sex marriages and gay parades) has gained popularity, as a harbinger of the next developments.

Here you could see how this narrative called "Bulgaria's venal elites" has been rising over time (Figure 8):

Figure 8 "Bulgaria's venal elites" narrative over time
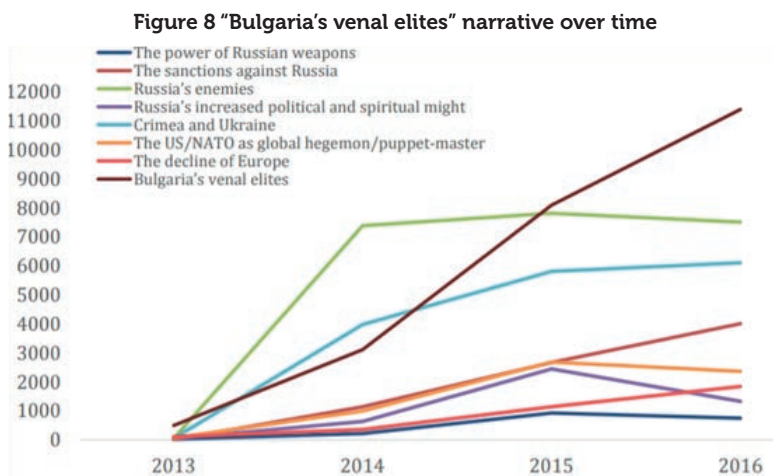
Source: Vatsov et al., 2016, p. 56.

ON RUSSIAN PROPAGANDA

As a rule, anti-EU and anti-liberal propaganda in Bulgaria is pro-Russian, but Bulgarian pro-Russian propaganda should be distinguished from official Russian propaganda (Vatsov et al., 2016). That means, it is domestically produced but it uses a vocabulary developed by Russian official propaganda and was used to discredit first the civic protests against Vladimir Putin in 2011– 2012 and then Ukraine's Euromaidan in 2013. The Kremlin propaganda strategies are thoroughly studied by Timothy Snyder, who notes that "European integration was interpreted by Russian politicians to mean the legalization of same-sex partnerships" and "thus the spread of homosexuality" (Snyder, 2018, p. 81). Here is a symptomatic story told by Snyder:

> In September 2013, a Russian diplomat repeated this argument at a conference on human rights in China. Gay rights were nothing more than the chosen weapon of a global neoliberal conspiracy, meant to prepare virtuous traditional societies such as Russia and China for exploitation. President Putin took the next step at his personal global summit at Valdai a few days later, comparing same-sex partnerships to Satanism. He associated gay rights with a Western model that "opens a direct path to degradation and primitivism, resulting in a profound demographic and moral crisis." The Russian parliament had by then passed a law "For the Purpose of Protecting Children from Information Advocating for a Denial of Traditional Family Values." (Snyder, 2018, p. 35)

The Putin regime „wants to present itself as the only defender of traditional Christian values" by "aggressively employing a wide range of tools and instruments", the European Parliament said in a resolution back in 2016 (European Parliament 2016).

In any case, we can say that although this new propaganda language was already well-structured in 2017, the *gender danger* narrative had not been born before the end of 2017.

THE INVENTION OF THE *GENDER DANGER* NARRATIVE

In the beginning was the declaration of VMRO against the so called Istanbul Convention, published at the very end of 2017. The declaration underpinned the VMRO's refusal to support the government's decision to propose the Parliament to ratify the Convention. At that time VMRO, together with their partner National Front for the Salvation of Bulgaria, NFSB, formed the United Patriots coalition – the minor partner in the government coalition with GERB. Due to internal contradictions between GERB and the United Patriots

on the construction of the second lift at the Bansko resort, the Patriots in the government voted against the ratification of the Convention. The relation between the two topics is evidenced by a sociological survey conducted in January 2018, wildly covered by media with headlines such as "Bulgarians do not want the Istanbul Convention, they want a second lift in Bansko" (BTA, 2018).

The background of these events is rather short, because the topic was almost non-existent in the Bulgarian political and media agenda.

The Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (CoE, 2011), known as the Istanbul Convention, was adopted in 2011 and Bulgaria signed it in April 2016 following a decision of the Council of Ministers. At that time, the second cabinet of Boiko Borisov was supported by the "Patriotic Front" (formed by the VMRO and NFSB), but no "patriot" saw any danger in the document. The Convention was subsequently discussed in several committees in the European Parliament, but again this did not provoke any political statements or media interest. On the contrary, as far as the Istanbul Convention was mentioned in Bulgarian media until December 2017, it was entirely in a positive light, in the context of the increasing number of cases of violence against women, as the document was presented as an important step to protect women. Meanwhile, in the autumn of 2017, a "creeping" resistance to the Convention has already being organized in online forums and Facebook groups. The "Society and Values Association", an NGO aimed at promoting and protecting "the family and marriage as a legal union between one man and one woman", has organized a petition against the ratification of the Istanbul Convention. A year later SVA proudly proclaimed the withdrawal of the draft bill on ratification of the Istanbul Convention and the subsequent decision of the Constitutional Court, which declared it to be inconsistent with Bulgaria's Constitution as their "biggest victory" (SVA, 2019).

A study conducted by the media analysis agency Perceptica (based on 7387 articles published between 1 December 2017 and 31 January 2018) demonstrates that a negative attitude towards the Istanbul Convention clearly prevails (Klub Z, 2018).

We could find the main arguments against the Convention summarized in the declaration of VMRO, mentioned above:

- The Convention legalizes the "third sex" by introducing a definition of "gender" and "gender" identity as something different from the biological sex.
- It legalizes gay marriages.
- It imposes school programs where children would be taught "non-stereotypical gender roles" such as homosexuality and transvestism.
- It attacks some categories which are "fundamental for Bulgarians" such as male and female, family of men and women, parental rights, the right to freedom of religion and others.
- It obliges Bulgaria to grant refugee status to "any transgender person from a third country".

According to many experts, we appeared to be lost in translation. Ruzha Smilova notes that "in the Convention's flawed, unofficial translation, the Bulgarian word for 'sex' [пол] is used for "gender" as well, making it indistinguishable from 'sex'. Just once, in Art. 4.3, is 'gender' translated as "social sex" [социален пол] to distinguish it from 'sex' as grounds for non-discrimination in the Convention's application, triggering speculations that a "third sex"[трети пол], alongside biological sexes, is introduced there" (Smilova, 2018).

But once the genie was out of the bottle, a whole new language to describe the *gender danger* was coined. The word "gender" acquired a new meaning and "overnight became a slur aimed at non-binary, gender-nonconforming, or at times even any person perceived to be LGBT+" (Nikolova, 2020). Moreover, as Emilia Slavova wrote, "gender" came to denote "even a liberal supporting gender equality and LGBT rights, having a strong pro-European orientation and threatening the traditional family" (Slavova, 2020). We have been observing "a new phenomenon in the Bulgarian

vocabulary in terms of the creation and activation of a whole system of new meanings", "strongly stylistically marked and connotatively loaded" and without exception negative and pejorative, Stalyanova and Runevska note. They have studied the use of the word "gender" in social media proving that it has already became part of our everyday language. Beside meaning (as a noun) a homosexual, transvestite, transgender person, hermaphrodite, or a person who shares an LGBT worldview, the word is also used as an adjective, referring to a value system opposed to the patriarchal one (Stalyanova & Runevska, 2018).

THE MASTERS OF THE *GENDER DANGER* NARRATIVE

To demonstrate the full repertoire and creative capabilities of the *gender danger* narrative I will use the work of its greatest masters – Ilia Iliev and Alexander Urumov.

Dr. Ilia Iliev has been a long-term employee of the socialist Bulgaria's secret services. These days he is a regular author in Bulgarian daily "Trud" – one of the oldest and once respected media in Bulgaria, but in recent years it has emerged as the flagship of the anti-Western and anti-liberal (hence, anti-European) campaign in Bulgaria. In February 2018 he published an article eloquently entitled "The battle with genderism grows into war" (Iliev, 2018). The author's arguments can be grouped into three main categories: the Istanbul Convention poses a threat to our values, the Convention poses a threat to our children, and the Convention presents a foreign (paid) influence.

The author claims that the Convention has an "anti-scientific" and "anti-religious" (specifically anti-Christian) nature. The convention mentions "gender" more than a hundred times and "the normal sex" – much less, claims the author, without bothering to explain what "the normal sex" means. The aim is, he goes, "special rights to be granted to the LGBT people, all kinds of non-stereotypical gender

roles, HIV-positive people, migrants and undocumented refugees". In this way, the other "enemy" of the guardians of traditional values – refugees and migrants – is "killed" with the same stone.

And if we are not yet convinced about how terrible it is, the observance of these "special rights" will be "watched and persecuted by GREVIO – a European moral special service, as omnipotent as the former VChK and Gestapo". The threatening acronym GREVIO actually refers to the Council of Europe's expert group responsible for monitoring the implementation of the Convention, which is far from "omnipotent", on the contrary, and has nothing to do with the concept of special services. However, the comparison with the secret police of Soviet Russia and Nazi Germany strikes the necessary associations with terror and repression.

In order to reinforce the suggestion of a threat to our values, the author emphasizes that the convention is aimed primarily at children, claiming that dozens of pages are devoted to "harm the sensitive children's souls". Moreover, it is supported by our own institutions:

> "Through the Ministry of Education and Science, mastered by NGO-s and foreign agents, a national program has been imposed to introduce gender issues in school programs and subjects. Another program, on prevention and protection from domestic violence, is incubated for the preschool age!"

The above quote illustrates another important talking point of the *gender danger* narrative – the forcible imposition of the Convention "through aggressive pressure from outside, for example through the EU and internally, through subversive NGOs". According to the author "the European Commission alone has set aside nearly 6 million euros to promote the anti-European gender ideology", but it's neither clear what he means, nor is it possible to check his claim.

Here the whole arsenal of propaganda theses and the Orwellian-style "newspeak", described in the study "Anti-democratic propaganda in Bulgaria", enters into force: "grant-spongers" and "grant-eaters",

"Sorosoids", and even "gendermerists". The author pathetically concludes that the "battle with this essentially global conspiracy grows into a war":

> „They use and will continue to use various techniques of information and psychological warfare to divide our people, to change the cultural identity of young generations, together with their sexual orientation".

In order to prove that it is not an exceptional case but rather the article is an exemplary as for the media, so for the whole *gender danger* narrative, here are some more headlines by the same author and same media:

> "A vicious Sorosoid howl against the prosecution"
> "The gendermerist contagion in a desperate offensive"
> "The gender lobbyists rely on Soros and Brussels"
> "With genderism, the insane invade"

Like Iliev, Alexander Urumov has also worked for the secret services of the totalitarian regime. He was recruited at the age of 19 under the pseudonym Abel, in the name of a famous Russian spy Rudolf Abel, arrested in the 1950s in the United States. However, Urumov's file was part of the purged documentation of the Ministry of Interior in 1990. Also, according to Bulgarian media he was baptized in an evangelical church in the mid-1990s (Vaksberg, 2019). In 2017 Urumov was appointed as the director of Public Relations and Protocol Directorate at the Ministry of Defence, headed by Krasimir Karakachanov, the leader of VMRO. In 2019 both Urumov and Karakachanov were VMRO MEP candidates.

In May 2019, just before the European elections, Urumov published an article titled "Brussels is the source of evil". This text is emblematic not only of Urumov's views, but of the VMRO's position on the subject: "The 'values' imposed on us by Brussels arouse more astonishment

and disgust than understanding or delight. The values turned out to be not just the weakest link in the European Union, they turned out to be a missing link!" (Urumov, 2019).

Urumov sees the root of evil in the EU Treaty, as it explicitly mentions the rights of persons belonging to minorities. But, he claims, "it is cunningly not mentioned what kind of minorities!". And it is not about the ethnic minorities, he goes on: "On the contrary, in view of the strong positions of power of gays, lesbians and so on, it is obviously a question of sexual minorities. And they are not fighting for tolerance, but for power!".

Like Iliev, Urumov also claims that "the gender ideology" enters "through the wide open doors of the national institutions", including the education system: "all these gender – defenders place as their main priority the imposition of the model of homosexuality and same-sex 'marriage' in Bulgaria". The dramatic ending points back to the title: "Where do the monopolies, the gender ideology, the greed for further deprivation of national sovereignty and its transfer to Brussels come from? It comes from Brussels, obviously. Brussels is the source of evil".

THE VALUE-BASED ANTI-EU NARRATIVE

Against this background, it is no surprise that the protection of "traditional Bulgarian values" from the threat of the "European values" was distinctively present among the party messages in the European election campaign in 2019. The results presented here are based on a content analysis of 251 articles selected through the media analysis system „Commetric" by keyword „values" during the European election campaign (24 April – 24 May 24 2019). This value-based discourse was most actively used by patriotic formations (especially VMRO) and the socialists (BSP) (Figure 9).

Figure 9. Speakers in the News by Party
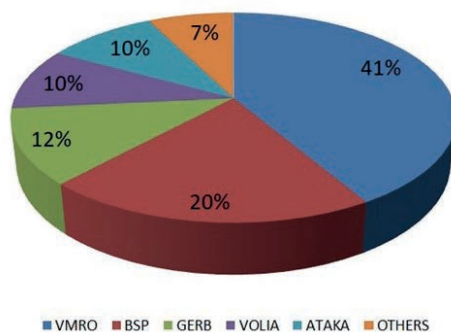
Source: Kovacheva, 2020.

The representatives of VMRO emphasized the image of traditional family as consisting of a man, a woman and children (boys and girls), according to the traditional Bulgarian and Christian values. They oppose liberal values, specifically multiculturalism and "gender ideology", defined as "a policy against nature":

> Krassimir Karakachanov: "We will not allow our children to be confused with various 'gender nonsense' – the family consists of a man, a woman and children."

> Angel Dzambazki: "The battle of the upcoming elections will be multiculturalism against traditions and national identity." (Kovacheva, 2020b).

Together with other patriotic formations ("Volia", "Ataka", "Vazrajdane") and even the Bulgarian Socialist Party to some extent, they formed a strong discursive coalition, making their messages even more visible and popular. Moreover, these parties purposefully presented the European values only in terms of gender and family: "Who said that the third sex is a European value", rhetorically asked the Socialist leader Kornelia Ninova (Kovacheva, 2020b). Some socialists criticized "the presence of gender ideology in education"

and "the quiet affirmation of gender ideology, anti-communism and rusophobia as dividing lines in the contemporary Bulgarian society" (Kaloian Pargov, Kovacheva 2020b).

The representatives of then the ruling party GERB (centre-right, an EPP member) used the most abstract and vague rhetoric on all issues and didn't use the *gender danger* narrative. However, they did make references to the traditional values of Bulgaria and Europe. The parliament chair Tsveta Karaianhceva, dressed in a traditional Bulgarian costume, talked about "Bulgarian values, which we should bring to Europe and stand for". The party candidate Mladen Shishkov promised to work for "restoration of the Christian family values". The European Commissioner Maria Gabriel and the GERB-EPP MEP Andrey Kovatchev talked about the Christian values of Europe (Kovacheva, 2020b).

In fact, the only case registered, when the European values were explicitly stated and supported, was an open letter signed by over 500 intellectuals. The letter expressed concern about the 'growing polarization in society," the rise of "extreme nationalism" and "ultraconservative and populist movements," active efforts "to roll back achievements in the field of human rights and democratic freedoms," attacks on NGOs, journalists, human rights defenders and others, and the questioning of "basic international human rights and child rights documents which Bulgaria has long accepted" (Klub Z, 2019).

Actually, topics such as freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law, solidarity, pluralism, etc., which are explicitly stated as European values in Articles 2 and 3 of the EU treaty (TEU, 2012) are not recognized as European values, despite being heatedly debated in the context of current domestic political events. However, the party representatives do not comment on these topics in a value dimension – they do not name the rule of law explicitly as a European value, nor do they present their desire for the rule of law as a basis for value rapprochement with the European Union. In this way, the value debate was framed entirely within the family values and gender issues and followed the sustainable narrative constructed in relation to the Istanbul Convention.

As for the opinions, half of the registered articles did not elaborate on the value dimension, but the other half was expressing clearly conservative values (understood in the way described above) or attacking the liberal values (Figure 10).

Figure 10. Values Supported in Opinions

LIBERAL — CONSERVATIVE — IRRELEVANT
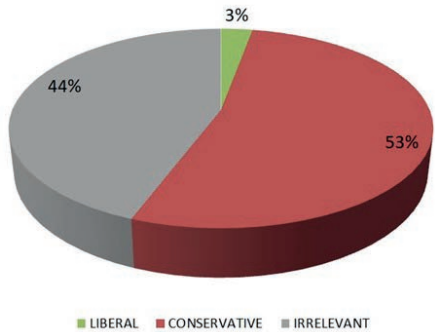
Source: Kovacheva, 2020.

The European values were reduced to free choice of gender identity and sexual orientation and thus, opposed to the traditional Bulgarian understanding of gender (equal to biological sex) and family, which are implicitly seen as good and the only right view. In this way, the EU ("Brussels") is presented as a foreign power, which imposes unacceptable values and policies on Bulgaria.

Figure 11. Attitude towards the EU in Opinions

POSITIVE — CRITICAL — NEGATIVE — NO ATTITUDE
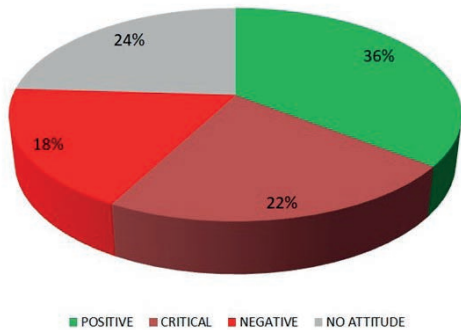
Source: Kovacheva, 2020.

It can be concluded that the value-based narrative regarding the EU is reduced basically to the aspect of gender identity and sexual orientation. The European (liberal) values are (mis)represented as morally rotten and corrupt, thus incompatible with the (good) traditional Bulgarian values. The *gender danger* narrative has been constructed in the course of the debates around the Istanbul Convention, but its foundations had been laid a few years earlier by the pro-Russian propaganda in Bulgaria.

Although the so called patriotic parties did not succeed in the parliamentary elections in 2021, the *gender danger* narrative has now become "the new normal" in Bulgaria's public discourse. "If the other political parties form a cabinet with the third mandate, they are vile political 'genders'", Toshko Iordanov wrote on Twitter, the chair of the biggest parliamentarian group in the current parliament of the "There is such a people" (Ima Takav Narod, ITN) party. In his tweet he explained that he has used the everyday meaning of the word "gender" (Trud, 2021).

To share conservative values, meaning to share "anti-gender" views and to use the *gender danger* narrative, is popular and even fashionable among the young people. There is a perception in Bulgarian society, that globalization has deprived the family of its status as a value, shows a study conducted with students at the Southwestern University "Neofit Rilski" in Blagoevgrad. According to the students, the traditions have lost their significance, but they should be the leading value in a society (Stoykova 2015). The study "Bulgarian Youth 2018/2019" also found that "there is a growth of traditional, more conservative worldviews and preservation of traditional religious identities" among the young people and "declarative adherence to legal marriage and the two-child model is increasing". According to this study, "in manifestations of patriotism and nationalism, the Bulgarian youngsters appear at the top of the region" (Gallup International 2019).

It can be concluded that the *gender danger* narrative has become sustainable and widely used in the Bulgarian political and media discourse. It is based on keywords and moral judgments originating

from the Kremlin propaganda playbook, but is further developed and adjusted to the domestic context by local actors. They, as well as Russia, use the *gender danger* narrative to instill anti-European and anti-Liberal sentiment in Bulgarian society.

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YOUTH, MEDIA, AND POLITICS. POLITICAL SOCIAL MEDIA USE AMONG POLISH FIRST-TIME VOTERS: A CASE OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC AND WOMEN'S STRIKES

ABSTRACT

Contemporary first-time voters are the oldest representatives of the digitized Polish Generation Z, for whom social media is an attractive source of information about the world, including politics. The empirical research aims to analyse the use of social media by Polish first-time voters in two cases, which may be considered as generation defining moments: the COVID-19 pandemic and women's strikes in Poland in 2020. This study uses a survey of 100 respondents who voted for the first time in the 2019 and 2020 elections, i.e. in the period of increased civic activity in Poland. The results present also the most popular social media in the studied group as a source of information and explore activities undertaken in social media by youth concerning the discussed events[1].

Keywords: Political Communication, COVID-19 Pandemic, First-time Voters, Generation Z, Social Media, Women's Strikes, Youth

INTRODUCTION

The focus of this chapter is on a specific group of citizens, known as first-time voters. The ACE Electoral Knowledge Network (n.d.) emphasizes that the term *first-time voter* tends to be used to refer to the three groups of voters. Firstly, the notion regards people who have had the right to vote for their whole adult life but have never used it and decide to do so for the first time. The second way of understanding the term applies to people who gain electoral rights and vote for reasons other than reaching a certain age (for instance by becoming a new citizen). However, in literature, the term first-time voters is used mainly to describe the youngest cohort of voters who gain the right to vote in a general election for the first time (e.g., Schäfer, Roßteutscher & Abendschön, 2020; Borge, 2017; Scott, Street, & Inthorn, 2011). This text refers to people included in the last definition: voters reaching the required age.

Youth is a group that scores very low in the political interest category (Quintelier, 2007; White, Bruce & Ritchie, 2000). What is more, young people are the least active among all age groups taking into account almost all areas of political participation (Marzęcki, 2015; LSE Enterprise, 2013). Political participation consists of basic elements, such as low voting probability, low interest in politics, or rare membership in political parties. However, Weiss (2020) points out that when considering the political participation of young adults, attention should also be paid to new forms of participation, which are often more attractive to young people. These new forms include, for example, activities undertaken in social media that are significantly *lowering the thresholds of political engagement* (Ekström & Shehata, 2018, as cited in Weiss 2020).

Research shows that the youngest citizens in democracies are more likely than the older to abstain from voting (Bhatti & Hansen, 2012; Dassonneville, 2017). In Poland, people under 24 years old declare participation in elections the least often (Czapliński & Panek, 2015). This group includes first-time voters, who are at the center of this study. The confirmations of these conclusions reflect in the Polish voter turnouts:

in the municipal election in the 2018 and European Parliament elections in 2019. Although, it is interesting that in the Polish parliamentary elections in 2019, the result improved. A noticeable contradiction to the norms cited earlier appears in the presidential election in 2020 when a turnout in the 18–29 age group was record-breaking (Ipsos, 2020). According to the Ipsos exit poll for TVP, TVN, and Polsat (2020), the turnout in this election in the group up to 29 years old was 64 percent and equalized the overall turnout for a whole society.

At this point, it should be clearly stated that a completely new group of young people, different from the previous ones, comes to the fore. Contemporary Polish first-time voters are the oldest representatives of the digitized Generation Z, who have not experienced the world without the Internet. Their relationship with the media is versatile, intense, and intuitive because being brought up in a digital world, unlike older generations, they did not have to adapt to new technologies. In the past, media scholars have never had the opportunity to research the age group that uses the media in a revolutionary way and on a large scale, being constantly online (Twenge, 2019). According to the *Media Use in the European Union* report (2019), the 15–24 age group indicated that every day/almost every day they use the Internet (94%) and social media (87%). Social media plays a vital role in the life of Generation Z, being an attractive source of knowledge about the world, including politics and current events (Flamingo & The Reuters Institute, 2020).

Different theories and ideas exist in the literature regarding generations. One of them concerns the phenomenon of a generational experience, which is an intense event that takes place as a generation enters adulthood. Petersen (1930, as cited in Hanna, 2016) indicates several factors shaping the generation, including similar education and common language. Next to them, the theorist lists a common generational event such as the First World War. Similarly, Mannheim (1952) considers traumatic historical events at the center of the theory of generations. A generational experience should be considered as an event on a social scale, not an individual one (Garewicz, 1983). Literature mentions participation in a common fate, historical community, the

first encounter with evil, collective trauma, or the collapse of the world (Garewicz, 1983; Artwińska & Mrozik, 2016; Folta, 2020). Garewicz (1983) and Ortega y Gasset (1992) even claim that the experience of a generation, as an initiation event, is a necessity, which later forms the basis of a generation legend that distinguishes generations from each other. However, many sources note that the millennial generation, that preceded Generation Z, was devoid of such a defining moment, and its main driving force is a pervasive consumption.

President of The Center for Generational Kinetics, Jason Dorsey (2021) uses the term generation defining moment when referring to events that comply with two requirements: *take place at the right time in a generation's coming of age experience* and *create a powerful, unforgettable emotional impact, usually tied to fear and uncertainty caused by the event and its aftermath*. Such moments can take various forms in terms of their scope (global or local) or nature (a single intense event or the culmination of many years of change). An example of a local breakthrough is the disaster of the Sewol Ferry in South Korea in 2014, killing hundreds of young people. This event politically awakened young people, increasing the political participation of this age group. Since then, Generation Z in South Korea is called The Sewol Ferry Generation (Jang, 2018).

In view of all that has been mentioned so far, for this study, two contemporary events have been selected. Both meet the criteria indicated by Dorsey (2021) and have the potential to be called generational events.

The COVID-19 pandemic creates an unforgettable emotional impact on the threshold of entering adulthood, fully reflecting the meaning of the term *generation defining moment*. The indicated event is a global public health crisis that has left its mark on every area of life, including politics. The term *pandemic generation* appears increasingly in the public discourse (e.g., Podemski, 2020). The experience of a lockdown, fear for loved ones, lifestyle changes, and disturbances in the rhythm of the day will irreversibly affect the future of Generation Z, which will mostly rely on the reconstruction of the post-pandemic world.

The second case which can be considered as Gen Z's generation defining moment is referred to as the political awakening of young people (Raciborski, 2020). Women's strikes in defense of women's rights in Poland in 2020 had a national dimension, and Generation Z participated in it on a large scale. The cause of mass protests was the judgment of the Constitutional Court of Julia Przyłębska of October 22, 2020, on tightening the abortion law. Łuczyn (2021) at the Batory Foundation's blog explains that: *the outbreak was triggered by the verdict of the Constitutional Tribunal, but the demonstrations almost immediately acquired a much broader, anti-government overtone*. Protests in the pandemic reality were the first opportunity for many young people to articulate their political views, demonstrate dissatisfaction, and present expectations towards the government and political elites.

RESEARCH PROBLEM

The issues of this research lie in the field of social sciences, combining aspects of social communication and media sciences with selected matters of political science and sociology. This chapter places the focus of research on the use of social media by Polish first-time voters in the face of two events with the potential to be called a generation defining moment. The empirical research aims to analyse the political use of social media by Polish first-time voters in two cases: the COVID-19 pandemic and women's strikes. Research indicates the main social media channels used by first-time voters in the two contexts mentioned. This chapter provides an overview of activities taken on social media by the study group at moments with the potential of defining a generation. Also, the study aims to identify whether selected cases can motivate young people to increase their interest in politics.

There are studies on young voters in Poland (e.g., Marzęcki, 2015) and first-time voters in other countries (e.g., Ohme, 2019). On the other hand, the novelty of this research consists in the fact

that there is a lack of studies that put Polish first-time voters at the center and their use of social media in a political context. So far, very little attention has been paid to the individual social media channels that are usually treated homogeneously. In addition, the study concerns current topics, recognizing issues that are relevant to the target group.

Based on the previously defined theoretical framework and approximate socio-political context, the following research questions were formulated (for each of the two selected events):

- RQ1/RQ2: Have the COVID-19 pandemic/women's strikes increased interest in politics of Polish first-time voters?
- RQ3/RQ4: Which social media did the respondents choose as a source of information about the COVID-19 pandemic/ women's strikes?
- RQ5/RQ6: What activities on social media were taken by respondents concerning the COVID-19 pandemic/women's strikes?

The first question is introductory, allowing one to assess whether the selected events have the potential to become a motivator to increase the political interest of the studied group. The subsequent questions relate to the political use of social media in the context of the two analysed events.

METHODOLOGY

The article is based on the methodology (for example, the same respondent selection strategy or original catalog of activities) developed as part of a doctoral project about Polish first-time voters that is in the preparation process at Jagiellonian University, Krakow. This chapter presents the results of a study conducted on June 1, 2021 – June 10, 2021, on a sample of 100 respondents. The methodological approach involves conducting a survey (CAWI) with the intention of exploring a specific group of digitized Polish first-time voters

belonging to Generation Z. This quantitative method enables and facilitates the collection of data in a potentially highly reliable and efficient way (Hansen & Machin, 2019).

The research focuses on voters making their debut in the 2019 and 2020 elections, which are the European Parliament elections, parliamentary elections, and presidential elections. It was a period of increased civic activity in Poland. Figure 12. shows the cut-off dates of birth for the first-time voters debuting in individual elections, which were indicated with accuracy to the day. Implementing such a specific date range, random sampling was assumed. In Figure 12. the cohort is divided into four groups according to elections in which the first-time voters made their election debut, but in this text they are analysed as a whole without division.

Figure 12. Respondent Selection Strategy

EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT ELECTIONS May 26, 2019
first-time voters born on August 14, 2000 - May 26, 2001

PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS October 13, 2019
first-time voters born on May 27, 2001 - October 13, 2001

PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS (FIRST BALLOT) June 28, 2020
first-time voters born on October 14, 2001 - June 28, 2002

PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS (SECOND BALLOT) July 12, 2020
first-time voters born on June 29, 2002 - July 12, 2002

Source: Author's own elaboration.

The study aims to explore the contemporary phenomenon (political use of social media by first-time voters) in the context of two specific events: the COVID-19 pandemic and the women's protests of 2020. Data was collected using an online questionnaire. The first part of the survey portrays discussed cases as a motivation to increase interest in politics (RQ1, RQ2). In this question, participants were

asked to indicate the degree of their increase in interest in politics (1 = not at all, 6 = very much). Following the example of grades in Polish schools, a 6-point scale was adopted, which is understandable to young people.

The next questions analyse Polish first-time voters and their social media usage in the face of the selected events. The results present the most popular social media in the studied group as a source of information (RQ3, RQ4). Carr and Hayes (2015) define social media as *Internet-based channels that allow users to opportunistically interact and selectively self-present, either in real-time or asynchronously, with both broad and narrow audiences who derive value from user-generated content and the perception of interaction with others*. Based on the secondary data analysis, it indicated the most popular social media in the studied group: YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Snapchat & TikTok (IAB Polska, 2020; Hootsuite & WeAreSocial, 2020). Even though WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger are scored high in some popularity charts, these are not included in the response directory. The author considers them to be communicators, not social media. The respondents could choose up to three answers, had the option of adding another social media that was not listed in the catalog, or indicate the answer *I do not follow this matter in social media*. In order to keep the respondent's attention in the first case (the COVID-19 pandemic), the names of social media in the catalog were arranged alphabetically, and in the question about women's strikes in the opposite direction.

The last part of the survey explores activities undertaken in social media by youth concerning the discussed events (RQ5, RQ6). An original catalog of activities that can be undertaken by youth in social media was prepared based on the researcher's own experience in the use of social media. The following activities requiring varying degrees of user involvement were identified: view the news feed; view the content of another user's profile; view the content of profiles of politicians or political party; like a post; comment on a post; observe another user's profile; observe the profile of politicians or political party; share a post of another user; publish a post.

All the activities mentioned above relate to the performance in the two analysed contexts. The design of the question assumed multiple choice.

RESULTS

The final sample size for the study is n=100. The respondents in this research come from Poland from places of various sizes. The majority of subjects are from a cities with a population of 20,000 to 99,000 (31%) and a villages (29%). Among the respondents, there is an equal gender distribution: women (49%) and men (49%). Two people stated their gender as *different/do not want to choose*. Figure 13 presents the distribution of respondents by professional status. The questionnaire allows for indicating more than one answer. No one selected the *Self-employed* answer. The research results presented in the following sections refer to the two analysed cases: the COVID-19 pandemic and women's strikes.

Figure 13. Respondents' Professional Status
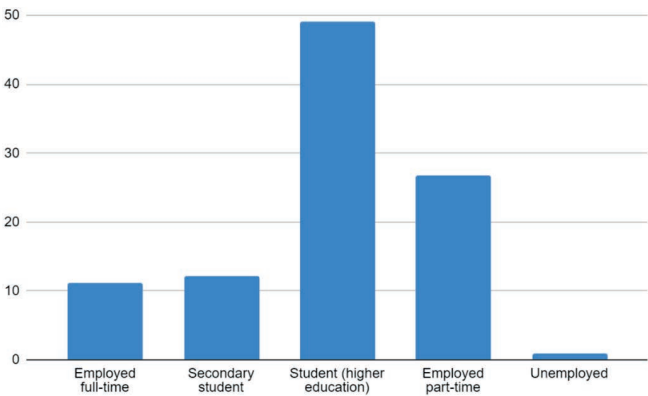
Source: Author's own elaboration.

The first set of analyses examined the first-time voters' political interests. Respondents were asked to indicate whether their interest in politics increased as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and women's strikes. In the case of the coronavirus pandemic, it can be seen from the data in Figure 14. that most people chose the answer *4* (26%), which is in the range of the higher ratings. Only a small number of respondents (4%) indicated that their interest in politics had increased significantly. Of the 100 respondents who completed the questionnaire, less than one in five indicated that interest in politics did not increase at all.

Figure 14. The Level of Increased Interest in Politics of Polish First-time Voters Due to the COVID-19 Pandemic and Women's Strikes (1 = not at all, 6 = very much).
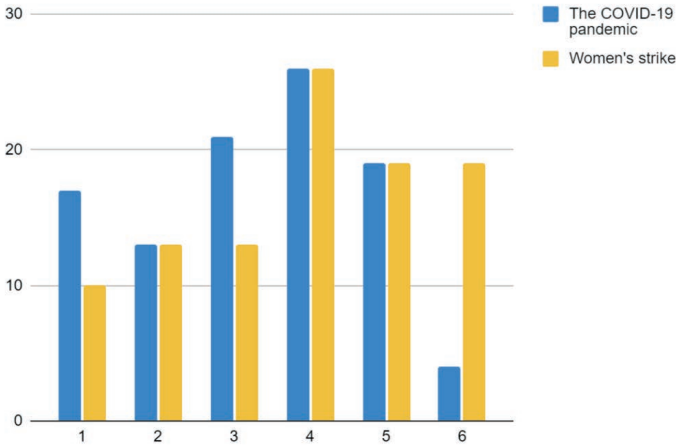
Source: Author's own elaboration.

As can be seen from Figure 14, in the case of the autumn 2020 protests to defend women's rights, there is a marked increase in political interests among respondents. What stands out in the table is that the right side of the chart dominates the low values on the left side. In the case of women's strikes, 38% of respondents said that the event caused a heavy increase in their interest in politics. Only every tenth person indicated that their interest in politics did not change as a result of this event.

Figure 15. Social Media Used by the Respondents to Track Information
Concerning the COVID-19 Pandemic and Women's Strikes
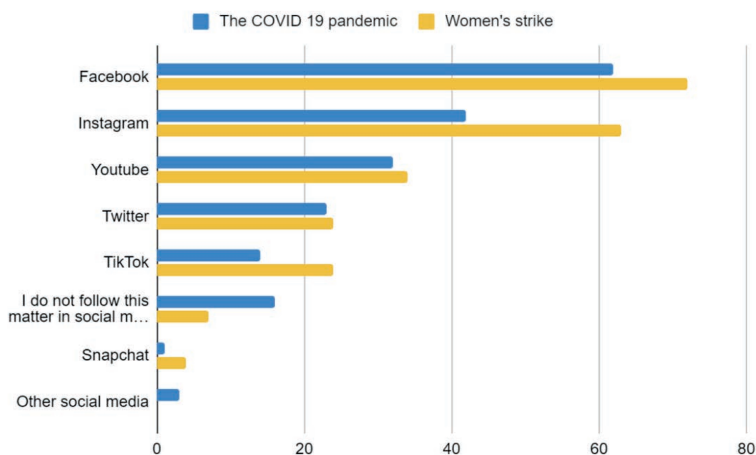
Source: Author's own elaboration.

Social media channels in which respondents followed information on selected events are in the same order in both cases. The majority of those who responded to this item stated that they followed information about the events on Facebook and Instagram. In the case of COVID-19, the Facebook pandemic was indicated by 62% of respondents, and Instagram by 42%. Every third respondent indicated YouTube, and nearly every fourth Twitter. The other two social media, i.e. TikTok (14%) and Snapchat (1%) were less popular. 16% said that they *do not follow this matter in social media*, and three people indicated other sources: *Google, Interia, gov.pl, TV*. In the case of women's protests, over half of those surveyed reported that they used Facebook (72%) or Instagram (63%) to track information about the events of the fall of 2020. YouTube and TikTok obtained the same result, i.e. 24 responses. Nobody added other social media, and only 4% of respondents marked that they *do not follow this matter in social media.*

Table 2. Activities Undertaken in Social Media by Respondents
Concerning the COVID-19 Pandemic and Women's Strikes.

ACTIVITY	THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC	WOMEN'S STRIKES
view the news feed, which sometimes contained posts about the case	59	63
view the content of another user's profile that publishes about the case	47	57
view the content of profiles of politicians or a political party that publishes about the case	31	39
like a post about the case	37	56
comment on a post about the case	17	24
observe another user's profile that publishes about the case	27	34
observe the profile of politicians or a political party that publishes about the case	12	18
share a post of another user about the case	16	23
publish a post about the case	8	15
none of the above	16	13

Source: Author's own elaboration.

Table 2 presents the summary statistics for different activities
undertaken in social media by respondents in the face of the CO-
VID-19 pandemic and the women's strikes. The most indications
in the context of both analysed cases had two answers: *view news feed,
which sometimes contained posts about the cases* and *view the content
of another user's profile that publishes about the cases*. Concerning the
COVID-19 pandemic, respondents often *like a post about the cases*
(37%) and *view the content of profiles of politicians or a political party
that publishes about the cases* (31%). Only 8% decided to publish
a post about the COVID-19 pandemic, but twice as many *shared
a post created by another user*. More than half of the respondents like
a post about the women's strikes (56%), and are also willing to *observe
another user's profile that publishes about the case* (34%). The answers
share a post of another user about the case and *comment on a post
about the case* were marked by nearly every fourth respondent, and

obtained a similar number of responses. The overall response to this question was very positive. Less than one in five respondents stated that they had not taken any of the mentioned activities to the selected events in social media.

DISCUSSION

Although the COVID-19 pandemic is not a political event, the increased interest in politics as a result of this case proves that Polish first-time voters interpret it as related to politics. In a public health crisis, the rulers bear a special responsibility for the functioning of the state, and their decisions (e.g. introduction of a lockdown) noticeably affect the everyday life of citizens. Increased interest in politics may also be related to the tracking of the development of the pandemic (number of new cases, deaths, available ventilators, etc.) on official government social media channels. The period of the COVID-19 pandemic is also a time of conflicts, scandals, and tensions in society that could interest first-time voters and yield in their increased political interest.

The case of the women's strikes received higher results in terms of increased interest in politics. This is probably related to the fact that it was an event of a political nature, clearly associated with young citizens: fighting for rights, expressing disapproval and anger towards the current political situation in Poland. By defending women's rights, young people defended their future. Only few indications for the answer *1* in both cases suggest the awareness of young people, a political awakening, and drawing their attention to political and social issues, which gives hope for the future.

Prior studies have noted the importance of social media in Generation Z's lives. This is confirmed by the responses to the questions about the channel of following information about the indicated events. The answer *I do not follow this matter in social media* was very rarely marked by the respondents. This study confirms that the

most popular social media in this age group are: Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, Twitter, and Snapchat. Only three people took advantage of the possibility of adding another social media, and still, no social media was among their indications. They were: a web browser, web portal, a government website, and television. That may be due to low attention or misunderstanding of the question. None of the respondents indicated any additional social media, which means that the catalog was properly constructed and the most popular social media in the surveyed group were consulted.

The most obvious finding to emerge from the analysis is that the American technology conglomerate Facebook, Inc. is at the top of the ranking. It owns Facebook and Instagram. The nature of the latter is based on photos and the presentation of certain lifestyles, but by young voters, it was used as a source of information about current events. In the case of protests in defense of women's rights, Instagram scored very high. This result may be explained by the fact that influencers incl. Krzysztof Gonciarz and Make Life Harder, showed great activity in reporting events using Insta Stories, providing other users with up-to-date information about the development of the affair. One unanticipated finding was that Twitter, of a political nature, ranks very low on the list. A possible explanation for these results may be that Twitter is targeted at a slightly older audience. On the other hand, the new TikTok social platform, popular in this age group, covers more and more topics, including politics (initially mainly music and dance – now important social and health issues, etc.). Snapchat obtained a poor result in both cases but is targeted to the studied age group. A possible explanation for this might be that it is a medium based on photos and short films focused more on communication in smaller closed groups.

As mentioned in the introduction, youth is the least active group at almost all areas of political participation. However, the results of this study show that young people are willing to be active in social media, which is their natural environment. These studies highlight that Polish first-time voters undertook various activities in social media concerning two cases of a political and social nature and

most of them did not limit themselves only to the passive viewing
of the news feed. In general, the activities requiring the least user
involvement, such as viewing, liking, and observing, gained the most
indications. One interesting finding is that commenting received
a similar number of hits as sharing a post of another user. These
relationships may partly be explained by the fact that commenting
requires user effort: the need to create and publish the content. The
user spends less time sharing, but it becomes more visible to his
friends, which, as in the case of a comment, is associated with a certain
manifestation of opinions. That requires courage. The answer *none
of the above* is polysemous. It may mean that users have performed
activities other than those mentioned or have not taken any actions
on social media at all.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this research provide insights into the use of social
media by Polish first-time voters in the face of two events with the
potential to be called a generation defining moment. The present
research aimed to examine the political use of social media by Pol-
ish first-time voters in two cases: the COVID-19 pandemic and
women's strikes. The political use of social media was defined by two
elements: the main social media channels and activities taken on so-
cial media by first-time voters. The second aim of this study was
to investigate whether selected cases can motivate young people
to increase their interest in politics.

The results demonstrated that the COVID-19 pandemic and
women's strikes increased interest in politics of Polish first-time vot-
ers (RQ1/RQ2). This means that selected events can be a motivator
to increase young people's interest in politics. With respect to the
next research questions (RQ3 / RQ4), it was found that the indicated
events were followed by young voters in various social media more
or less frequently. The most popular in this regard were social media

belonging to the technology giant Facebook, Inc., and the weakest result was generated by Snapchat. The last questions in this research (RQ5 / RQ6) sought to determine activities taken in social media by respondents concerning the selected cases. All activities listed in the catalog were indicated with high frequency by the respondents, with the remark that the more user involvement a given activity required, the less frequently it was undertaken by the user.

Understanding Generation Z and digitized first-time voters is understanding the new communication revolution. In the digitized world, political participation takes new forms, penetrating also the social media environment. Further studies, which take these issues into account, will need to be undertaken. The presented survey results have an exploratory nature, drawing attention to very current phenomena and behaviors towards contemporary socially important events. Nevertheless, it would be worthwhile to conduct a qualitative analysis in depth on this topic.

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MEDIA FRAMES IN RO.SPUTNIK.MD.
THE COVERAGE OF THE 2019 ROMANIAN PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN

ABSTRACT

The 2019 presidential campaign held significant national importance and garnered extensive coverage from the Romanian news media. Our research aimed to identify the prevailing frames used in portraying the two primary candidates, Klaus Iohannis and Viorica Dăncilă, as presented in a sample of articles (N=226) published by ro.sputnik.md during both rounds of the electoral campaign (October 12 to November 9 and November 15 to November 23, 2019). The content produced by ro.sputnik.md was of particular interest due to its status as a visible Romanian-language news outlet funded by the Kremlin. Through content analysis and lexical analysis, we sought to identify the media frames associated with each politician. Our qualitative textual analysis focused on headline types, linguistic hooks, and the use of sarcasm and irony. Additionally, our visual analysis examined the types of shots, angles utilized, and nonverbal language displayed in the published photos. Employing a mixed-methods approach, our examination of ro.sputnik.md's textual and visual content uncovered biases and political and ideological inclinations evident in the coverage of the two main presidential candidates' campaigns.

Keywords: media frames, electoral campaign, content analysis, visual analysis

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, concepts such *as propaganda, fake news, manipulation,* and *misinformation* have been increasingly circulating in the public space. However, these information disorders are not recent; they are old political communication practices adapted to the media development and the facilities brought by the digital age in spreading messages of any kind. In the context of elections, propaganda is used as a strategic tool to create a positive image of a candidate or party while undermining the credibility and reputation of opponents. Its primary objective is to persuade voters, often through emotional appeals, distorted information, or selective messaging. Propaganda techniques can include the use of catchy slogans, persuasive speeches, carefully crafted advertisements, and the manipulation of visuals and symbols to create a desired narrative. The current research conducted focused on the Sputnik news platform because it is known for its pro-Kremlin stance and has been accused of spreading propaganda and disinformation to shape public opinion and advance Russia's geopolitical agenda (Mogoş, Grapă, Şandru, 2022).

The content analysis and lexical analysis were applied to the sample of articles (N=226) about the two candidates, materials published by ro.sputnik.md during the election campaign, divided into three categories: articles about Viorica Dăncilă, articles about Klaus Iohannis, and articles about both of them. The visual frame analysis considers the types of shots, the angles of the photos, and the nonverbal language displayed in the photos published together with the sample articles."

LITERATURE REVIEW

FROM PROPAGANDA TO FAKE NEWS

Propaganda and fake news have become pervasive phenomena that increasingly impact society, leaving profound imprints on collective mindsets. These aspects extend beyond politics, economics, and diplomatic relations, affecting various domains such as culture and interpersonal interactions. The systematic exposure to propaganda and fake news creates information bubbles wherein individuals perceive themselves as possessors of absolute truth, often unaware that they could be victims of their own beliefs.

These two concepts are almost inseparable and work in tandem, sharing common objectives. Fake news serves as a support to propaganda, and the latter relies on the repetitive dissemination of often false ideas through fabricated news. Jacques Ellul describes propaganda as a sociological phenomenon rather than a unique creation intended for specific purposes. He considers propaganda as „a set of methods employed by an organized group that seeks to actively or passively involve a mass of psychologically unified individuals in its actions through psychological manipulations and organizational incorporation" (Ellul, 1973, p. 61).

Propaganda entails the systematic dissemination of ideas, theories, and opinions, primarily for political purposes, with the aim of influencing the masses to align with those in power (Voicu, 2018, p. 12).

The twentieth century witnessed the propagation of powerful ideologies through propaganda, ultimately destabilizing Europe and leading to the outbreak of two world wars. Notably, early researchers of this phenomenon emerged during that period. In his 1928 work, Bernays defines propaganda as „a consistent, enduring effort to create or shape events, and to influence the public's relations with an enterprise, idea, or group" (Bernays, 1928, p. 25). Between 1960 and 1980, Soviet international propaganda experienced continuous

expansion within the context of the Cold War. Propaganda materials were broadcast in over 80 languages, and the average weekly broadcast time increased by over 1,000 hours (Pynnöniemi, Rácz, 2016, p. 39).

Therefore, fake news cannot be considered a recent phenomenon. A recent study defines fake news as „news articles that are intentionally and verifiably false and have the potential to mislead readers" (Allcott, Gentzkow, 2017, p. 213). The study further highlights two primary motivations behind this phenomenon: financial gain and ideological agendas. On one hand, fake news often goes viral due to its sensational nature, attracting high levels of engagement that can be monetized. On the other hand, certain content creators produce fake news to promote specific ideas or individuals they support, often by discrediting others (Allcott, Gentzkow, 2017, p. 213).

The process of shaping public spaces through the elaboration and dissemination of news about political actors involves both symbolic elements (representations, discourse, images) and citizens' responsibility to evaluate received content. Various forms of written press attribute political significance to institutional activities and events, shaping a country's political landscape and serving as subjects of information and public debate (Gîfu, 2011, p. 5).

The means and methods of mass communication employed by propaganda heavily rely on the social-historical context, which impacts the process of influencing the public opinion. In order to effectively reach their target audience, propaganda messages often assume simpler forms, facilitating faster and easier dissemination.

POLITICAL FRAMES AND MEDIA REPRESENTATIONS

Frames play a crucial role in shaping public perceptions about events, individuals, phenomena, and situations. By combining facts with specific attributes or actions, frames could even result in stereotypes. Framing theory explores how these frames contribute to the formation of perceptions and beliefs in the public consciousness, making

them essential for developing our understanding of the world and society. People analyze and evaluate new experiences based on their previous encounters, using them as a lens for interpretation.

According to Scheufele and Tewksbury, frames are „tools for effectively presenting complex issues […] to lay audiences by aligning with their existing cognitive schemas" (Scheufele and Tewksbury, 2007, p. 11-12). Specifically, political frames often utilize metaphors to convey information to the public.

To better comprehend political phenomena, „complex and often ambiguous events and concerns are symbolically mined for moral truths and understandings presumed to be held by the audience, while the repeated presentations of similar scenarios teach the audience about the nature and causes of disorder" (Ericson, Baranek, and Chan, 1989, p. 16).

A significant aspect of political frames is the common practice in the media of employing fear frames. These frames exploit societal fears, attributing them to political actions due to the direct impact politicians' decisions and actions have on citizens' lives. Decades of studies in the field have not definitively determined whether the media generates people's fears or if existing societal fears (on various topics) drive the use of fear frames by the press (Altheide, 1997, p. 648).

„Suffering, misfortune, distress, and inconvenience form the content of contemporary news, but they are not ‚the problem.' The problem lies within the format organized around a narrative that starts with a general conclusion that something is wrong, and we know what it is!" (Altheide, 1997, p. 654). In essence, the media presents negative aspects of society, often in the form of a story or narration, that begin with the premise that something bad has occurred. Moral principles and other collectively accepted norms are utilized to present what the message producers consider to be the truth.

In today's world, numerous examples of media outlets disseminating propaganda messages online exist. Some do so explicitly, while others employ more subtle approaches. However, their shared objective is to persuade.

RO.SPUTNIK.MD – A RUSSIAN
FUNDED NEWSMEDIA OUTLET

According to official data, ro.sputnik.md is an online platform established on November 10, 2014, serving as the Romanian version of the international publication Sputnik. It functions as a news agency, disseminating multimedia content in 30 different languages across numerous European countries (Sputnik, 2020). The platform is funded by the Government of the Russian Federation. A journalistic investigation conducted by Romanian media outlet Recorder presented official documents confirming that „Sputnik is a network of news sites and radio stations directly controlled by the Russian government through the media conglomerate Rossia Segodnya" (Ungureanu, 2018). Furthermore, „Approximately one-third of the approximately $1 billion that the Kremlin allocates annually to the media it controls goes to institutions producing and broadcasting news in foreign languages, such as Sputnik and RT (Russia Today)" (Shuster, 2015, cited in Voicu, 2018, p. 57). The name „Sputnik" itself refers to the world's first artificial satellite launched by the Soviet Union in 1957 (NASA, n.d.).

No metrics regarding the traffic/audience of ro.sputnik.md website is publicly available on platforms such as SATI (Audience and Internet Traffic Study).

Since its establishment in 2014, international publications have highlighted the potential danger posed by such a news agency, whose credibility may be questionable. The Telegraph states, „The radio station and the website will show Western media that everyone has the right to live in their own way. Russia has launched a new state-run international media brand called Sputnik to counter what it calls a unipolar worldview promoted by the United States, which it sees as overseen and destructive" (Parfitt, 2014).

In the description the website, ro.sputnik.md claims to advocate for a multipolar world, offering alternative information about the interests, history, traditions, and culture of each country. They assert that they occupy a unique niche in the press, and the accompanying photographs in their articles are provided by an international network

of correspondents (Sputnik, 2020). An Expert Forum study, quoted by Radio Free Europe Romania, clearly indicates that the materials published and the editorial style promoted by ro.sputnik.md are representative of Russian propaganda, albeit subtly (Popescu, 2019).

In recent years, ro.sputnik.md has been at the center of controversial discussions regarding its objectives and the way it conveys messages that incite negative reactions from the audience. Internationally, the biased coverage of news by publications such as Sputnik or Russia Today has faced repeated criticism from the West. In 2016, the European Parliament raised concerns about these two publications, considering them genuine threats. Additionally, several American and European politicians have accused Sputnik and Russia Today of intervening in the domestic policies of other countries and making unfounded allegations. In response, Moscow dismissed these accusations as baseless (Rossiya Segodnya, 2019).

In Romania, the name ro.sputnik.md is associated with scandal. During the protests in early 2017, which aimed to combat corruption and changes in justice laws, the publication carried alarmist headlines about a coup d'etat, a civil war, George Soros, and the failure of representative democracy in Romania (Voicu, 2018, p. 261-263). Ro.sputnik.md responded to the accusations of misinformation by quoting Confucius: „The hardest thing of all is to find a black cat in a dark room, especially if there is no cat" (Voicu, 2018, p.163). Four days after the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, on February 28, 2022, the ro.sputnik.md website was banned in Romania.

HEADLINE CONSTRUCTION, BETWEEN INFORMATION TO CLICKBAIT

Newspaper headlines serve two distinct functions: to summarize the article or to highlight its most important aspects (Kuiken, Schuth, Spitters & Marx, 2017, p. 1302). It is the journalist's responsibility to find and propose a title that is closely related to the text, accurately synthesizes the information, and represents the topic effectively within the structure of the article.

The classifications of journalistic titles vary among authors, as do the criteria for classification. Consequently, typologies of titles can be distinguished based on grammar, the lexico-semantic component, or the stylistic procedures employed (Cavasnîi Cătănescu, 2006). In this paper, we will provide a broad classification of titles, such as:

- *Informative titles*, which offer readers a concise overview of the information presented in the preceding journalistic material.
- *Interrogative titles*, which challenge the reader's curiosity and engagement.
- *Exclamatory-imperative titles*, commonly found in publications that exploit sensationalism.
- *Quoted titles*, particularly used in the case of interviews (Rad, 2009, pp. 156-159).

The headline plays a crucial role in the structure of a journalistic text, often determining whether or not a person will read the article. Its importance is amplified in the online environment, where users have the option to easily scroll and search for other content, making the headline a significant challenge for journalists.

Clickbait encompasses stylistic and narrative tools that act as bait to generate curiosity in readers, enticing them to click on the title and continue reading (Blom and Hansen, 2015, p. 87). Clickbait is a broad concept, covering various techniques that share the goal of attracting attention and piquing the reader's curiosity. Studies analyzing clickbait conclude that it is an attempt to entice the audience with „a headline that does not adhere to traditional journalistic criteria, aiming to keep the reader on the webpage for as long as possible, rather than informing them" (García-Orosa, Gallur-Santorun, and López-García, 2017, pp. 1261-1277). In other words, the content behind a clickbait title does not necessarily need to be sensitive, comprehensive, or factual; a sensational headline alone can achieve its intended purpose.

VISUAL LANGUAGE ELEMENTS

„Photography was used to cover wars and events, but was also later used to disguise the presence of the politically inconvenient aspects" (Gu, Kropotov and Yarochkin, 2017 p. 4). In the realm of visual communication, certain aspects play a crucial role in decoding the messages conveyed by press photography.

ANGLES

The angles chosen in photography subtly guide the viewer, indicating the approach taken towards the subject being photographed. There of the most common angles used in photography are:

- *Eye-level/normal angle*: The camera lens is positioned at eye level with the subject, capturing them from the same horizontal plane. This perspective allows the audience to relate to the characters as equals (Thompson and Bowen, 2009, p. 40).
- *High angle*: A high angle shot typically presents the subject as smaller, weaker, subservient, or in a compromised position. It conveys a sense of power imbalance or vulnerability (Thompson and Bowen, 2009, p. 41).
- *Low angle:* The low angle shot is the opposite of the high angle shot. The subject seen from below appears larger, more significant, and powerful. It creates a sense of dominance (Thompson and Bowen, 2009, p. 42).

TYPES OF SHOTS

Different types of shots in press photography determine the amount of information contained within the frame. Here are the main types commonly used:

- *Long shot/Wide shot:* This type captures the entire subject, including the surrounding environment. It provides a broader context, showcasing the location, time, and general attributes such as gender, clothing, and movements (Thompson and Bowen, 2009, p. 15).

- *American Shot/Medium long shot*: Traditionally framed to cut off the leg just below or above the knee, the American shot maintains prominence on the physiognomy, gender, clothing details, and facial expressions (Thompson and Bowen, 2009, p. 15).
- *Medium Shot*: This shot cuts off the human figure below the waist and above the wrists when arms are down. It prominently displays the human figure, including facial features, eyes, direction of gaze, clothing, and hair, while restricting freedom of gesture due to the tighter framing (Thompson and Bowen, 2009, p. 16).
- *Close-Up*: The close-up shot offers a wealth of information concerning facial expressions and details. It focuses on capturing the intimate emotions conveyed through the eyes, mouth, and facial muscles, revealing aspects like health conditions, facial hair in men, and makeup use in women (Thompson and Bowen, 2009, p. 18).

NONVERBAL LANGUAGE

Nonverbal language, including gestures, often speaks louder than words. In press photography, clichés associated with nonverbal elements are employed to suggest a particular attitude or perspective towards the subject being photographed. This is particularly evident when portraying political figures. Here are some examples of suggestive nonverbal elements commonly used in media representations:

- *Smiles*: Studies have shown that smiles carry a universal meaning across cultures. Women are often perceived as having greater facial expressions and smiling more frequently than men, which is a result of socialization (Chelcea, Ivan, Chelcea, 2005, pp. 60, 64).
- *Gestures*: Placing hands close to the body is a common nonverbal way to express a desire to appear narrower or more self-contained (Chelcea, Ivan, Chelcea, 2005, p. 149).
- Aspects related to visual communication are particularly important in decoding the message sent by press photography.

RESEARCH DESIGN

The objective of this research is to examine the discursive techniques employed by ro.sputnik.md during the 2019 presidential campaign to shape the narratives surrounding Klaus Iohannis and Viorica Dăncilă.

- RQ 1: How are the news headlines about Viorica Dăncilă and Klaus Iohannis constructed on ro.sputnik.md during the election campaign?
- RQ 2: How is the image of the candidates portrayed through the accompanying photographs in the articles?
- RQ 3: What is the frequency of articles posted about Viorica Dăncilă and Klaus Iohannis?
- RQ 4: What are the main frames associated with Viorica Dăncilă and Klaus Iohannis?

To address these research questions, a combination of qualitative and quantitative content analysis is deemed appropriate. The analysis will focus on the articles (accompanied by images) published on ro.sputnik.md between October 12 and November 9, 2019 (first-round campaign) and November 15 – November 23 (second-round campaign) that specifically discuss Viorica Dăncilă and Klaus Iohannis.

The research methodology employed involves the utilization of a content analysis grid. The textual analysis will examine the headline types, linguistic elements employed to capture attention, the framing techniques utilized, and the presence of sarcasm and irony. The visual analysis will consider the types of shots, angles of the photographs, and the nonverbal language displayed in the accompanying images.

The content analysis grid is structured as follows:

Headline Analysis:

- Language Level: Examination of main typologies found, identification of words that are out of the ordinary, presence of war-related lexicon, linguistic elements employed to capture attention.

- Message Level: Analysis of frames utilized, identification of actions and attributes associated with Viorica Dăncilă and Klaus Iohannis, evaluation of any employment of sarcastic or ironic approaches, identification of defamatory messages.

Image Analysis:

- Angles Used: Assessment of the angles employed, including normal, high angle shot, or low angle shot.
- Types of Shots: Examination of the types of shots utilized, such as long shot/wide shot, American (medium long shot), medium, and close-up.

Nonverbal Elements: Analysis of nonverbal elements, with a focus on facial expressions.

The data were collected manually from the ro.sputnik.md website using specific options from the advanced search menu, based on the defined time period criteria.

The selected time frame encompasses both the first and second rounds of the electoral campaign, spanning from October 12 to November 9, 2019, and from November 15 to November 23.

The analysis focused on a sample of 226 articles, examining the content related to the two candidates. Out of these articles, 121 were about Klaus Iohannis, 55 were about Viorica Dăncilă, and a third category was identified, consisting of articles that discussed both candidates.

THE TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

Our initial observation reveals that out of the total articles analyzed in the research, 24% of them mention or reference Viorica Dăncilă, while 54% focus on Klaus Iohannis. A significant portion of 22% is allocated to articles discussing both candidates, as depicted in Figure 16. In other words, Klaus Iohannis enjoys greater exposure on the ro.sputnik.md website during the election campaign compared to his opponent.

Figure 16. Number of Articles in the Election Campaign
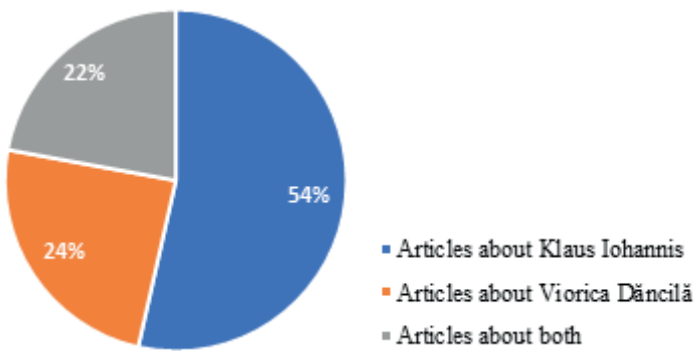
Source: Authors' own elaboration

In terms of headline typology, informative titles were the most prevalent on ro.sputnik.md, accounting for 40% of the sample. Notably, exclamatory headlines hold a significant share of 27%, securing second place. It is worth noting that 7% of titles combine both exclamation and quotation marks, suggesting that the use of these imperative constructions is a common practice for the journalists at ro.sputnik.md. Interrogative titles constitute 16% of the sample, while 10% of the headlines feature a quote from someone's words as the focal point, as illustrated in Figure 17.

Figure 17. Types of Titles
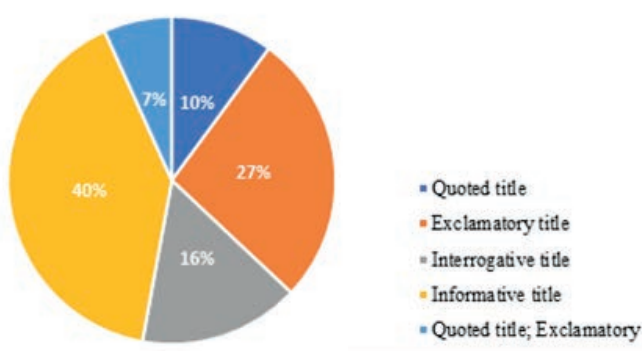
Source: Authors' own elaboration

Since a simple categorization of titles is insufficient to fully comprehend their construction, the next step is perform a linguistic analysis of the headlines. As outlined in the methodology, several categories emerged, among which we mention the words or combinations of hook-type words that deviate from the norm: words such as „Scandal" or „Shocking," among others. We identified such terms in n=135 titles out of the n=226 analyzed. These structures, including phrases like „historical record," „last-minute surprise," „bomb survey," „last-minute message," „total success," „big scandal," „sensational revelation," „fulminating message," and „terrible reaction", share a common trait: ambiguity. They aim to capture attention through shocking expressions, albeit with incomplete information. Consequently, the public is left questioning: What kind of survey is it? What surprise? Who broke a record? and so on. Another broader category we generically labelled as „hook-type words or linguistic elements that attract attention" encompasses a wide range of stylistic devices, primarily metaphors, rhetorical interrogations, constructions in the vocative or imperative forms, the use of ellipses or capital letters, as well as absolute superlatives or comparative superiority. Additionally, we included a third category labelled as the *lexicon of war*.

We will examine some of the most illustrative titles we encountered. „Dăncilă launches the hottest challenge for PNL – everyone is interested!" („*Dăncilă lansează cea mai tare provocare pentru PNL. Interesează pe toată lumea*", 2019), published on the site on 14/10/2019, clearly employs the absolute superlative, intensifying its impact through repetition to emphasize the scope of the challenge. However, the phrasing remains ambiguous, as the text itself does not provide further details. We only learn that it concerns Dăncilă's conflict with the opposition, which is neither unexpected nor unusual, yet somehow „everyone is interested!" The exclamation at the end aims to make any reader feel targeted and believe that the article is relevant to them. The frequent use of breaks in title composition creates ellipses in both grammar and meaning.

In another title from 11/22/2019, „The conclusion of the campaign: ‚They are tired of this scandalous president, who acts like a mechanical doll with a key!'" („S-au săturat de acest preşedinte scandalagiu, întors cu cheia", 2019), we find all the aforementioned language elements once again. The phrase „The conclusion of the campaign" is presented as a kind of definitive statement, yet we do not know who makes this assertion as the subsequent quote lacks a source. Only through the news article do we discover that it is a statement made by Viorica Dăncilă herself, not a specialist in sociology or statistics who can offer such judgments supported by evidence. The metaphor of a mechanical doll with a key clearly suggests the idea of a puppet, a subservient individual controlled from the outside and not accountable for their actions. The exclamation mark at the end of the title conveys not only the author's sentiment expressed in the statement but also the journalist's indignation in selecting and quoting it.

These are just a few examples of the controversial titles analyzed in our research. It was observed that the linguistic elements designed to attract attention (stylistic figures, imperative constructions, ellipses, capital letters, etc.) are frequently employed in titles on ro.sputnik.md. Specifically, they appear in n=170 out of the n=226 titles analyzed.

Figure 18. Title Construction Techniques
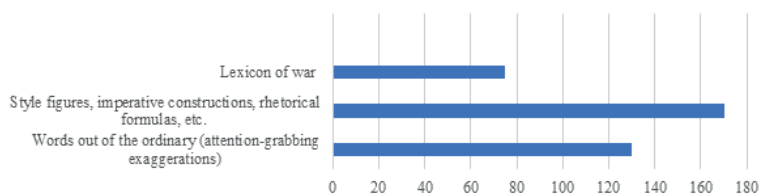
Source: Authors' own elaboration

The lexicon of war is identified in n=75 of the titles, as shown in Figure 18. Consequently, a substantial proportion of titles on ro.sputnik.md during the 2019 presidential election campaign associate the „relationship" of the main candidates with an actual war. Expressions

such as „great victory," „diversion," „total war," „his appeals are closed,"
„he is crushed," „propelled," „he is instructed," „destructive," „pact,"
„shattered," and „nuclear" are just a few examples.

In the qualitative analysis of the titles, we identified a series of ac-
tions and attributes frequently associated with each of the two can-
didates. In the case of Viorica Dăncilă, we found only two directly
expressed attributes: brave and intelligent. Based on the actions
associated with her, the audience can infer other character traits:
assertive, adaptable, resilient, challenging, accusatory, tenacious,
impressive, responsive, transformative, threatening, committed,
decisive, and forceful, among others.

On the other hand, numerous attributes are associated with Klaus
Iohannis: „enslaved", „fearful", „arrogant", „governor", „abolished",
„destroyed", „a moral accident", „official thief", „puppet", „unscrupu-
lous dictator", „cowardice in Cotroceni", and „scandalous president".
Regarding actions, we identified structures such as: „making mistakes",
„creating diversions", „attending Orban's training", „avoiding confronta-
tions", „making mocking ironies against the Army", „defying partners",
„committing unforgivable sins", „blocking the import of gold to the
country", and more. Additionally, passive voice verbs were used, such
as: „his plan being overturned by the European Commission", „be-
ing revealed", „being mocked", „being accused by judges", and „his
supporters revolting against him and destroying him".

Moving further in the qualitative analysis of the headlines, this time
focusing on the message conveyed, it is noteworthy to observe the
extent to which ro.sputnik.md journalists employ irony and sarcasm
in their headlines and whether the conveyed ideas are defamatory
towards the involved actors.

Figure 19. Irony / Sarcasm in the Titles
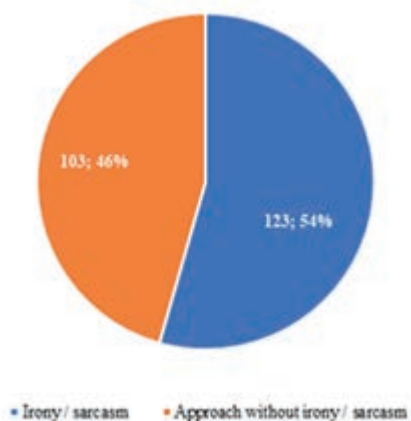
Source: Authors' own elaboration

As depicted in Figure 19, 54% of the analyzed titles treat the subject with irony or sarcasm. More intriguingly, n=71 titles out of n=226 contain denigrating ideas, statements, or insinuations about Klaus Iohannis, while no other titles contain any defamatory messages related to Viorica Dăncilă (Figure 20). As a result, as we initially demonstrated in the data analysis, over half of the news articles from the election campaign published by ro.sputnik.md focus on Iohannis, and now we discover a significant percentage of defamatory messages associated with him. These findings indicate a biased attitude of the journalists, who, far from being impartial, criticize one candidate while praising the other in the midst of the campaign.

If we were to create a portrait of the two candidates based solely on the linguistic techniques mentioned above and the attributes associated with them, we could conclude that Viorica Dăncilă is a brave, intelligent, and powerful woman capable of easily dismantling her political opponents. In contrast, Klaus Iohannis is depicted as a coward, a traitor, and a puppet.

Figure 20. Defamatory News
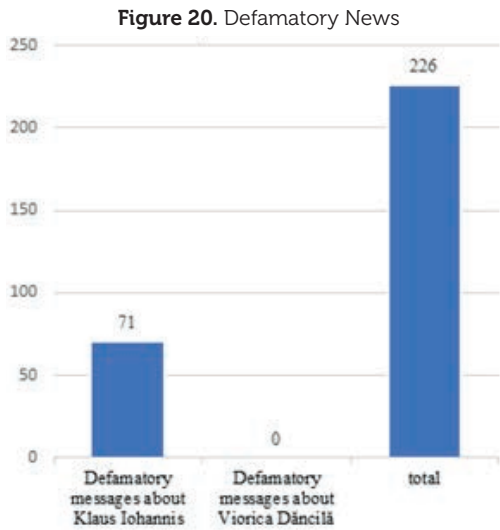
Source: Authors' own elaboration

If we were to make a portrait of the two, as it is outlined by the techniques related to language, mentioned above and based strictly on the attributes associated with them, then we could conclude that Viorica Dăncilă is a brave, intelligent and strong woman, who can easily destroy her political opponents, while Klaus Iohannis is a coward, a traitor and a puppet.

THE VISUAL FRAMING OF THE CANDIDATES

We discovered that in 72% of the images featuring Viorica Dăncilă, she is photographed from a normal angle. However, in 21% of cases, a lower angle is used, while a high angle is employed in 7% of the images. Considering the significance of each angle and the fact that Dăncilă is photographed in 28% of cases from angles other than the normal one, it can be deduced that the photographs often portray her in a humble and inferior position rather than making her appear imposing or superior.

In terms of shot types, close-ups are the most commonly used, accounting for 47% of the pictures, followed by medium shots at 36%, American shots at 14%, and long shots at only 3%. Therefore, in terms of the information conveyed by the photographs, it is clear that the most relevant details revolve around Dăncilă's facial features and expressions. She is the central element of the photo.

Figure 21. Viorica Dăncilă's gestures
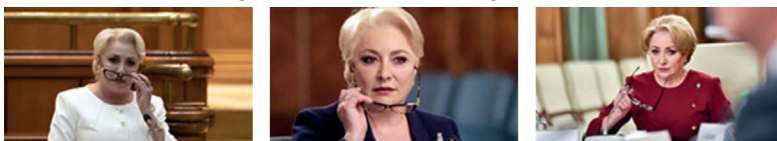
Source: ro.sputnik.md, November 4th, 2019

Given the predominance of close-ups, it is expected that nonverbal elements, especially facial expressions, will be more noticeable. Consequently, in 26% of the pictures, we observe Dăncilă smiling, in 22% she has a focused expression, and notably, in 21% of the photos, there is a distinct gesture involving her glasses.

Dăncilă is captured in various poses and contexts, often seen wearing glasses, a gesture that could be interpreted as a reference to culture and elitism. In 14% of the pictures, she appears serious with a furrowed brow, in 10% her hands are positioned next to her body, and in smaller proportions, she is depicted making dictatorial gestures (5%) or engaging in expansive body movements (2%). Overall, the photos on ro.sputnik.md show a smiling Viorica Dăncilă, frequently focused and sober, with her hands positioned near her body, and without many expansive body movements.

In the analysis of photos featuring Klaus Iohannis, the aspects are much more diverse. On ro.sputnik.md, he is rarely photographed from a normal angle (54%), often appearing from a lower angle perspective (37%). Only 9% of the pictures with him are taken from a high angle. This indicates that Iohannis is often portrayed as imposing, powerful, and superior, which contrasts significantly with Dăncilă's representation.

Regarding shot types, Iohannis is most commonly captured in medium shots (51%), which provide information not only about him but also about his surroundings and companions. Close-ups account for 24% of the images, significantly fewer than those featuring Dăncilă (47%). American shots are used in 15% of the pictures, while long shots make up 10%. Thus, it becomes apparent that the approach to creating Iohannis' image differs significantly from the one employed for Dăncilă.

In 36% of the pictures, we see Iohannis smiling, and in 30%, his hands are positioned next to his body. His facial expressions suggest concentration in 12% of cases, and in 7% he appears serious with a sober demeanor. Unlike Dăncilă, Iohannis does not make gestures involving glasses. Instead, he utilizes expansive gestures with his arms (10%) and occasionally exhibits dictatorial gestures (5%), as depicted in Figure 22.

Figure 22. Nonverbal elements
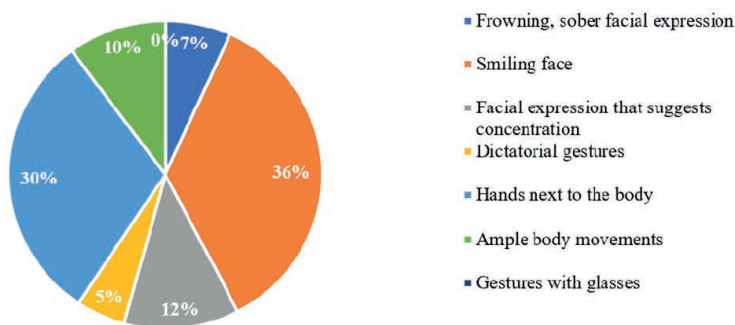
Source: Authors' own elaboration

Visually, both candidates are represented as smiling, indicating a friendly attitude. Iohannis tends to keep his arms positioned next to his body more frequently, while Dăncilă appears noticeably more focused and composed. Notably, Iohannis employs expansive arm gestures five times more frequently in photos. Interestingly, both candidates display an equal occurrence of dictatorial gestures (5%), which adds an unexpected element to their visual representation.

Figure 23. Dăncilă and Iohannis pictured together

Source: ro.sputnik.md, November 21, 2019

During the specified time frame, only one photo depicting both Iohannis and Dăncilă together was published on ro.sputnik.md, which was repeatedly used for various news articles (Figure 23). The photo captures them in a medium shot, photographed from a normal angle. A clear discrepancy is evident: Dăncilă appears engaged, speaking or presenting something, while Iohannis appears disinterested, looking in the opposite direction. The decision of ro.sputnik.md to utilize a single photo representing both candidates indicate their approach. They chose to portray them separately, emphasizing their differences and highlighting the positive attributes of one candidate in contrast to the perceived flaws of the other.

Analysis of the coverage reveals an imbalance in frequency during the election campaign (Figure 24). The number of daily news articles published about Iohannis (represented in blue) far exceeds those about Dăncilă (represented in red). It is evident that a greater number of materials were published daily about Iohannis. The highest number of news articles posted on a single day throughout the analyzed period was 14, which occurred on November 5, prior to the first-round elections. In contrast, on the same day, there were only two articles about Dăncilă.

Figure 24. Frequency of Articles About the Main
Actors of the Presidential Campaign
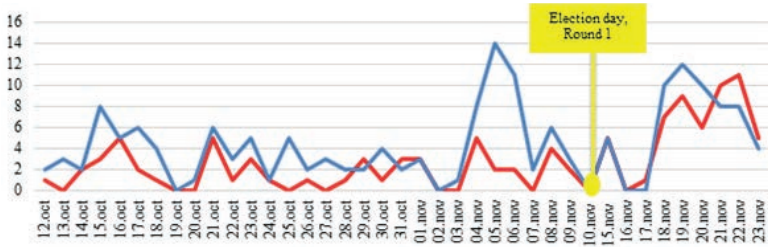
Source: Authors' own elaboration

Upon entering the second stage of the election campaign, specifically the run-off round, there was an increase in the frequency of articles published about the two candidates. Following two days of relative relaxation on the topic (November 16-17), the number of articles surged. The majority of news articles about Viorica Dăncilă were published on November 22, the day before the end of the campaign, totalling 11 items. On the same day, there were fewer articles written about Iohannis, with a total of 8 articles.

Frame analysis conducted identified a series of 17 frames associated with the two candidates, providing a response to RQ4. These frames are listed in Figure 10.

FRAME ANALYSIS

Among the top 5 frames used, there is a direct focus on how ro.sputnik.md represents the two candidates. In 42 of the analyzed articles, the frame portrays Viorica Dăncilă as victorious and strong. In 38 articles, Iohannis is depicted as a lazy and peculiar dictator, a colonist, and an enemy of the people. Additionally, in 38 articles, Dăncilă is presented as a fighter. While the frames regarding Dăncilă remain consistent, aligning with a common theme, those related to Iohannis are contradictory. In another 30 articles, the president is portrayed as a weak man and a coward.

Figure 25. Frames
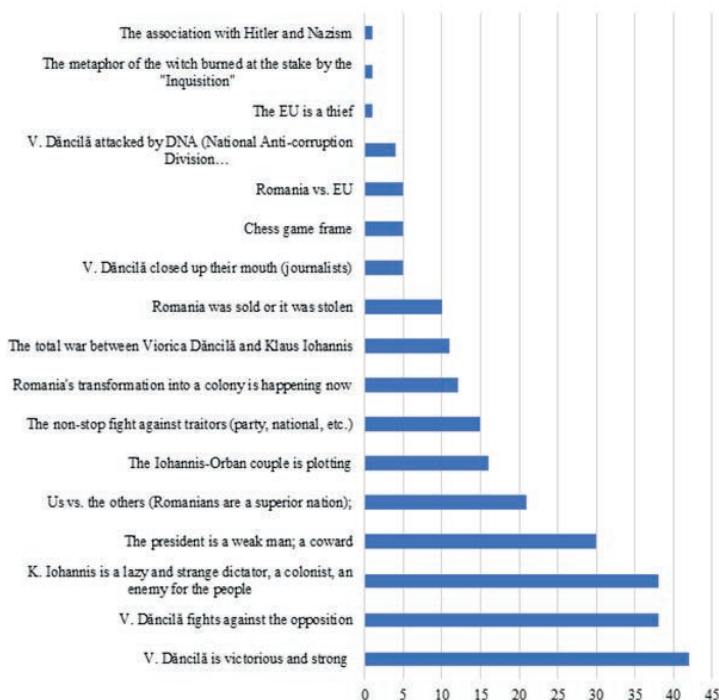
Source: Authors' own elaboration

Another notable frame is the "us vs. the others," which portrays Romanians as a superior nation. In 15 cases, there is a continuous fight against traitors, although it remains unclear who the adversaries are. An atypical issue is the portrayal of the Iohannis-Orban Couple in 16 articles, where they are depicted as plotting either against the state, the government, the opposition, or even against each other. The frame of the chess game, found in 5 headlines, evokes a strategic element.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The quantitative analysis reveals a lack of balance in the coverage of Dăncilă and Iohannis. The majority of analyzed articles focus on Klaus Iohannis (54%), with only 24% dedicated to Viorica Dăncilă, while the remaining 22% cover both candidates. Furthermore, 71 out of the 226 headlines analyzed contain defamatory messages targeting the candidate of the National Liberal Party (PNL), whereas no such headlines are found about Dăncilă, the candidate of the Social Democratic Party (PSD).

The headlines follow a pattern aimed at generating clickbait. They employ linguistic elements that attract attention such as metaphors, rhetorical interrogations, imperative or vocative constructions, along with hook-words and extraordinary claims. Additionally, war-related terminology is commonly used. The headlines are mostly informative, followed by exclamatory, interrogative, simultaneously quoted and exclamatory titles, and lastly, quoted titles.

Irony or sarcasm are frequently employed when discussing Klaus Iohannis and Viorica Dăncilă. Through the research, a series of attributes and actions associated with the two candidates have been identified. In terms of language representation, Iohannis is described as enslaved or abolished, while Dăncilă is characterized as brave and intelligent.

Regarding the visual composition of the two candidates through photographs, certain perceptions are induced in the public, which do not always align with the aforementioned descriptions. In the case of Viorica Dăncilă, the low angle is used in only 21% of the cases, whereas Iohannis is photographed from a low angle more frequently, at a proportion of 37%. According to interpretations by theorists, this type of angle suggests the photographed character's greatness, strength, and significance. Thus, to some extent, Iohannis may be perceived as more imposing than Dăncilă visually.

Most of the time, Dăncilă is captured smiling, displaying focused behavior, gesturing with her glasses, and maintaining a sober facial expression with hands next to her body. She rarely employs dictatorial

gestures or wide movements with open arms. These nonverbal cues, along with discreet gestures and hands positioned close to the body, indicate that Dăncilă sometimes feels uncomfortable and focused, displaying certain fears in initiating dialogues. These elements contradict the attributes associated with her through language (brave, strong, intelligent, etc.). The frequent use of the glasses gesture (21%) suggests a deliberate attempt to convey traits such as intelligence, tenacity, professionalism, and concentration.

Iohannis is perceived as more important than Dăncilă, considering the frequency of using the low angle. However, when it comes to the high angle, which typically implies inferiority and weakness, it is used more often in pictures featuring Iohannis compared to Dăncilă. This contradiction indicates that ro.sputnik.md is inconsistent in their statements and representations.

In photographs, Klaus Iohannis is predominantly depicted in medium shots, smiling, with hands next to his body. He appears focused, occasionally displaying open arms, and rarely adopts a sober demeanor or uses dictatorial gestures. He exudes a more relaxed and confident presence in various circumstances.

The identified frames are derived from the themes employed by Sputnik, leveraging national specificity, cultural elements, populist references, and exploiting the nationalist pride of ro.sputnik.md followers. Additionally, they employ emotional triggers like fear to captivate attention.

Based on our research findings, it is evident that ro.sputnik.md engages in pro-Viorica Dăncilă propaganda by systematically disseminating defamatory messages about her opponent, while consistently portraying her in a positive light.

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ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE AND THE MEDIA: ISSUES REGARDING DISINFORMATION

ABSTRACT

The chapter focuses on the issues at the intersection of journalism, the functioning of media organizations and the use of Artificial Intelligence, especially in the context of disinformation. While AI is now moving into the mainstream, media institutions have been using AI for some time. AI is giving journalists more power, however, by doing so, it also brings some challenges. The text provides examples of good practices in the media referring to the use of AI and journalistic work in the field of disinformation. It also presents results of content analyses of opinion-forming newspapers in the UK and Poland on disinformation and AI – technologies which might both contribute to this phenomenon as well as assist in fighting threats in communication processes.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence, AI, Media, Journalism, Disinformation

While AI is now moving into the mainstream (Vincent, 2022), media institutions have been using AI for some time. Already in 2019 almost half of news institutions used AI in their work as indicated in the *New powers, new responsibilities. A global survey of journalism and artificial intelligence* report prepared by the 'Polis' think tank at the London School of Economics and Political Science together with the Google News Initiative in the framework of the Journalism AI project. According to the report, AI is a significant part of journalism already, however the report has pointed out the fact that it is unevenly distributed. As Beckett (2019), author of the report, underlines "AI is giving journalists more power, but with that comes editorial and ethical responsibilities", it also "has the potential for wide-ranging and profound influence on how journalism is made and consumed". This study presents the promises and perils of AI use in journalism and media organizations, paying special attention to questions related to disinformation. It also discusses media coverage of topics connected with disinformation and artificial intelligence.

AI is used in journalism to analyse extensive data, organise data, find patterns, create reports and summaries, translate into different languages, recommend materials and help with their personalization (maintaining the balance of maximizing personal experiences and at the same time minimizing filter bubbles), as well as search for various information or to protect against plagiarism. It can also be used in quite narrow areas, such as automating certain functions. Many media organizations have developed in-house versions of the Natural Language Generation (NLG) tools that produce journalistic articles: the BBC has Juicer, the Washington Post has Heliograf, and nearly a third of the content published by Bloomberg is generated by a system called Cyborg (Chase, 2020). However, "these systems can only produce articles where highly structured data is available as an input, such as video of a football match, or spreadsheet data from a company's annual return. They cannot write articles with flair, imagination, or in-depth analysis" (Ibid.). Article generating systems will not replace human journalists in the foreseeable future but they may assist journalist in their daily work.

This new situation is challenging for journalists as they need to acquire new skills such as understanding technology issues and having a heightened sense of ethical issues in journalism – ranging from dealing with copyrights and other legal issues to building AI solutions in journalism which require the creation of teams with members representing not only different fields but also coming from different backgrounds to prevent biases that can be inherent in these solutions. Otherwise, automatically generated content, characterized by low quality and unchecked by journalists, can significantly undermine trust in the media, as among different fears about the harmful effects of AI-generated texts, there is the most common one that the products of these systems are unreliable.

This chapter is divided into two parts: the first one presents examples of good practices in the media referring to the AI use and journalistic work in the field of disinformation; the second one shows results of content analyses of opinion-forming newspapers in the UK and Poland on disinformation and AI, which might both contribute to this phenomenon as well as assist in fighting threats in communication processes.

THE USE OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE IN JOURNALISTIC WORK IN CONNECTION TO THE ISSUES OF DISINFORMATION

In the context of the topic of this chapter – i.e. disinformation – there are some initiatives worth mentioning at the intersection of journalism and AI. We will look closer into the ones presented at the Journalism AI Festival. In 2021 a team from 'Code for Africa' gave a presentation on 'Battling Disinformation Using Machine Learning' (PolisLSE, 2021). The CivicSignal platform used machine learning and natural language processing (NLP) tools developed at MIT to detect how the 'meta narrative' was evolving or being subverted. When decoding narratives it monitored media via a database of over 11 million articles.

They underline that 'mis-/dis-information is a structural problem that needs structural solutions'. By tracking the narratives they try to understand how local African media in specific countries cover several issues (e.g. media reports on Russia or on COVID-19) and are able to identify for example a spike in coverage of political interests in the chosen African country or to make comparative analyses. They are looking at top themes, top organizations or top people in the narratives. Moreover, they find claims made on both media and social media to avoid co-option of media outlets to spread propaganda or mis-/dis-information. To increase media resistance to disinformation they cooperate with entities such as The Global Disinformation Index (GDI) to construct Risk Assessment for Media Market, rating for each medium low, medium, high or maximum risk to publish disinformation.

Another project, presented in 2022, concerned 'Using AI to identify manipulated narratives online', in which 'The Times' and 'Ippen Media' took part (PolisLSE, 2022). Inspired by existing research (Da San Martino, 2020) they collected and studied the articles from state-controlled media outlets (such as Russia Today or Sputnik) from two angles – the first one being linguistic analysis (topic modelling; identifying examples of propagandistic content within texts) and the second one being network and dissemination analysis (using article URLs collecting Twitter data about how articles have spread and determine whether they have spread in a way that could be classified as manipulated). The results were meant to serve as a kind of early warning system. By scoring an article from 1 to 100 ('Manipulation Score'), the probability of it being used in a propaganda campaign was defined in four aspects: a) source, b) language (labelling or loaded language, appeal to fear among others), c) coordination within Twitter, and d) bot-like activity. These two examples show the great potential of using AI in the media and the work of journalists.

The creative use of technology by those employed in the media can be useful in solving today's problems such as disinformation. At this stage, it is necessary to popularize and educate people working in the media to use AI in their tasks in a thoughtful and innovative

way. And as we can see, there are more and more such initiatives. What is time-consuming and repetitive can be automated (Czopek, 2021). Thanks to this, journalists can have more time to create more ambitious content. The field of investigative journalism or political journalism, for instance, can also benefit from cooperation between journalists, various media organizations and institutions dealing with AI, such as universities or specialist companies. The work done by the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (Beckett, 2020; Google News Initiative, n.d.), as it has been among the early adopters of AI and machine learning in journalism, may serve as an illustration here. Another example might be the Washington Post (2019) which established a computational political journalism R&D lab in the newsroom in collaboration with Northwestern University. Also in Poland, more and more media companies use machine learning models at all stages of operation, from creating personalized content recommendations, through monetization, to increasing engagement. Closer cooperation between media institutions, technology companies and scientific institutions may also develop in the coming years. Now we are mainly dealing with the automation of media processes (Szpecht, 2020). However, the quality of journalistic materials remains a challenge, as it depends on the skills of individual journalists and editors running a given medium.

MEDIA ABOUT DISINFORMATION AND AI

To present media coverage regarding the issue of disinformation and artificial intelligence the qualitative content analysis (Schreier, 2012) of leading, opinion-forming and trusted newspapers in the UK and Poland (according to the Institute of Media Monitoring, IMM, 2021a; Sweney, 2020) on the example of 'The Guardian' and 'Rzeczpospolita', was performed. The latter press title is also included by the IMM in the Top5 most opinion-forming media from all sectors (press, television, radio and Internet) in 2020 and 2021. The

research was conducted in the period from March 2020 to March 2021 by entering into search machines of the internet portals of these newspapers the words: 'disinformation' and 'artificial intelligence'. In 2020, the number of media publications on disinformation doubled during the year (IMM, 2021b). The first wave of COVID-19 fueled the media discussion about fake news and it is interesting to explore the perspective of credible and influential press titles on the subject, especially in the context of the use of new technologies. The aim of the study was to check how the media wrote about disinformation and what the references to artificial intelligence were.

The Guardian analysis showed that many social media platforms struggled to limit coronavirus misinformation. Many texts referred to the fact that social media platforms (such as Facebook, Instagram, YouTube or Twitter), although they were taking down posts containing false information, monitoring the content and linking to the World Health Organization's virus page when necessary, they were unable to control, effectively, the volume of conspiracy theory and disinformation. What is worth noting is the fact that, for example, YouTube initially prohibited the monetization of videos about COVID-19 under its "sensitive events" policy, however in April it expanded monetization of content mentioning or featuring coronavirus to all creators and news organizations. Experts indicated that these companies might be forced to rely more heavily on artificial intelligence tools to moderate content while employees were forced to work from home as in many cases, their moderation efforts had not been sufficient. Thus at the root of this incapacity of social media lie two factors according to one of the specialist in the public understanding of technology: a) the scale of the volume of content that has to be moderated (machine-learning technology may help here, however it needs to be developed more), b) the business models of the platforms, which prioritise "user engagement", militate against more robust editorial control (Naughton, 2020).

The research demonstrated that the British government entered into dialogue with tech firms, at the beginning largely focusing on asking major social networks to improve the quality of messaging and

reducing the level of online disinformation about COVID-19, and then deepening cooperation with the technology sector. In the UK, leading tech companies and artificial intelligence researchers offered staff and technical support to fight coronavirus when asked for help. Among the companies participating in meetings with the government were: Google's London-based DeepMind artificial intelligence research unit, a London artificial intelligence company, called Faculty, Microsoft, and Apple among others. As noted 'the importance placed on the meeting is a recognition that tech platforms – often facing a tough time from the government – can reach the population with accurate information in a way that many traditional media outlets cannot' (Waterson, 2020). However there had been some concerns associated with this cooperation, including 'ensuring appropriate control of sensitive information, and the long-term impact of allowing a large number of private companies to work with the healthcare system's data' (Ibid.)[1].

An interesting case of Google's new procedures was described at the end of 2020: 'Tensions between Google and some of its staff broke into view after the abrupt exit of scientist Timnit Gebru, who led a 12-person team with Mitchell focused on ethics in artificial intelligence software (AI) […] she questioned an order not to publish research claiming AI that mimics speech could disadvantage marginalized populations.' (The Guardian, 2020). The researchers should 'consult legal, policy and public relations teams before pursuing topics such as face and sentiment analysis and categorizations of race, gender or political affiliation' (Ibid.). Studying Google services for biases is among the "sensitive topics" under the company's new policy. The scientists at Google were also told to use "a positive tone" in AI research: 'The Google paper for which authors were told to strike a positive tone discusses recommendation AI, which services like YouTube employ to personalize users' content feeds. A draft reviewed by Reuters included "concerns" that this technology can promote

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[1]   Especially considering the fact that companies such as the Faculty (founded under the name ASI Data Science) were associated with the Facebook-Cambridge Analytica data scandal (Cadwalladr, 2017).

"disinformation, discriminatory or otherwise unfair results" and "insufficient diversity of content", as well as lead to "political polarization". The final publication instead says the systems can promote "accurate information, fairness and diversity of content." (Ibid.).

Some experts speaking in the newspaper emphasized that 'one of the things the pandemic had done was to make everyone realise the extent to which the internet – and the services that run on it – had become the critical infrastructure of 21st-century life' (Naughton, 2020). Another crucial step is the use of AI, which – as experts in 'The Guardian' write – should be regulated because now the tech companies are free to deploy algorithms that turn out to have serious downsides for society. Many voices point out that it should be the governments that shall regulate tech companies rather than leave it to industry self-regulation (nevertheless drawing up meaningful legislation is difficult).

The texts in 'The Guardian' also dealt with the topic of artificial intelligence and foreign disinformation campaigns (e.g. 'AI system detects posts by foreign 'trolls' on Facebook and Twitter' – Davis and Hern, 2020). Significant attention was given to the manipulation that could be attributed to Russian state actors. The differences in disinformation depending on the country behind the campaign – mainly Chinese and Russian activity – as well as the ways how foreign campaigns change tactics over time were discussed in the analysed articles.

From the analysis of the Polish newspaper 'Rzeczpospolita' one can learn that the most discussed topic was – similar to the results of the Guardian analysis – how social media such as Facebook or Twitter were dealing with disinformation on their platforms (articles with titles such as 'Twitter has a surprising idea to fight disinformation' – Mandel, 2020). Then, two main topics followed: a) fake news and conspiracy theories about coronavirus ('Fake news is multiplying as fast as the epidemic itself' – Lesman, 2020) and b) disinformation by foreign agents.

In the first group, one could find texts pointing out that for example the 5G network does not cause Covid-19: 'Paradoxically, 5G may just help fight the pandemic. Thanks to this technology, artificial intelligence

systems analysing the virus and looking for an effective drug or vaccine work faster and more effectively. Thanks to 5G, autonomous vehicles that deliver groceries and medicines to sick and quarantined people also operate. 5G is also one of the most important elements of the functioning of modern, partially automated hospitals, where some functions are taken over by robots, for example cleaning and disinfection.' (Ibid.). Referring to the second group of articles – dealing with disinformation and its sources – the results of the analysis of materials published in the Polish newspaper indicate that more information in the context of disinformation concerned China than Russia – contrary to the Guardian analysis: e.g. 'Twitter has banned more than 170,000 accounts linked to the Chinese government that spread false information about, among other things, the coronavirus'. However, in 'Rzeczpospolita' there were also opinions published, later on, that Russia is responsible for disinformation in Poland.

In 'Rzeczpospolita' one could also distinguish articles that presented technologies in a positive light: not only in the context of disinformation but also in other fields – there was for example a text about scientists from Boston MIT who developed a technology that allowed them to remotely detect an infected person; earlier one could also read about Chinese artificial intelligence fighting the coronavirus – about tech giants Baidu and Alibaba which created an AI tool for gene sequencing. There were also some reports about the development of Polish potential in the field of artificial intelligence and Polish companies using powerful computing and analytical powers to fight the virus such as DataWalk – a Polish producer of unique software for analysing giant data sets on a global scale. Other mentioned topics included changes in the area of digital legislation in the European Union and cybersecurity.

Concluding, as it could be seen in the analyzes presented in both parts of this text, Artificial Intelligence can effectively assist journalists in their daily work. In this context, it should be emphasized that the acquisition of new skills such as understanding technology issues and having a heightened sense of ethical issues by journalists and editors are essential in contemporary media organizations.

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BRANDS AT RISK FROM DISINFORMATION: A META-ANALYSIS OF COMMERCIAL DISINFORMATION STUDIES

ABSTRACT

This chapter enriches the thus far very little researched topic of commercial disinformation. The aim is to describe proper marketing actions in companies' response to the communication crisis caused by disinformation. This text presents a synthesis of the managerial implications based on the analysis of 62 scientific articles. The author selected 28 that best correspond to the research aims. Analysed articles recommend avoiding advertising on disinformation sites and working with employees, brand ambassadors, and journalists. Based on this meta-analysis, the author suggests engaging employees in corrective communication activities. Recommended forms of response to commercial misinformation include submitting a detailed response, approaching misinformation scientifically to uncover the nature of the rumour being spread, and using storytelling as a tool to help the brand highlight the positive aspects and avoid repeating the negative content of the disinformation. This chapter provides evidence-based recommendations for practitioners to combat a commercial disinformation crisis.

Keywords: Brand, Commercial Disinformation, Marketing, Fake News

INTRODUCTION

Kay Jewellery lost 11% of its share value in the week after fake news began to spread, which claimed that its rings were using low-quality gemstones instead of real diamonds. Similarly, Pepsi's shares fell by 4% during the U.S. presidential election campaign in 2016 after false information circulated that the company's CEO, Indra Nooyi, was supporting then-candidate Donald Trump. The spread of false information, which has long been a problem in politics, has already leaped those boundaries and is now becoming an important issue in the field of marketing. This development calls for an understanding of what happens when a brand is affected by false information and what response is demanded by this new threat.

As early as 2018, more than a fifth of the companies in the European Union stated that their reputations had suffered at least once because of fake news (ECM, 2018). By the same time in the USA, about 20% of companies had experienced an attack on their reputation based on false news about their brand circulated on the internet (NACM, 2018). The Brand Disinformation Impact Study (New Knowledge, 2019) revealed that 55% of consumers think they have been exposed to disinformation about brands. Despite all that, only 12% of the EU organisations affected by disinformation have taken steps to proactively identify fake news that may affect them (ECM, 2018).

With the advent of the mass use of the Internet, propaganda and its application in public relations gained new prominence. The goal of this meta-analysis is to examine how this problem has been addressed by the academic literature. Our results provide a basis for future research that will aid in understanding the relationship between disinformation ecosystems and the work of public relations professionals.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Several authors refer to misinformation as inaccurate, misleading, or false information that is not intentionally disseminated and its author is unaware of its inaccuracy (Fallis, 2015; Ireton & Posetti, 2018; Sharma, et al., 2019).

A specific type of misinformation, according to Fallis (2015), is disinformation

> *misleading information that has the intentional purpose of being misleading.*

A third specific type of information is mal-information, which works with a true fact but

> *serves to harm a person, organization, or country* (Ireton & Posetti, 2018).

A much-used term is 'fake news', which Gelfert (2018) describes as a type of disinformation, specifically a certain kind of journalistic report. It consists of content that strongly resembles a news report that deliberately presents inaccurate, misleading, or fabricated information. Paul, O'Shaughnessy, and Snow (2019) point to the low relevance of intent and its difficulty to verify. They argue that intent does not affect the impact of false information and suggest that fake news (as a specific form of misinformation) should be distinguished from real news based on criteria other than intent. In this chapter I will treat fake news as: *the presentation of (typically) false or misleading claims as news, where the claims are misleading by design.*

MILITARY VS. COMMERCIAL DISINFORMATION

The term disinformation originates from the military where it refers to a strategy of political control or a national instrument with different objectives (O'Shaughnessy, N., 2019). Purported factual assertions used as a tactical way to slander adversaries are a precursor to contemporary "fake news" (Gelfert, 2018), which began to be widely discussed in connection with Russia's occupation of Crimea in 2014, followed by the 2016 US presidential election. The term 'fake news' is seen as a threat to the future of the democratic world by international organisations such as the UN, EU and UNESCO.

The various types of information that are used in propaganda and political struggles (Jowett & O'donnell, 2018) pose a threat not only to nation states but also to commercial organisations. Already shortly after World War II, Allport and Postman (1947) explain how rumours can damage the reputation of organizations. Regardless of the intent of the propagandist, the online circulation of rumours involving a company's name can damage a good reputation, negatively affect sales, and impeach the credibility of a brand (Berthon & Pitt, 2018; Flostrand et al., 2019; Parsons, 2020; Peterson, 2019; Visentin et al., 2019).

This text focuses on commercial, non-political disinformation that explicitly refers to a commercial brand name. We define commercial disinformation as *misleading information targeting a brand's reputation that has the intentional purpose of being misleading.*

CHANGING THE COMMUNICATION PARADIGM

Peterson (2019) argues that brand managers are not prepared for the current world, which is often characterized by the acronym VUCA (volatility, uncertainty, complexity, ambiguity). In the context of the fragmentation of traditional media and the decline of journalistic

standards, there has also been a democratization of social expression, where people are not only recipients but also co-creators of content (O'Shaughnessy, N., 2019).

The falsification of stories accompanies every major transformation of communication. For example, as early as 1835 a sensational hoax purporting to relay discoveries of life on the Moon – thereby increasing a rise in sales – was published in the first penny newspaper *The New York Sun* and was criticized for this (Britannica, 2021). The false stories in *Arena* magazine were also pointed out by J. B. Montgomery-McGovern in 1898.

Spokespeople for some communities, such as doctors, were paid to confirm the veracity of these fabricated stories, which influenced not only the reader but also the reporter (middle-man) who took this source of information as credible (Gelfert, 2018).

Today, disinformers go directly to the reader, i.e. the social network user, without the need to bribe experts (Gelfert, 2018). The rise of political polarization and partisan news services make it easier than ever to spread fake news (Beck, 2017). The ease of creating and disseminating information on social media allows commercial fake news to be communicated ubiquitously and pervasively (Tandoc et al., 2018).

> *"(…) in cyberspace, everyone can be anyone, can deconstruct and reconstruct his/her identity, and create stories and metanarratives that may or may not be real, factual, or objective. There is no assurance about the accuracy of what is read, viewed, or listened to in the Internet sphere." – (Valentini, Kruckeberg, 2011, p. 95)*

The internet has changed journalism on these three levels (Mills, A. J., & Robson, K., 2019):
- there are no entry requirements, anyone can be a journalist
- the cost of producing and distributing news has dropped (it spreads quickly and for free)

- society has embraced new media and consumes it in the same way as traditional media sources *(regardless of different forms, it works – author's note)*

Disinformation is effective because:

> it promotes confirmation bias; we tend to believe what we want based on previously held attitudes (Nickerson, 1988 in O'Shaughnessy, N., 2019).

This confirmation bias is supported by social networks that surround us with the very content we prefer (O'Shaughnessy, N., 2019).

Users with high online trust do not hesitate to take risks in sharing any information (Krasnova et al., 2010; Lin and Liu, 2012).

Conspiracy theories create answers to unanswered questions, which reassures users even though it may have nothing to do with reality. Yet the reaction to disinformation is rarely immediate belief, but more often involves doubt and cynicism (Ibid.).

Fake news:

> is amusing and has faster and deeper penetration on social media (O'Shaughnessy, N., 2019) tends to go viral and quickly become autonomous of its author (Subramanian, 2017), is more attractive to readers compared to real news, and has more novelty (Vosoughi et al., 2018).

is supported by Social Media Fatigue (SMF) and Fear of Missing Out (FOMO) effects on social media:

> SMF is the result of negative emotions associated with social media that give way to exhaustion and fatigue (Talwar, 2019).

> FOMO is the pervasive fear of missing out on a rewarding experience accompanied by the need to be constantly connected to what others are doing (Przybylski et al., 2013).

WHO SPREADS RUMOURS AND WHY?

According to the American Bar Association, the main sources of commercial disinformation are trolls, profiteers, and foreign countries. Disinformation can also be a tool of national strategy to sabotage international consensus, a weapon against a hostile nation or coalition (O'Shaughnessy, N., 2019). Profiteers work behind the scenes of so – called click bait sites.

'Click bait' attracts the attention of unsuspecting social media users who click on the links of the stories in question, believing they are visiting legitimate news sites. These users are attracted by the appeal to emotion, while the authors of fake news receive a financial share from each click on the advertisement (Mustafaraj, E., & Metaxas, P. T., 2017).

CRISIS COMMUNICATION AND BRAND MANAGEMENT

The recent proliferation of fake news poses a new challenge for crisis communication on social media (Jahng, M. R., 2021). Social media crises are defined as events that originate in or are amplified by social media and which can damage an organization's reputation (Owyang, 2011).

The first way to theoretically conceptualize commercial disinformation is to view the spreading rumour as a crisis. However, the available crisis communication theories *Image repair theory* (Benoit, W. L., 1997) or *Situational crisis communication theory* (SCCT) (Combs, 2012) do not account for the dynamics of new media in which rumours spread very quickly (Fallis, 2015; O'Shaughnessy, N., 2019, Starbird et al., 2014).

The second way to theoretically approach commercial disinformation is brand management. This is a profession that is constantly changing. In response to technological and societal factors, it is not

only discovering new market opportunities, but also new challenges related to maintaining control over its brands (Veloutsou, C., & Guzman, F., 2017), and one of these challenges is fake news.

Berthon et al. (2018) recall the "perceptual cycle" of Ulric Neisser, who proposed a concept depicting the perception of an object as an active construction process.

According to this concept, brand perception is the result of environmental influences and cognitive processes such as observation, filtering, ignoring, or close processing. The brand can be thought of as a cognitive schema that selects, guides, and frames the exploration of the offer. According to Berthon and his colleagues, brands can play the role of interpretive frameworks, not reality creators, therefore brands should be seen as processes not objects. Fake news can influence a brand through its influence on the aforementioned cognitive processes.

METHOD

Meta-analysis was chosen as the method for mapping the topic of commercial disinformation and its impact on the work of brand managers. The search was conducted using keywords: "fake news", "brand+fake news", "brand", "disinformation", "marketing", "brand management+fake news" and "fake news+marketing".

Keywords were searched in scientific publications on Taylor & Francis Online, Ebsco, ScienceDirect, Google Scholar, Web of Science, and Emerald. The author found a total of 62 articles and selected 28 scientific publications that best suited the purpose of this study – to capture the comprehensive results of research in the field of commercial disinformation. These are mainly scientific articles, studies, and experiments from 2018 – 2021 and a list of them is provided in Appendix A. Appendix B contains a table of six articles that mention specific recommendations for marketers on how to approach communication when challenging the aspersions of fake news parties.

Table 3. Selected articles of the meta-analysis

62 x	28 x	6 x
Analysed articles	Selected articles that met search criteria	Articles with managerial implications

Source: Author's own elaboration.

While it is common to find hundreds of articles in meta-analyses, the author finds it very challenging to find articles that meet the requirements of this study. The low representation of the marketing perspective on disinformation is confirmed by a new study (Di Domenico, 2021) examining 117 articles, of which only 7 come from the marketing discipline. A year earlier (Di Domenico et Visentin, 2020) analysed 86 articles that mention a combination of the following keywords: "fake news," "consequences," "consumer behavior," "social media," "problematic information". Only 13 of the analysed articles came from the marketing industry.

Although only 28 articles were found that met all three criteria below for inclusion in this meta-analysis, not all articles contained managerial implications. The selected articles meet these criteria:

- They look at the issue through the lens of the field of marketing
- The central theme is fake news and/or disinformation and the brand or reputation of the organization
- The theoretical part is based on one of the following topics: brand management, reputation management, crisis communication, propaganda studies, or strategic communication

DATA

Berthon et al. (2018) present several ways in which brands may participate in fake news:

(1) the brand itself may be the target of fake news, (2) by appearing in an advertisement on a disinformation site, the brand lends it some validity, and (3) in some cases, brands may fund fake news

in advertisements on web platforms. The authors advise companies not to advertise on fake-news sites to prevent direct funding, to educate customers about deceptive practices, and to use brand ambassadors to raise awareness of the topic. Their main recommendation for brands is to work with the brand as a process not a thing.

Companies that become the target of a conspiracy theory must expect long-term damage to their brand reputation. The financial implications of the spread of fake news are a particular threat to publicly traded companies that depend on investors (Lambert, C. A., et al., 2018). According to Kuchler (2017), the overall decline of trust in companies, as shown in the Edelman (2017)[1] report, can lead, as reported by customers and employees, to lost sales.

Canadian researchers Flostrand, A., Pitt, L., & Kietzmann, J. (2019) used the Delphi method to examine the forecasts of 42 academics with peer-reviewed publications in brand management. According to their findings, experts disagree on whether brands are directly involved in stimulating fake news by advertising with them. But they do agree on the increasing impact of fake news on brand management. The general findings suggest that fake news is a growing phenomenon; in general, strategies to mitigate the impact of fake news on brands need to be improved or implemented. Experts recommend that managers become familiar with modern tools such as blacklists of fake news sites and become much more aware of identifying and mitigating brand vulnerability to fake news.

The results of an experiment (Jahng, M. R., 2021) indicated that while fake news with high brand damage intent was perceived and rated as a serious organizational crisis, fake news with political motivation was not considered as a brand reputation crisis. Political motivation in fake news seems to damage the brand less than other motivations. If the motivation to defame a brand is not politically motivated in the eyes of customers, they have higher expectations of the brand to explain the situation (Ibid., 2021).

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1   https://www.edelman.com/trust/2017-trust-barometer

Another experiment (Jin, Y., et al., 2020) found that when an accused company used factual elaboration in its corrective communication message compared to a more concise form (e.g., a simple rebuttal), its message was perceived as being of higher quality, which in turn enhanced its reputation and reduced its perceived responsibility for the crisis.

Further, when employees were involved in crisis communication, the company's message was then perceived to be of higher quality and the accusing organization's message was in turn perceived to be of lower quality, leading to positive crisis communication outcomes on the part of the accused company in terms of less reputational damage and lower perceived crisis liability.

Mark Peterson (2019) recommends that brand managers approach content and information on the internet using practices reminiscent of the scientific method. In doing so, he refers to Daniel Kahneman's concept of fast and slow thinking. By elaborating on the context, monitoring fake news, verifying information and arguments, the nature of the rumor being spread can be revealed, which can lead to improved trust in society (Peterson, 2019). He created a guide for brand managers on how to approach fake news according to a scientific approach/example:

Figure 26. Critical Thinking Guide for Fake News

Step in the scientific method	Focal question for individuals	Takeaways for brand managers
1. Assess relevant knowledge	What is the news story saying? What do I know about this topic? Is the source really legitimate?	Provide a readable website Update it weekly (SMEs) Update it daily (corporations)
2. Develop a research question	Is this news story fake?	Monitor the infosphere Enlist all employees in monitoring for fake news
3. Acquiring data	What is the news' context? (Its history and meaning for others)	Maintain the history and meaning of wrong information on the brand's website
4. Analysis of data	Is the news a parody? What results come from image and fact-checking websites?	Maintain a list of the prominent satires and parodies featuring the brand on the brand website
5. Discussion	Why does the author think that? How does the author know that to be true? What are my biases that might lead me to believe or resist this news?	Hang out in tribal groups of the internet Maintain a media relations staff to field inquiries about the brand and news/ discussion related to the brand

Source: Peterson, 2019, p. 240

Storytelling is one way to remove the risk of misinformation from the brand (Mills, A. J., & Robson, K., 2019). Mills and Robson point to the emotional nature of fake news and question the effectiveness of rationally refuting fake news using facts. When challenging brand reputation, they recommend choosing storytelling using the same emotional aspects as fake news, i.e. novelty, attractiveness, and appeal to emotion. Brand storytelling, in particular, can tell a positive story without having to recoil from a negative claim. At the same time, it allows for the anchoring of a counterargument, which is very useful, especially due to the great difficulty of identifying the source of fake news (Ibid., 2019).

Results from U.S. research from 2020 showed that the increase of high self-efficacy of evaluating corporate fake news on social media positively influences the presumed influence of this fake news on others. Additionally, it was found that the more people perceive fake news as undesirable, the more they believe it will influence others. This survey conducted with 661 U.S. participants (Cheng & Chen, 2020) showed that consumers with a high presumption of fake news influence on others are more likely to indicate the support for corporate corrective actions, media literacy interventions, and governmental regulation. They suggest that communication professionals should collaborate more with journalists and be able to quickly provide accurate information.

Research (Kumar et al., 2021) examined the association of fake news and purchase behavior towards natural personal care products based on trust and perceived risks. Stimulus-Organism-Behavior-Consequence (SOBC) was used as the theoretical framework with a sample of 390 existing consumers. The results suggest that consumers who intend to purchase and use natural personal care products in the near future will be sensitive to negative messages received about any brand selling such products without verifying their authenticity. The research further revealed that trust in a brand increases engagement with purchase intentions along with the propensity to believe and act on fake news. The more a customer trusts a system, the more they plan to buy a natural personal care product based on the claimed

naturalness of its ingredients. In contrast, research has not shown a positive effect of trust in the system on acting on fake news circulating about natural personal care products that they believe to be true. The authors recommend that communication managers actively publish positive messages about products, their health benefits, and their novelty. They recommend working closely with governments to certify these products and set standards.

Wicker's research from 2020 tested Islamic religiosity, perceived information substantiality, and brand hate. The results suggest that fake news, which violates a person's moral code and values, provokes anger that escalates into brand hate. According to the author, fake news can provoke retaliatory actions against the brand such as anti-brand protests and negative Word of Mouth.

LIMITATIONS OF THIS STUDY

This meta-analysis examined dozens of articles by authors with different approaches and experiences. Although the author selected 28 articles that met the search criteria, the synthesis draws on research that has different samples and analyses the issue in different settings and conditions. Each of the determined recommendations (such as using employees in organizational corrective communication, using storytelling, or stopping advertising on misinformation platforms) would merit deeper exploration in a separate study.

CONCLUSION

This analysis argues that the new field of research into how the existing good reputation of a brand should be managed in the face of a revolution in communications and the spread of disinformation

is an important new field of research. Fake news and disinformation are adversely impacting the work of brand managers, which must quickly adapt themselves to the new challenge.

Compared to previous systematic literature reviews, this meta-analysis covers about 50% of all analysed articles, which confirms the growing interest in the topic of commercial misinformation.

The literature suggests that the recent scourge of false information in society is the result of several factors. Technology-enabled communication has exponentially outpaced its spread (Kumar and Shah, 2018; Berthon and Pitt, 2018; Vosoughi et al., 2018). The positive feedback loops created by fake news tend to support the continued spread of disinformation (Berthon and Pitt, 2018); untruths spread faster than the truth because people are more likely to share them (Vosoughi et al., 2018).

Association with misinformation can potentially result in a negative financial impact (Berthon et al., 2018), a possible brand boycott (Berthon et al., 2018), and a reduction in perceived brand value (Levi, 2018).

The meta-analysis also presents a number of approaches that can help brand managers mitigate the impact of commercial disinformation on their brand. These include removing advertising from sites that are labelled as disinformation, using storytelling, or presenting facts and refuting rumors.

MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

According to the studied sources, managers should not advertise on disinformation sites; both to avoid financially supporting these websites and to avoid putting their brand in an undesirable context (Berthon et al., 2018; Flostrand et al., 2019).

A number of authors focus on the form of response that should help the brand to mitigate the impact of the rumor and set the record straight. While Peterson (2019) suggests working with information

as in science and Jin et al. (2020) recommend giving customers an elaborate response instead of a simple denial, Mills & Robinson (2019) recommend using storytelling and telling positive stories to mitigate the disinformation.

Other recommendations concern cooperation with other actors to be better prepared for a possible communication crisis. While Berthon et al. (2018) recommend continuously educating employees on misinformation issues, Jin et al. (2020), based on a conducted experiment, suggest using employees as disseminators of desired messages in crisis communication. Berthon et al. (2018) also suggest collaborating with brand ambassadors, while Cheng & Chen (2020) recommend working closely with journalists.

If commercial disinformation is linked to a political issue, it is suggested to frame the corrective communication in such a way that customers understand that the brand is a victim of political motivations. An experiment (Jahng, M. R., 2021) suggested that if the motivation to denigrate a brand is politically motivated in the eyes of customers, customers have less expectation for the brand to explain the situation.

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Table 4. Appendix A: List of Scientific Articles, Studies, and
Experiments on Commercial Disinformation (2018-2021)

1	2019	BANKOLE, Oluwafunmilayo; REYNEKE, Mignon	The Effect of Fake News on the Relationship between Brand Equity and Consumer Responses to Premium Brands: An Abstract.
2	2018	BELLMAN, Steven, et al.	Brand safety: the effects of controversial video content on pre-roll advertising.
3	2018	BERTHON, Pierre, et al.	How truthiness, fake news and post-fact endanger brands and what to do about it.
4	2018	BERTHON, Pierre R., et al.	Can Brand custodians cope with fake news? Marketing assets in the age of truthiness and post – fact.
5	2020	BORGES TIAGO, Teresa, et al	Online users' attitudes toward fake news: Implications for brand management.
6	2019	CHEN, Zifei Fay; CHENG, Yang	Consumer response to fake news about brands on social media: the effects of self-efficacy, media trust, and persuasion knowledge on brand trust.
7	2020	CHENG, Yang; CHEN, Zifei Fay	The influence of presumed fake news influence: examining public support for corporate corrective response, media literacy interventions, and governmental regulation.
8	2019	DE REGT, Anouk; MONTECCHI, Matteo; FERGUSON, Sarah Lord	A false image of health: how fake news and pseudo – facts spread in the health and beauty industry
9	2020	DI DOMENICO, Giandomenico; VISENTIN, Marco	Fake news or true lies? Reflections about problematic contents in marketing.

10	2019	FERREIRA, Caitlin Candice; ROBERTSON, Jeandri; KIRSTEN, Marnell	The truth (as I see it): philosophical considerations influencing a typology of fake news.
11	2019	FLOSTRAND, Andrew; PITT, Leyland; KIETZMANN, Jan	Fake news and brand management: a Delphi study of impact, vulnerability, and mitigation.
12	2018	GUILBEAULT, Douglas	Digital marketing in the disinformation age.
13	2021	JAHNG, M. Rosie	Is Fake News the New Social Media Crisis? Examining the Public Evaluation of Crisis Management for Corporate Organizations Targeted in Fake News.
14	2020	JAHNG, Mi Rosie; LEE, Hyunmin; ROCHADIAT, Annisa	Public relations practitioners' management of fake news: Exploring key elements and acts of information authentication.
15	2020	JIN, Yan, et al.	The effects of corrective communication and employee backup on the effectiveness of fighting crisis misinformation.
16	2021	CHAN-OLMSTED, Sylvia M.; QIN, Yufan Sunny	The impact of fake news on its sponsor's brand trust.
17	2021	KUMAR, Sushant, et al.	Purchasing natural personal care products in the era of fake news? The moderation effect of brand trust.
18	2021	LADEIRA, Wagner Junior, et al.	Visual cognition of fake news: the effects of consumer brand engagement.

19	2018	LAMBERT, Cheryl Ann; EWING, Michele; WITHERS, Chas D.	The Financial Impact of Fake News: A Case Study Analysis of Man-Made Crises.
20	2019	MILLS, Adam J.; ROBSON, Karen	Brand management in the era of fake news: narrative response as a strategy to insulate brand value.
21	2017	MUSTAFARAJ, Eni; METAXAS, Panagiotis Takis	The fake news spreading plague: was it preventable?
22	2019	OBADĂ, Rareș	Sharing fake news about brands on social media: A new conceptual model based on flow theory.
23	2020	ONETE, Cristian Bogdan, et al.	The impact of fake news on the real estate market.
24	2019	PETERSON, Mark	A high-speed world with fake news: brand managers take warning.
25	2019	RODRÍGUEZ – FERNÁNDEZ, Leticia	Disinformation and organisational communication: A study of the impact of fake news.
26	2019	TALWAR, Shalini, et al.	Why do people share fake news? Associations between the dark side of social media use and fake news sharing behaviour.
27	2017	VELOUTSOU, Cleopatra; GUZMAN, Francisco	The evolution of brand management thinking over the last 25 years as recorded in the Journal of Product and Brand Management.
28	2018	WISKER, Zazli Lily	The effect of fake news in marketing halal food: a moderating role of religiosity.

Table 5. Appendix B: Articles Mentioning Specific
Recommendations for Marketers.

Source:	Managerial implication:
Berthon et al. (2018)	recommends avoiding advertising on misinformation sites
Berthon et al. (2018)	recommends educating employees on the issue of misinformation
Berthon et al. (2018)	recommends working with brand ambassadors
Flostrand, A., Pitt, L., & Kietzmann, J. (2019)	recommends avoiding advertising on misinformation sites (using blacklists)
Jin, Y., et al., 2020	based on an experiment, suggests the use of elaborated answers
Jin, Y., et al., 2020	based on an experiment, proposes to involve employees
Peterson, 2019	recommends approaching content and information as a science
Mills, A. J., & Robson, K., 2019	recommends using storytelling and avoiding negative references contained in misinformation
Cheng & Chen, 2020	suggests intensive cooperation with journalists

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THE DIGITAL REVOLUTION AND THE PLACE OF PRINTED BOOKS

ABSTRACT

"Digital first" seems to be a crucial idea of our time. From the practical, economical, and even ecological point of view, printed books are not the best solution. But this practice still exits. The aim of this study is to answer, why the textual niche occurs in the digital environment. Is it a kind of relic or something which is deeply connected with human reading comprehension and the quality of text experience? To solve this problem a case study and cognitive methods will be used. The crucial question for the presented text is: whether a printed (codex) book and its reading means a form of distributing texts which will be progressively declining under pressure from the digital revolution (Q1)? To answer this question it is necessary to describe the current situation of traditional printing and also raise the question: if printed documents especially printed and codex books have any features which cannot be replaced by online publishing (Q2)? In the second question one should take into account the cultural and subjective context of reading printed books and also their symbolic value.

Keywords: Digitalisation, Extensive Reading, Hybrid Reading, Intensive Reading, Printed Book, Publishing Market, Typography

OPENING REMARKS

It is obvious that the digital revolution is a fact in almost every area of human life. There is no question that trade, business, goods production, engineering, not to mention interpersonal communication and broadcasting are deeply connected with IT technology.

This process is also being observed in the publishing area. The slogan "Digital first" may soon be replaced by "Digital only", because as it was stressed by Eric Pearson, Chief Information Officer of InterContinental Hotels Group – "It's no longer the big beating the small, but the fast beating the slow." (Jones, 2018). And printing a book – because of its solid, material form which involved the printing industry and delivery system – is simply much slower than internet publishing.

There is a lot of evidence of IT revolution and replacing the process of printing by digital publishing, but one of the most striking was probably the announcement that the 2010 edition of "Encyclopaedia Britannica" was to be the last printed version (Pepitone, 2012). "The world standard of knowledge since 1768" – as the Britannica's catchphrase says – ended its career on bookshelves and moved out to the digital world.

New media and its impact on societies can also be seen in reading and writing abilities – literacy. Nowadays one of the main goal of education is not only to learn reading and writing but learn to do it via new media. In this context traditional literacy transforms into digital literacy (DL) and the DL fits into the frames of the information society (IS) defined as "the new status quo and the new socioeconomic and technological paradigm likely to occur because of the current all-embracing process of change. It is expected to affect the interaction in computer-mediated human activities, individual human behaviour, the collective consciousness, and the economic and social environment (…). The emergence of the Information Society signifies the transition toward a new form of society based on the production and exchange of information (…). Its evolution is likely to introduce new virtual spaces (…) and a whole range of computer-mediated human activities" (Stary, 1999, p. 2).

Due to this definition of IS it is worth emphasizing a few terms: computer-mediated, virtual spaces and of course exchange of information. Such phrases clearly indicate that sending and spreading information in the form of a codex, i.e. a printed book with binding cover, cannot be the goal of "the current all-embracing process of change". Furthermore the overwhelming popularity of such projects and ideas as Google Books, open access, and of course new media with its digitality, interactivity, hyper textuality and virtuality (Lister, et al., 2009, pp. 14-34) may announce the end of the codex book and traditional publishing.

As Lloyd Davidson, the Life Sciences Librarian and Bibliographer, pointed out, "The digital publication has suddenly become the copy of record and those few print copies that still remain merely provide a lingering convenience for those who, like me, haven't yet been willing to cut the ties to print entirely" (Davidson, 2005). So from this perspective publishing books (newspaper, magazine[1] and so on) in printed form seems to be a custom which sooner or later will be fading out, unless those who "haven't yet been willing to cut the ties to print entirely" will still exist.

MAIN QUESTIONS OF THE STUDY – SOME DATA AND REMARKS

The crucial question for the presented study is: whether a printed (codex) book and its reading means a form of distributing texts which will be progressively declining under pressure from the digital revolution (Q1)? To answer this question it is necessary to describe the current situation of traditional printing and also raise the question: if printed documents especially printed and codex books have any features which cannot be replaced by online publishing (Q2)? In the second question one should take into account the cultural and subjective context of reading or possessing printed books.

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[1]   The problem of paper magazines and newspapers is not considered here because it is a rather different issue.

Figure 27. Estimated Share of the Population That Purchase
an E-book/Printed Book in 2020 (in Percentage)
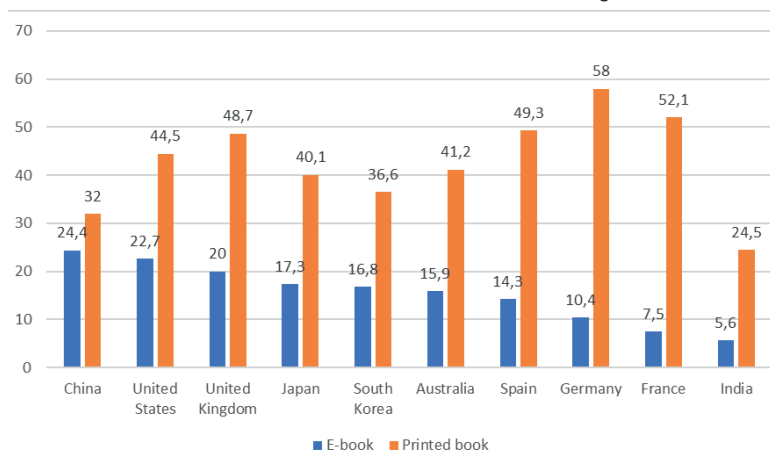
The figure 27 clearly shows that printed books are still popular and
their share in the publishing market is up to five times (see Germany)
or even seven times bigger (France) than e-books'. It is also worth
noting that the data covers the year 2020 i.e. the period when the
COVID-19 pandemic overtook the world, most countries entered re-
strictions and almost the whole of human life moved onto the internet.
Such circumstances may have caused the use of online documents
(e-books and so on) probably because they are more convenient, but
on the other side choosing the real, solid book might be interpreted
as a counterreaction to the "online life" during the pandemic. This
possibility of different, sometimes even contradictory explanations
of the given phenomenon will be discussed in later paragraphs.

    More data from the USA – one of the leaders in new, digital media
– demonstrates, that "the end of printed books" should be regarded
with caution. "Despite some growth in certain digital formats, it re-
mains the case that relatively few Americans only consume digital
books (which include audiobooks and e-books) to the exclusion
of print. Some 37% of Americans say they read only print books,

while 28% read in these digital formats and also read printed books. Just 7% of Americans say they only read books in digital formats and have not read any printed books in the past 12 months" (Perrin, 2019).

In the case of European countries "the e-book market (now nearing 10% of the total) showed signs of stagnation for the last 5 years (but it could be a matter of capturing the right data), whereas audio book sales exploded in 2019, giving new impetus to digital sales. If 2018 marked a trend reversal in the recovery process started in 2015, 2019 confirmed the positive trend" (Federation of European Publishers, 2021).

As a side note it is worth discussing the growth popularity of audio books stressed in both cited surveys. Usually digitalization and new media are deeply connected with image, their visual aspect is held as the most important one. But the mentioned facts clearly show that the pure audial sphere also plays a relevant role in digital reality.

This illustrative data-review will be closed by an example from the Polish book market, which was chosen because of two reasons. Firstly, it could be taken as a sample of the typical post-communist market, secondly, the author of the presented chapter has been working for years as an editor for different publishing houses and knows this market from the publishers' side. In the functioning of the Polish book market one interesting observation is the ratio of paper books' to e-books' titles. There is a tendency to level off the ratio between these two versions of one title, but it still does not relate to belles-lettres, teenagers' literature, horrors, and children's books (Drózd, 2020). The beginning of the e-books' market in Poland met a few obstacles. One of the major setbacks was connected with the status of intellectual property and one very popular conviction, that if something was published on the internet is for free, and a lot of authors worried about the benefits. It is important to stress that this belief is regarded as obvious not only among Polish or other post-communist citizens, but has probably a universal character (Reuß, 2017, p. 10).

Invoked data and the processes observed in the publishing market allow us to state that at the present – after almost twenty years of the open access project – there is no fading out of printed, codex books. So the answer for the first question (Q1) in presented research is "no" – the digital revolution does not shatter or even weaken the position of solid books and traditional publishing (at least not as much as before).

TWO SCENARIOS

In reflection on the condition of traditional books in the digital area the tendency to figure out different scenarios for the future of printed publications can be observed. The Polish Book Institute developed two scenarios directly focused on the topic[2]. The first one, called "the vinyl record scenario" states, that solid books, published by the professional editors, would be something special, addressed to a narrow range of consumers, "bookophile" individuals just as it happens with vinyl records and the niche of audiophiles (Print Partner, 2015)[3]. It should be mentioned that the analogy between the printed book and the vinyl record is an approximation. As Ronald Reuß, proffessor of edition philology pointed out, in phonographic records there is no difference between original file and copy, but in publishing it is not the same situation, because fonts, their type size and even baseline designed by the editor could not be presented in the device which is used to read them (Reuß, 2017, pp. 8-9).

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[2] To be precise, there are three scenarios, but the first one refers to the future of readership in general, without regard for the vehicle of text which is crucial in this elaboration.

[3] The same parallel between the publishing market and music industry draws sociologist John B. Thompson in his Book Wars (Thompson, 2021). His answer (given six years later) to the question if books will go the same way as CD's or vinyl and became a niche is optimistic for traditional publishing. After almost twenty years of rapid development of e-books the major share of the publishing market is kept by traditional publishing.

The second scenario, and the worst one, shows the world without books at all (Print Partner, 2015). The reason for such a world may be summarized in one word: "fast". Doing something as quickly as possible or being less time-consuming could be taken as a *cliché* of communication in the digital period (Print Partner, 2015). New media and big data form the one side, and information overload forms the other – this is not a good background for carefully studying linear, and deprived of any hyperlinks, printed books. It seems so obvious but there is a simplification which will be discussed later.

THE WRONG DILEMMA

In these two scenarios the digital revolution is presented as a antithesis to the "Gutenberg Galaxy" (Marshall McLuhan, 2017) with typography and printing as one of the key elements, but probably the relation between these two historical movements is not like an exclusive disjunction, where only one value can be true. It is more like a logical alternation – both the digital world and Gutenberg Galaxy have common parts, but also there are some features which differ in these paradigms.

Although, at first glance the digital revolution seems to be an opposition to the printing culture, because the former is connected with being virtual, non-material or fluent and the latter's products have material and tactile characteristics, they can coexist. Studying human phenomena shows that the unity of contradictions is quite common. The complexity of post-industrial time lead to a situation when the Hegelian dialectic seems to be quite a useful explanatory model as for instance it is seen in the connection between globalization and indigenous cultures where both find their synthesis or hybrid (mixed) form in glocalization (Pirveli & Lewczuk, 2013, p. 47)

Contradictory, mixed or hybrid features of contemporary human reality was stressed by Lev Manovich in the preface to the Polish edition of his fundamental book *The Language of New Media* (Manovich,

2006, p. 15). From this perspective the dilemma: digital or printed with classical *tertium non datur* simply is not a good method to grasp the publishing market of our times. Digital documents and codex, printed books seem to be complementary form of readership. There is no strict opposition between them both, because traditional books have some features which – so far – cannot be replaced one to one by any digital form. It was previously mentioned that fonts, their type size and baseline designed by the editor could not be respected by the device used to read them. In addition paper sheets in books have specific size, weight, coat and brightness which usually cannot be represented on any screen. Another important aspect of traditional books is the resolution of paper which is much higher than any screen resolution (Reuß, 2017, p. 11).

Details are listed above about which features of the printed book belong to those which cannot be replaced by online publishing (Q2). They have a technical nature. Besides such features, there are also ones which have a psychological and sociological character. Using any device connected to the Internet – which is normal when reading digital documents – is quite good in so called extensive reading. In this kind of reading it is essential is to grasp the main information without studying the language structure, style, levels of meaning, "texture" – especially in poetry. Another type of reading, far from "flattening attention" (Reuß, 2017, p. 11), is an intensive reading which is easier to perform with a traditional book than online – in the second case the temptation to browse something else (another text, page, film and so on) is quite strong and plays a role in diffusing someone's attention.

From the sociological point of view the traditional book has a symbolic meaning, which is unique for physical books. Possessing a home library or even travelling with a printed book can be read as symbol of highbrow status or aspirations. While watching TV news one can notice that professional comments on current issues given by specialists are broadcasted with a bookcase in the background. It could be interpreted as a metonymy of being objective, scientific or even wise.

CONCLUSIONS – THE THIRD WAY

Technical, psychological and sociological features of traditional books allow us to make the conclusion that even during the digital revolution printed materials still play an important role. What at the end should be stressed, interpreting digital culture as an opposition to traditional publishing is a kind of simplification. As it was demonstrated by statistical data from the publishing market, the mixed or hybrid character of postmodern reality and the mentioned features of printed books are conditions to draw a third scenario for the Gutenberg Galaxy during the time of big data and open access. This third way means complementary coexistence of these paradigms (PwC, 2015, p. 15).

The third scenario with a complementary relationship between traditional publishing and e-books is deeply connected with the observation that because of the digital revolution reading practice has two forms: traditional and digital. Their coexisting was called above as hybrid reading. This state of affairs has an equivalent in the functioning of publishing market – sales cycles of digital texts are different from the printed book's production, delivery and selling process (Nowell, 2015). They simply satisfy or meet different needs – but "different" does not mean "opposite".

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PART II.

COMMUNICATION DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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INFODEMIC AS A THREAT FOR THE SOCIETY: HOW COVID-19 PANDEMIC AFFECTS ACTIVITY OF MEDIA AND POLITICS

ABSTRACT

The topic of the article is the infodemic taking place during the CO-VID-19 pandemic, as well as the dangers it entails. In the opinion of many researchers, the infodemic has become one of the most important pandemic problems. While the excess of news, or disinformation or fake news is nothing new, during the dynamically developing coronavirus pandemic, these phenomena began to intensify. The aim of the article is to show that the infodemic poses a serious threat to human health and even life. In this chapter, actions that were – or could have been – taken by the politicians and representatives of the mass media in order to fight against false information will also be cited.

Keywords: Infodemic, COVID-19 Pandemic, Fake News, Mental Health, Media Messages

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic is described by many as the worst global crisis since World War II. The spreading infections took not only millions of lives, but also negatively affected the psychological awareness of people. In a short time, it turned out that not only the virus

itself is dangerous, but also the information that surrounds us – and it is definitely in excess. Why? Because fake news spreads even faster and more easily than a virus.

The sheer volume of information that comes from many different sources – both native and foreign – leads to the creation of completely untrue or manipulated information. As it turns out, both traditional media (radio, press, television) and online media (including social media), are susceptible to this problem. It seems to be growing mainly due to the lack of appropriate legal tools, that would make editorial offices responsible for checking the accuracy of the provided information (Waszak, 2017, p. 175).

Disinformation often appears as an innocent dissemination of untested information, but it can cause material damage. (Bieniek, 2020). The uncontrolled spread of information in the mass media can mentally harm people who are incapable of discerning truth and falsehood. This is also why disinformation during the COVID-19 pandemic is considered as one of the threats that threaten citizens' sense of security (Ibid.). Polish journalist, Jan Kunert (konkret24) drew attention to the fact that: *disinformation is based on emotions and arousing sensation. There are two levels – high and low. The low one is for people who want to prove that the pandemic was made up by coming across people with the same views. But there is also a play by big actors, such as national states, mixing in an anti-vaccine kettle. It is the large countries that run disinformation campaigns, for example regarding vaccines from Pfizer or AstraZeneca.* (Kompała, 2021).

The main goal of this artictle is to show that the infodemic poses a serious threat to human health and even life. The author also wants to answer the question: is there something, what politicians and representatives of the mass media did – or could do – with the spreading of fake news about the COVID-19 disease. Based on the author's observations and the information on the activities undertaken against the infodemic, the author formulated the following research hypothesis:

- H1: Media representatives and governments have a significant influence on how widespread an infodemic will be.

- H2: Lack of answers to the development of fake news is a serious threat to the peoples' health and lives all around the world, especially when it comes to health issues.
- H3: The development of the COVID-19 pandemic and the accompanying infodemic shows the great importance of education in the field of recognizing fake news.

INFODEMIC – EXPLANATION OF THE PHENOMENON

The World Health Organization was the very first organization which noticed the problem called "infodemic" during the dynamically developing pandemic. In a report published in February 2020, WHO described this as: *An infodemic is too much information including false or misleading information in digital and physical environments during a disease outbreak. It causes confusion and risk-taking behaviours that can harm health. It also leads to mistrust in health authorities and undermines the public health response. An infodemic can intensify or lengthen outbreaks when people are unsure about what they need to do to protect their health and the health of people around them. With growing digitization – an expansion of social media and internet use – information can spread more rapidly. This can help to more quickly fill information voids but can also amplify harmful messages* (World Health Organization 2020).

The Cambridge Dictionary makes it clear that too much information isn't the only problem with infodemic. By dictionary definition it is: *A situation, in which a lot of false information is being spread in a way that is harmful:*
- *According to the WHO, the COVID-19 related infodemic is just as dangerous as the virus itself.*
- *The leaders of social media companies have failed to tackle the infodemic of misinformation* (Cambridge Dictionary).

Infodemic is also related to the concept of disinformation which is a deliberate action aimed at causing changes in the awareness of recipients, changing attitudes towards phenomena, and causing a specific social, economic or political reaction. (Krajowa Rada Radiofonii i Telewizji, 2020, p. 7). Infodemic could also be related to fake news. This popular term is both used, when it comes to false or completely untrue information and when people have to deal with a more complex form of disinformation. An important issue is that fake news is information that mimics the form of media messages, but from thoroughly compiled messages by mass media employees, fake news differs in the very process of elaboration and the intentions that accompany it. These terms can be misleading, therefore it is worth trying to describe the phenomenon of *information disorder*. Reffering to the Council of Europe report from November 2017, there are three types of information disorder. 1) Dis-information – information that is false and deliberately created to harm a person, social group, organization or country. 2) Mis-information – information that is false, but not created with the intention of causing harm. 3) Mal-information – information that is based on reality, used to inflict harm on a person, organization or country (Wardle, Derakhshan, 2017, p. 20). These three types of messages are probably the most popular forms of distorted information, which spread rapidly at times of public health challenges and which require an immediate response.

In response to these challenges, WHO developed an *infodemic managements* system. The Organization describes this as *systematic use of risk – and evidence-based analysis and approaches to manage the infodemic and reduce its impact on health behaviours during health emergencies*. The organization encourages the use of good health practices through 4 types of activities as: 1) listening to community concerns and questions, 2) promoting understanding of risk and health expert advice, 3) building resilience to misinformation and the last – 4) engaging and empowering communities to take positive action (World Health Organization, 2020).

Also Gunther Eysenbach in his publication noted that, the info-demic around COVID-19 relates to the spheres of science, politics and practice, media and social media. This is why, counteracting the infodemic should be based on four pillars: 1) faithful translation of knowledge, 2) checking facts, 3) building e-health competences and 4) monitoring and information supervision (Eysenbach, 2020).

MAIN SOURCES OF THE FAKE NEWS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

The increase in the spread of disinformation is undoubtedly due to the development of modern media, including social media, where a multitude of information reaches the user from many different communication channels.

Reffering to the issue of publishing too much information that could lead to social confusion and even fear, only in the period from mid-January to March 12, 2020 over a million publications on coronavirus were published in social media, and in Polish tra-ditional media (such as radio, press, television) – 235 thousand (PRESS-SERVICE Monitoring Mediów, 2020). Three out of four mentions about COVID-19 appeared on the Internet, only in further places were radio, press and television. Looking at these numbers, it's hard to even imagine how many publications about coronavirus in total were published in the media around the world throughout 2020. What's more, it's hard to know which of them was true and which was completely false. Having almost five times higher the number of publications in social media shows how active people are in this space. This is one of the most important reasons why it can be concluded that social media was the very main source of fake news about COVID-19.

However, not only the mass media or social media are sources of fake news. As reported by the 2021 Edelman Trust Barometer report, the latest edition of which is devoted to the world's struggle with the

coronavirus pandemic, hundreds of thousands of people have lost their trust in leaders of states and governments and in journalists. According to the data contained in the report, as many as 57% of people said that: government leaders are purposely trying to mislead people by saying things they know are false or gross exaggerations (Edelman Trust Barometer, 2021, p. 21). In the case of journalists, however, one could come across the opinion that: journalists and reporters are purposely trying to mislead people by saying things they know are false or gross exaggerations. This opinion was confirmed by 59% of respondents (Edelman Trust Barometer, 2021, p. 25).

INFODEMIC AS A THREAT FOR THE SOCIETY – A FEW EXAMPLES

As was it earlier said, the infodemic is just as dangerous as the virus itself. There are some popular examples, which could have been tragic for hundreds, thousands, and maybe even millions of people all around the world.

First example: there was a myth circulating that snorting cocaine can protect from the coronavirus, and apparently French people believed it. It is unclear whether they acted upon it, but the gossip was so popular that the French Ministry of Health was forced to release a public service announcement clarifying that cocaine does not in fact protect people against the coronavirus (Crellin, 2020). Later, there were mounting questions about whether vitamin D can help fight coronavirus. In fact, vitamin D boosts the immune system and helps fight off infections. But the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) suggests, that there is no evidence to support taking vitamin D supplements to specifically prevent or treat coronavirus. What is important: taking vitamin D may have some health benefits during the pandemic, but in appropriate doses. Taking more

than the recommended amount every day, can be dangerous in the long run. People all around the world have thought, that taking lots of vitamin D could prevent them from coronavirus (Roberts, 2020).

According to a study prepared by the Polish news agency PRESS-SERVICE Media Monitoring, there was also other fake news regarding health issues during the COVID-19 pandemic. More information appeared on social media: drinking alcohol protects against coronavirus, drinking water every 15 minutes protects against coronavirus and many more conspiracy theories (PRESS-SERVICE Monitoring Mediów, 2020). According to the research published in the American Journal of Tropical Medicine and Hygiene101, the fake news analysed by scientists in the public perception had the hallmarks of credibility, because their linguistic structure resembled medical advice that Internet users often look for on the Internet (Krajowa Rada Radiofonii i Telewizji, 2020, p. 56). The research team emphasized also that the responsibility for combating disinformation regarding coronavirus, with regard especially to the national governments, internet platforms and international organizations.

It should be said, that the excess of untrue information could push people to irresponsible actions, but this isn't the only factor that may be a threat to people's lives. The development of the pandemic was one of the direct casual links that caused many people to develop mental disorders, most often manifested by the state of anxiety, panic or obsessive disorders. People exposed to these types of activities have proven to be particularly vulnerable to harmful health advice that is not disseminated by experts in medicine or virology. What is more, people who underwent disinformation during a pandemic are often at risk of psychotic exacerbations and even psychosis (Heitzman, 2020, p. 189). During a global health crisis, the public opinion often relies on messages distributed by the mass media to be up-to-date with the latest news, as well as in search of appropriate health-promoting behaviors. So it's no surprise that many people living is isolation for such a long time, could feel overwhelmed by too much information, not knowing which of it may be true. It is also worth noting, that the information on the COVID-19 pandemic usually did not cover

only one area of life. News distributed by the mass media, repeatedly referred not only to information in the field of health protection, but also to: transport and communication, education, economics, culture, trade, politics, sports and even tourism (Ibid.).

POLITICIANS AND GOVERNMENTS
FIGHT AGAINST FAKE NEWS

In order to prevent the negative effects of infodemia, which may abound in a lot of false or not entirely true information, the first steps should be taken on the part of those who exert a significant influence on public opinion. This is about politicians or people holding important public functions.

Activities initiated by the EU community may have turned out to be of key importance for the fate of Europe. In March 2020, the head of the European Commission, Ursula Von der Leyen, announced that the authorities of the European Union should strengthen the fight against fake news related to the subject of the coronavirus, as they threaten the safety of EU citizens. The European Commission has previously informed that along with the coronavirus spreading in the European Union countries, EU institutions are watching not only the growing wave of disinformation, but even propaganda. According to the spokesman of the European Commission, Peter Stano, the increase in disinformation activities was most often related to the activities of countries such as Russia, or those that were in any other way connected with pro-Kremlin sources. It is worth noting that the East StratCom task force has been established within the European External Action Service. Its purpose is to regularly monitor Russia's disinformation activities. According to the documents collected by the European Commission, through a wide disinformation campaign, the Russian media wanted to cause panic and distrust of the

governments of the member states, as well as of the European Union itself, which would thus be perceived as incapable of ensuring the safety of its citizens (Dziennik Gazeta Prawna, 2020).

The Dubai authorities took a similar position. In April 2020, the government of the United Arab Emirates announced that people who disseminate false medical information related to the COVID-19 pandemic that contradict official statements will be fined 20,000 dirhams, approximately 5,500 USD. The Emirates News Agency (WAM) cited the government directive and reported: *It is forbidden for any individual to publish, re-publish or circulate medical information or guidance which is false, misleading or which hasn't been announced officially… using print, audiovisual or social media, or online websites or any other way of publication or circulation* (Reuters, 2020).

The Polish state authority – National Broadcasting Council (Krajowa Rada Radiofonii i Telewizji), published a report where it is noted how important media education is. In the National Broadcasting Council's opinion *exposing disinformation and resilience building to this phenomenon requires – first of all – stregthening critical thinking* (Krajowa Rada Radiofonii i Telewizji, 2020, p. 65). The Council also said that the attempts made for years to counteract and stop the spread of online disinformation, despite the efforts of organizations such as the Council of Europe, the European Parliament or the European Commission, turned out to be far from sufficient (Ibid.).

MEDIA REPRESENTATIVES FIGHT AGAINST FAKE NEWS

A report conducted in February 2018, by Flash Eurobarometer showed that respondents are most likely to think that journalists should act to stop the spread of fake news (45%), followed by national authorities (39%), press and broadcasting management (36%), citizens themselves (32%), online social networks (26%), EU institutions (21%) and

non-governmental organisations (15%) (Krajowa Rada Radiofonii i Telewizji, 2020, p. 65). This shows how important it is to involve these people in fighting infodemics.

Social media users were most susceptible to fake news. There is nothing surprising about this, considering the fact that sitting in front of a computer screen without revealing your true or full identity, you can become a virtual expert in any field. That is why the owners of social media did not remain passive to fake news and in 2020, they took the first initiatives to eliminate the risk of false information. For this purpose Facebook, in collaboration with WHO and European fact-checking partners, launched an information campaign called: "Together against COVID-19 vaccines disinformation". In this way, the platform wanted to support Internet users in verifying information available on the Internet. As part of the campaign, images appeared on Facebook and Instagram which contained practical tips helpful in recognizing fake content (Biznes Newseria, 2021). Twitter acted similarly, and started to post warnings on entries that may be untrue information about vaccination against COVID-19. How it turned out, Twitter has been fighting with fake news about coronavirus for a long time. This process started yet before WHO announced the global pandemic. The purpose of the action is – above all – removing false or misleading entries about the virus. As a result, about 9,000 entries were deleted over a year, and nearly 12 million accounts were suspended or permanently blocked (ITbiznes, 2021). These activities are monitored by the EU DisinfoLab – an organization that monitors disinformation activity on the internet. In its opinion, the actions taken by social media platforms to reduce the spread of false information are insufficient. Moreover, the EU DisinfoLab emphasizes that the responsibility for disinformation activity rests with the owners of social media platforms. Therefore, the organization submitted an open letter to decision-makers of the European Union, in which it proposed to amend the changes in Digital Service Act (Demagog, 2021).

When it comes to the activities of the media or journalists in the fight against fake news, during the COVID-19 pandemic, all around the world many institutions or organizations have been established to deal with fact-checking.

CONCLUSIONS

As the above work shows, infodemic poses a serious threat to human health and life. It is worth considering that it is not only about physical health, but also mental health. When there is widespread misinformation that affects health issues, appropriate action should be taken immediately to minimize the risk of further dissemination of false information. Representatives of states and governments and media institutions are playing a significant role in this regard. In addition, the most important international organizations proved helpless in the face of the spread of fake news. It showed not only negligence on the part of the owners of online platforms (fake news appeared the most in social media and spread there the fastest), but also how easy it is to believe in information that attracts emotions with the headline. This is why it is extremely important to educate the society in the field of media education.

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THE RISE OF INFLUENCERS:

AN UPDATE TO THE MULTI-STEP FLOW THEORY OF COMMUNICATION IN THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE COVID-19 INFODEMIC IN BULGARIA

ABSTRACT

This study offers a new, upgraded metamorphic multi-step flow theory of communication – a natural prolongation of the evolving concept, observing opinion leadership and the limited effects paradigm in a public sphere, shaped by social networks. The current typology of influencers is presented (both in the online and offline environment), in 7 different categories and subcategories: authentic (traditional and modern), elite (traditional and modern), "Web-born" (authorities and buffoons) and ephemera. The metamorphic model is tested in the context of the infodemic, unleashed by the COVID-19 pandemic. The study evaluates the potential of opinion leaders both to consolidate and polarize the society during the coronavirus crisis in Bulgaria. The most prominent speakers of the "COVID-19 narrative" have been distinguished and analysed in terms of their influence on the flow of communication and the response in social and traditional media triggered by their messages. Results show that the pandemic mobilizes all types of opinion leaders – authentic, elite, "Web-born" and ephemera. New influencers are emerging in the "Facebook" echo chambers – especially experts in the field of science. Influential both in platforms and mainstream media, some of them are "monetizing" their social capital starting a political career in 2021 – a year, marked by two major elections in Bulgaria – parliamentary and presidential. The analysis confirms that influencers, audience and media are continuously exchanging their roles within the web 4.0 era. The platforms have proven as a "nutrient medium" for opinion leaders to broaden their influence and reinforce messages sharply. Meanwhile, the audience accesses more diverse sources of information and mechanisms to set their own agenda in the social networks. A great challenge lies ahead for media – which need both to extract and produce information for the platforms, while disputing with influencers about their right to lead the socio-political debate.

Keywords: COVID-19 Pandemic, Influencer, Infodemic, Journalism, Social Media

INTRODUCTION

"The first post-truth pandemic". That's how Boston researchers Wendy Parmet and Jeremy Paul identified the COVID-19 epidemic that struck us in 2020 (Parmet & Paul, 2020). The coronavirus has pushed the world into a "lockdown" mode and closed billions in their digital "shelters" – leaving them literally "drowning" in disturbing news, circulated by the media and multiplied by social networks and their fierce filter bubbles. The infodemia is no less dangerous to health than COVID-19, the World Health Organization (WHO) warned in February 2020. And fake news about the virus is more contagious than SARS-Cov-2 itself, warned the Secretary General of WHO Dr. Tedros Ghebreyesus[1].

The WHO defines the term "infodemia" as "*an overabundance of information – some accurate and some not – occurring during an epidemic. It makes it hard for people to find trustworthy sources and reliable guidance when they need it*"[2]. Prominent scientists Matteo Cinelli, Walter Quattrociochi and Alessandro Galeazi and their team demonstrated in October 2020 that the news about the coronavirus spread like a real epidemic on social networks (Cinelli, M., Quattrociochi, W., Galeazzi, A. al., 2020). And Parmet and Paul consider the problem of infodemia in the context of the post-truth world, subordinated to the maxim: "*I believe, therefore I see!*" (Parmet & Paul, 2020). Their argument is that today the post-truth is imposed not only from the top to the bottom – from the elite to the audience, but also from ordinary users to opinion leaders and institutions.

But whose messages are more harmful at the epicenter of the "information tsunami"? The most dangerous "ambassadors" of the "misinformation virus", as it turns out, are the opinion leaders – representatives of the elite as politicians or celebrities, according to the

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1   The speech of Dr. Gebreyesus, addressed to the "Munich Security Conference" on 15th March 2020, is available at: https://www.who.int/director-general/speeches/detail/munich-security-conference

2   See WHO's website for more details: https://www.who.int/news-room/events/detail/2020/06/30/default-calendar/1st-who-infodemiology-conference

Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism (Brennen et al., 2020). Scott Brennan's team proves that although the misinformation coming from the influencers makes up only 20 percent of the sample, it accumulates 69% of social media engagement. The explanation – the pandemic increases the desire of consumers to find security, so they are increasingly prone to find it in "convenient facts" disseminated by institutions and individuals, precisely because they correspond to the opinions audience already supports (Petrova, 2020).

Social networks, on the other hand, stand out as the best "nutrient medium" for controversial content about COVID-19, Brennen argued. A majority (88%) of the sample appeared on the social media platforms. Another 9 percent were spotted on television, 8 percent on news agencies, and 7 percent on other websites, according to the study. A half-truth is the best lie, Brennan's team also discovered. 59% of misinformation involved various forms of distortion, where often accurate information was twisted, recontextualized or reworked. A smaller part – 38%, was completely fabricated (Brennen et al., 2020). These COVID-19 narratives perfectly fit with emo-truth phenomenon (Harsin, 2017; 2018; 2020) – the "sense of truth", inspired by negative emotions that legitimize it as credible. Thus the toxic combination of "pandemic news" overload, against the background of global anxiety and thanks to social sharing tools, turn the coronavirus into an "information virus" with just one click – the Butterfly effect is underway (Dermendjieva & Slavova 2016).

This infodemic would not have been possible without the evolution of the Multi-Step Flow Theory in the last 70 years. Today, in the context of social networks, the roles of its participants – opinion leaders, media and audience, are constantly changing roles. Influencers are becoming more influential, the public is becoming more active and the "power" of journalists is weakening. The purpose of this study is to offer an upgraded author's Metamorphic flow model (Simeonova, 2020), based on the development of the Multi-Step Flow paradigm, tested in the context of the COVID-19 virus-triggered infodemic.

THE EVOLUTION OF THE MULTI-STEP FLOW THEORY OF COMMUNICATION

Challenged and refuted, upgraded and expanded, over the last 70 years the Multi-Step Flow Theory "has stood the test of time". Evolving in parallel with technology and media, the paradigm sounds relevant today – albeit transformed in the context of social networks. There are several key transformations of the model. In the 1940s, its foundation was based on the hypothesis that before changing the attitudes of the public, media messages must pass through the "filter" of the so-called opinion leaders or influencers (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, Gaudet, 1948; Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955; Katz, 1957). The authority of these well-informed and respected members of the community weighs more than that of journalists and they have the potential to influence the decisions of the audience to a greater extent than radio, television or the press. In the "second wave" of concepts – which unfolded from the 1960s to the late 1990s – this simple, one-way, two-tier model of communication was upgraded and became multi-tier (Robinson, 1976; Valente, 1996, Rogers, 1983; Burt, 1999). Various empirical studies from that period have shown that influencers combine several roles simultaneously – of "opinion givers" and "opinion seekers"; different classifications of opinion leadership were made and the audience emerged from its passive part. After a complex upgrade – already in the era of Web 2.0, scientists made a "U-turn" – completely simplifying the concept. The result was the One-step flow of communication (Bennet & Manheim, 2006). The new paradigm argued that in the conditions of total oversaturation with news and thanks to the over-personalization of information, opinion leaders are obsolete and the media directly reach their audiences. In total opposition to this theory is the next modification – the Radial Flow of Communication (Stansberry, 2012). This star-shaped model put opinion leaders at the center of the "universe" of Internet-based communities of interest. The so-called "primary influencers" collect, screen and disseminate information from a variety of sources – media, social networks, blogs, institutions, research – and present

it to audiences. The Multi-Step Flow Network Model also gave a new perspective (Ognyanova & Monge, 2013). This concept offered two interpretations of the role of the media in spreading information and influencing opinion. In the first type of the model, outlets were not considered as part of the network, and in the second type – were embedded into the multi-dimensional network.

The hypertextual, personalized and interactive environment of so-cial networks leads to metamorphoses not only in the Multi-Step Flow Theory, but also in several other paradigms that are inextricably linked to the Katz and Lazarsfeld hypothesis – for example, the Agenda-Setting Theory by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw (McCombs & Shaw, 1972) and Kurt Lewin's Gatekeeping Theory (1947). In the "social network era" everybody – even the most apathetic users – have access to the important topics of the day – often without looking for them intentionally. This phenomenon is again explained by the function of the newsfeed algorithms of platforms – these "invis-ible editors-in-chief", who flood us with every login on "Facebook" or "Twitter" – even with unsolicited media content. The media outlets today can only line up their own agenda, but it is increasingly dif-ficult for them to provoke debate in the complex multifaceted media environment – this thesis is advocated by the Australian researcher Axel Bruns, the "father" of the term "gatewatching" (Bruns, 2011, p. 13), who "retires" the old watchdogs at the information entrance. His theory is that in the Internet age, when the media is unlimited – both in place and time, and the pattern of "pushing" information is shifting to that of "pulling", journalists no longer hold the key to the "information gate" (Bruns, 2003, p. 134). The function of the so-called gatewatchers is to monitor the portals through which the news travels and to point it out to the part of the readers who are most likely interested in opening it and gaining useful information. Before him, Joe Bardoel and Mark Deuze, defining the new roles of online journalists, spoke of their reorientation from "watchdogs" to "guidedogs" (Bardoel & Deuze, 2001, p. 94).

THE METAMORPHIC FLOW MODEL
THROUGH THE PRISM OF COVID-19

Last in vaccination in the European Union – with only 22.3% having received two doses[3], and second in mortality from the virus[4] – Bulgaria is more than divided in the midst of the fourth wave of COVID-19. Forty-five percent have neither been immunized nor intend to do so, according to the latest Gallup International poll[5]. How does the strongly polarized and hysterical media environment in Bulgaria affect the attitude to the measures to overcome the pandemic? This is verified through the prism of the author's Metamorphic flow model. For this purpose, a content analysis of 48 opinion leaders in the Bulgarian "Facebook" has been made – both quantitative (through "MediaToolKit") and qualitative (through social media monitoring of the influencers profiles and case-study research), as well as in two online polls – among the audience (with 270 respondents) and among professional journalists (22 respondents).

After the outbreak of the pandemic, the popular saying that "everyone in Bulgaria understands politics and football" was continued with: "… and epidemiology and virology." In the conditions of unprecedented infodemia, the topic "COVID-19", reasonably, has activated all types of opinion leaders in the last 2 years – both online and offline. What do the content analysis results of their profiles show?

Katz and Lazarsfeld's (1955) classic definition of opinion leaders is: "…*leadership at its simplest: it is casually exercised, sometimes unwitting and unbeknown, within the smallest groupings of friends, family members, and neighbors. It is not leadership on the high level of Churchill, nor of a local politico; it is the almost invisible, certainly inconspicuous form of leadership at the person-to-person level of ordinary, intimate, informal, everyday contact*" (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955).

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3   Further details by ECDC are available at: https://vaccinetracker.ecdc.europa.eu/public/extensions/COVID-19/vaccine-tracker.html#uptake-tab

4   Furter details by Statista.com are available at: https://www.statista.com/statistics/1111779/coronavirus-death-rate-europe-by-country/

5   Furter details by "Gallup International" are available at: https://www.gallup-international.bg/45008/45-percent-say-they-are-not-vaccinated-and-they-will-not-do-it/

This characteristic of opinion leaders remains stable – whether influencers reach their potential in the era of radio and print – as in Erie County in 1944, or in that of "Facebook" and "Twitter". Thus today they perform some influence on their audience – both offline and online. Within the author's Metamorphic flow model, they can be categorized with the term *authentic* opinion leaders. They are divided into two subcategories – *traditional* (operating with information and influence offline) and *modern* (operating both offline and online).

However, authentic influencers are only part of the "palette" of opinion leaders that outlines the upgraded paradigm. Another important role in it is played by another type of influencers, which the classical concepts exclude from the "equation" – these are the representatives of the political, intellectual, economic, journalistic, art and other avant-garde. They fall into the category of *elite* opinion leaders. Again, they are divided into two subtypes – *traditional* (which communicate with the audience through the media, bypassing social networks) and *modern* (which communicate with the audience directly online on social networks). From the point of view of the old models, they remain outside the "ecosystem". However, Web 4.0 allows these authorities – especially the modern ones among them – to enter the "field" of interpersonal communication, to "catch up" with the audience on a virtual social plane and to communicate with it directly.

In the next category are "*web-born*" opinion leaders. Their appearance is due to the development of Web 2.0 and Web 3.0. These influencers have accumulated their social capital entirely online. They are divided into two types – *authorities*, real people, with many followers on social networks, whose expertise and/or charisma are transferred to the mainstream media. The other subcategory is the *buffoons* – entirely fictional virtual "personalities", an online underground that accumulates likes and shares only on "Facebook" and "Twitter".

The last, seventh type of opinion leaders, due to the dominance of the social and semantic web, are the *ephemera*. These influencers have only "15 minutes of fame" – both online and offline. They take on the role of opinion leaders, becoming producers of viral content that engages the audience, "break throughs" into the media agenda and cause social change.

"A WOMAN SAID..." – THE AUTHENTIC TRADITIONAL LEADERS

The mediatization of the environment, thanks to the rapid development of technology, leaves very few of the authentic opinion leaders in the category of *traditional authentic* – spreading influence only in the offline environment. The reason for this is that interpersonal networks naturally migrate to social networks. And in the context of the COVID pandemic, the impact of these influencers remains significant. The data from the survey shows that 13 percent of people are most often informed about the virus by their relatives and acquaintances. 5.6 percent are adamant that their friends are the source they trust the most when it comes to the virus.

An interesting phenomenon is that even the messages of traditional influencers often penetrate social networks, albeit indirectly. This happens when users present their ideas – as an argument reinforcing one or another thesis. "The neighbor, my mother, the GP, my friend, a known acquaintance" – this is the collective image of traditional authentic influencers in the context of the debate on COVID-19 in Bulgaria. They are usually anonymous – their opinions or experiences are cited as arguments in affirming an opinion or idea in discussions on "Facebook". Most often, their "holograms" are used by anti-vaxxers or by those who are hesitant about the virus, immunization and measures to limit it. The most common narratives in which these influencers are the main characters can be summarized as follows:

- *My mother / my neighbor / my friend is vaccinated and then becomes infected or dies from the virus;*
- *I don't get vaccinated because my GP / cardiologist / neurologist told me it was dangerous;*
- *They offered BGN 1,800 to an acquaintance of mine to enter in the death certificate of a relative that he had died of COVID-19.*

These dominant messages, which often carry the attributes of rumors, can hardly be refuted rationally because they are not based on facts. However, they are extremely debatable, gather solid engagement, and have great viral potential, so they are recognizable in the social media agenda and have the power to shape user's beliefs.

THE MODERN AUTHENTIC – CURERS AND CONSPIRATORS

The *modern* ones are the majority among the *authentic influencers* – they spread information and influence both online and offline. Social networks only strengthen their qualities and facilitate their functions. 21.9 percent of the respondents in the survey admit that the news and comments on COVID-19, which they most often read are shared by the profiles of their friends (virtual and real) and relatives. This puts informal leaders right after media outlets as a main source of information on the platforms. The survey also shows that in the "corona reality" more than 54 percent of people spend more time on social networks than before. This, respectively, leads to the conclusion that their "virtual existence" is increasingly influencing their reality, while online communication is becoming more intense and Internet connections are deepening. As the public debate moves "from the living room to the newsfeed", modern authentic influencers are mobilized on the topic of COVID-19. And extremely polarized. During the pandemic, on the one side of the barricade are the pro-vaxxers – mostly doctors and scientists; on the other – fans of conspiracy theories, to which the pandemic offers many new plots.

Both types often expand the scope of their personal influence, thanks to their active position in huge groups on "Facebook" – as administrators, moderators or just active distributors of opinions and comments. The authority they accumulate in the discussions in these echo chambers is transferred to their personal profiles – and the results are thousands of followers and huge engagement.

Dr. Alexander Atanasov[6] is one of the hundreds of representatives of this "wave" of opinion leaders in Bulgaria. GP and a pediatrician from Sofia, the young doctor is one of the most active members of the most powerful group dedicated to the virus and the fight against it – "Vaksini"[7] – with 22,000 members and 400 posts a day. Along with advice[8] to his patients on "Facebook", he publishes emotional posts about the management of the pandemic[9] and doesn't spare his criticism – both to authorities and his fellow doctors, who spread contradictory information about the virus, restrictions and immunizations. In the last 9 months he has been one of the most active GPs involved in vaccination – regularly brags on his personal profile about the number immunized for the day, which in some days reaches nearly 100 people. Atanasov is also among the few medics who actively promote the vaccination of children – a sensitive topic for Bulgarian society, which is generally skeptical about immunization. In the group "Vaksini" he answers dozens of questions every day, and if necessary offers "vaccines for rescuing" – when he has free doses due to absent patients. This activity puts him at the forefront of the "influencers on the other side" – anti-vaxxers with good positions on social networks. Along with other colleagues from the specialized groups on "Facebook", who are conducting the most active vaccination campaign, he was named a "public enemy" by the most powerful conspiracy group dedicated to the virus – "Izmamata K0vid19"[10], which literally "resurrects" itself every few weeks because it had been reported en masse and then recovered again.

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6   The personal profile of dr. Alexander Atanasov is available at: https://www. facebook.com/alexander.atanasov.7

7   The "Facebook" group is available at: https://www.facebook.com/groups/vaksini/

8   See more at: https://www.facebook.com/alexander.atanasov.7/posts /10218801844650193

9   See more at: https://www.facebook.com/alexander.atanasov.7/posts/ 10218801844650193

10   See more at: https://www.facebook.com/alexander.atanasov.7/posts/ 10222424928225018

Which modern authentic influencers stand "on the other side of the barricade"? A huge "Facebook" army, whose representatives most often present themselves as independent journalists and fighters against censorship and medical fascism, guardians of truth and warriors against the world conspiracy that wants to enslave humanity with the weapons of the "fictional virus" and "poisonous vaccines". However, monitoring their profiles raises the reasonable question – are they influencers or just trolls? Yes, like their opponents – mostly doctors and scientists, who run a powerful information campaign with the arguments of science, these opinion leaders gather their strength from the echo chambers formed in the groups of the social network, which have more than 150,000 members. But at the same time, the analysis of their personal profiles sows suspicion – whether we are confronted with authentic, informal leadership or with a deliberate distortion of the flow of information and influence in favour of particular agenda. Why?

First, a large part of the personal profiles of the most active users in the groups involved in anti-COVID rhetoric are either closed or – when public, 100% concentrated around propaganda messages – now around the topic of the virus, and in a relevant analysis – about sensitive topics such as anti-European and pro-Russian and pro-Eurasian narratives, attacks on the liberal model and so on. This type of users, moreover, are highly organized, coordinated and productive – they generate a huge amount of a similar type of content, in different groups simultaneously, and their pace is constant. Dissemination of information seems more like a professional task than like an impulse. Some of the most hyperactive speakers about COVID-19 in the field of anti-vaxxers have an interesting and long biography in the hybrid wars on "Facebook" and even appear in lists of trolls who work for the Kremlin's paradigm and the imposition of anti-European sentiment[11]. Russophile Iva Ivatta, for example, who presents herself as an "independent journalist" and is based in London, is among the few producers of content in the most powerful

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11   I Borisov nastapi ruska mina. Webcafe.bg, June 2016, available at: https://webcafe.bg/vlast/1166953155-i-borisov-nastapi-ruska-mina.html, [Cited on 29.10.2021]

populist echo rooms, whose profile is public – and with over 10,000 followers. Her posts are shared daily in groups such as "Behind the Government"[12] (with over 42,000 members), "Izmamata CoVid-19"[13] (its latest version has over 10,000 followers), "Az podkrepiam docent Atanas Mangarov"[14] (with over 16 500 members), "Az niama da se v@ksiniram!" (with over 21,000 followers). Their topics cover the whole spectrum of the anti-vaccination movement – from videos with revelations that vaccines turn the body into "radiation soup"[15], through reports of protests against "green passports" and masks[16], through news about children and adults who died after immunization[17]. And the pace of publication – an average of 5 articles a day only on her personal page, separately – in the largest echo chambers in the network, as well as in her channel and on "Telegram". Ivatta's recognizable profile has been used to spill content and other influencers on the subject who are active in conspiracy groups – such as Martin Raichev[18], who tags her in most of his posts. Iva herself gives credit and overflows influence to other voice speakers against the virus and measures to control it – such as Yana Shishkova, a Chinese teacher and flagship of anti-vaccination teachers in Bulgaria[19].

The clash between pro – and anti-vaxxers is also significant in the next category of opinion leaders – the *elite* ones. The classical paradigm of Multi-Step Flow excludes formal leaders in the society from the model – with the presumption that their messages are produced

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12 See more at: https://www.facebook.com/beh.gov/

13 See more at: https://www.facebook.com/groups/475034620293272/

14 See more at: https://www.facebook.com/groups/584734219056887/

15 The video is available at: Видеото е достъпно на: https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=149543917375319&id=100069591356277

16 See more at: https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=1519579265059894&id=100010235055114

17 See more at: https://bit.ly/3o96A9L

18 Martin Raichev's profile is available at: Профилът е достъпен на: https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100069591356277

19 See more at: Публикацията е достъпна на: https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=1517301631954324&id=100010235055114

by the media. We can find them in different studies as "fictitious, virtual or parasocial influencers" (Stehr, Rössler, Schönhard, & Leissner, 2015, p. 984).

In the first subcategory – of the *traditional* influencers, are usually representatives of the political, art, intellectual and other elites who do not have profiles on social networks. However, in many cases, they live a virtual life when users share their opinions on social networks and "expose" them to comments, likes and shares.

THE GENERAL AS A MEME

The most significant example is Prof. Ventsislav Mutafchiiski. "Don't go out!" – with this call at the start of the pandemic the surgeon-general, chief doctor of the Bulgarian army and head of the Military Medical Academy became a real icon of COVID-19. Little known to the common public before the pandemic – due to his rare media appearances as a head of hospital, in the midst of the pandemic he totally took over the news agenda in Bulgaria. The reason – with the declaration of the state of emergency on 13th March 2020, the regular briefings of the National operational headquarters for combating COVID-19 (NOSHT), which was headed by Mutafchiiski, began. Until 5th May 2020, all Bulgarians literally woke up to the speeches of the uniformed doctor, who every morning at 8 o'clock reported the latest data on the infected, the dead and the measures and answered the journalist's questions. The press conferences – first held in front of the entrance of the Military Medical Academy, and later – in the Council of Ministers, were broadcasted live by all television stations, as well as on Facebook. They even gave birth to new genres on social networks – such as "pandemic chronicles", in which users – often satirically, comment on the General's latest statements every morning, and others wrote poems about him. Thus, Mutafchiiski became the most influential speaker about COVID-19 – both online and offline. Sociological research also confirms it – during the drilling

in the spring and summer of 2020, the abdominal surgeon surpassed both the then Prime Minister Borissov and President Rumen Radev. And he is the most liked person in the country in regards to approval, which reaches 89 percent[20].

Although since June 2020 Mutafchiiski had avoided media appearances, his role as an influencer did not weaken. More than a year later, he continues to be a hero in the "Facebook" wars dedicated to the virus. Groups in support of him have more than 50,000 followers and publish an average of 20 posts a day and some users are lobbying for his nomination for president –something that has not happened. There are 20,000 fans on the pages dedicated to the military doctor, which, however, are dotted mainly with the meme of the General.

The analysis through the tool "MediaToolKit" shows that in the period of July-September 2021 alone, his name appeared in over 633,000 publications online – 580 thousand of which were on online media, and 28,000 were on "Facebook". Over 46 percent of them have a positive bias, the negative ones are 30 percent, and the neutral ones – 23 percent. 137 of these publications were "dumped" in one day –24th September 2021, when a photo of the General being vaccinated for the third time was published on the official website of the Military Medical Academy – it actually gave the start of the campaign for the "third dose" in Bulgaria.

Behind the popularity of the General, however, lies another phenomenon – namely – his clash in the public space with two of his colleagues – the infectious disease specialist Assoc. Prof. Atanas Mangarov and the immunologist Prof. Andrey Chorbanov. The constant war between them – both in traditional media and on social networks, allows them to mobilize their audiences and keep interest in themselves even in the process of accumulating fatigue from pandemic news in people. Unlike Mutafchiiski, Mangarov and Chorbanov belong to the group of elite modern influencers. Apart

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20   Ne siadai na miastoto mi, che s toia reiting stavash riskov. Mediapool.bg, 24th March 2020, available at: www.mediapool.bg/borisov-kam-mutafchiyski-ne-syadai-na-myastoto-mi-che-s-toya-reiting-stavash-riskov-news305148.html, [Cited 29.09.2021]

from being desirable speakers in mainstream media – because of their attractive and always opportunistic theses (even before COVID-19), they also enjoy a stable audience on Facebook. Both influencers tried to monetize their social capital in politics – one of them – successfully.

PUBLIC ENEMY #1

In his two profiles – personal[21] and public[22], Mangarov is followed by nearly 50,000 people. In the survey, conducted specifically for the purposes of the study, he was followed by 9.6 percent of respondents, which puts him in the Top 10 of popular personalities in the Bulgarian "Facebook". However, his messages reach a much wider range of users – because his media appearances, as well as publications in his profiles, are among the main content in the largest anti-vaccination groups, which we have already commented above. And his posts are shared by some of the most powerful media moguls on the social network – such as Martin Karbowski, the Bulgarian Alex Jones, whose "Facebook" army numbers over half a million.

The doctor publishes daily – recordings of his media interviews, comments on scientific articles, remarks to his opponents in the CO-VID-19 "war". From the very beginning of the pandemic, Mangarov took on the role of the everlasting opposition to the official agenda – first he was against the lockdown and argued that the virus would weaken if there was no closure and only a certain part of the "dry twigs" would die. At the same time, he was against wearing a mask in public places, he himself was photographed without one in a tram, and he explained to the journalists that he has one but it "*smells like a pocket*" because he has kept it there since the beginning of the pandemic. When vaccines appeared, the doctor doubted the benefits of them – arguing that natural immunity is more effective. Moreover, Mangarov even announced on national air the fake news about the

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21 See more at: https://www.facebook.com/atanas.mangarov
22 See more at: https://www.facebook.com/DocentMangurov/

death of an immunized patient in his hospital. In fact, in the elections in April 2021, Mangarov was a candidate for parliament, representing the left party with fierce anti-COVID-19 rhetoric. The associate professor was a leading candidate in the largest constituency in the country – in the capital, but the party received only 1,789 votes, with nearly 800 preferences for Mangarov. The doctor's political ambitions gave his opponents an argument to accuse him that, in an attempt to monetize his influence, he is ready to sow a dangerous division in society and he is a threat to public health. To date, Mangarov has been accused by both the medical community and politicians – of being one of the main culprits for the failure of the vaccination campaign and high mortality rate in Bulgaria. Along with that, the media are also criticized, giving him a generous tribute – in the name of pluralism of opinion and because of the fact that his appearances guarantee high ratings.

The analysis with "MediaToolKit" for the period of July-September 2021 shows that Mangarov is a hero in over 1 million flashes, as 7.6 percent of them are on "Facebook", and more – 9.1 percent – on "YouTube". Interestingly, no matter how controversial the doctor is, over 44 percent of his posts are neutral, 28.7 percent positive, 26.5 negative, and his critics are most often on "YouTube".

THE SEXIEST PROFESSOR EVER

Mangarov shares the people's love and disgrace with another elite modern influencer – the immunologist Prof. Andrey Chorbanov. The biotechnologist from the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, which develops vaccines, has nearly 13,000 followers on the social network. In the author's survey he was followed by 4.8 percent of the respondents, but his influence extends far from social networks – besides being a "media sweetheart", the professor was also an MP in three parliaments after the outbreak of the pandemic. Chorbanov is a successful example of monetizing publicity in politics – as a one of the top-guns in the populist party of the showman Slavi Trifonov, which

exploits anti-COVID rhetoric. His unusual behavior – to wear a bikini instead of mask or post pictures with a teddy bear, wearing a T-shirt: "The sexiest professor ever", for example, is a bait for media outlets. He, himself, bragged in the first year after the outbreak of the pandemic with over 300 interviews in mainstream media.

The analysis with "MediaToolKit" shows that for the period of July-September 2021 he was a hero in over 585,000 posts on online and social media, 6.7 percent of which are on "Facebook". It is interesting that over 43 percent of them are positive, 40.7 percent – neutral and only 16.3 percent – negative, which only confirms that Chorbanov's charm is winning – from the TV screen to the parliament.

The COVID-19 topic mobilizes the next category of influencers – *web-born*. These authorities are self-made opinion leaders, experienced in digital communication, whose social capital, accumulated in the Web, turns them into prominent speakers both in platforms and mainstream media. Apart from becoming favourites of the journalists, they are also successful game changers and flagmen of various civic campaigns.

DR. VACCINE FROM SWITZERLAND

In the context of the pandemic, this segment is developing most rapidly. On the one hand, these "professional influencers" are expected to intensify on the "topic of the day". The majority of them in Bulgaria are among the supporters of officials in the battle with the virus. More interesting, from the point of view of the pandemic, however, are the experts – in this case, doctors, who are aggressively entering the public debate during the crisis. Many of them even before the infection maintain blogs and pages dedicated to their specialty or comment on current problems of the health system in the country. However, the pandemic motivates them to become more active and to interact more intensively with their audience. And, respectively, they are recognized by media as prominent speakers about COVID-19.

A clear example is Dr. Asparuh Iliev, a Bulgarian vaccine safety expert based in Bern, Switzerland. From an anonymous doctor who posted mostly rock songs on the social network until the end of 2019, today he is one of the most trusted experts in the public debate. Every single day he presents and translates in "common language" the newest scientific reports on the topic. He had become a flagman of pro-vaxxers and a convinced promoter of lockdowns. Dr. Iliev is also among the most furious critics of Assoc. Prof. Mangarov and Prof. Chorbanov and other doctors who are skeptics about immunization. He "overflows" content and influence to other "web-born" influencers – such as mathematician Peter Velkov and his fellow doctors who administrate echo chambers such as the "Vaksini" group, etc.

The analysis through the tool "MediaToolKit" for the period of July-September 2021 shows that he is a hero in over 355,000 posts, 4.2 percent of which are on "Facebook". In the "war of experts" he is characterized by the greatest neutrality in coverage – 52.3 percent, 33% of the materials are negative and 13.8 percent – positive. In the author's survey, Dr. Iliev was followed by 3.3% of the respondents. But – despite his repeated threats – that he will stop his media appearances, due to the readiness of journalists to give a platform to the lobby of "Mangarov-Chorbanov", he remains active in his participation, which defends the policy of vaccination and restriction of social contacts.

I DREAM OF AN ANTIBODY!

The other subcategory – the *buffoons*, do not stay away from the COVID debate, although – probably quite deliberately – they do not abuse this topic. The influence of these opinion leaders remains "closed" only in the field of social networks. Like the *authorities*, they also support large communities of followers online and are

particularly active in the socio-political debate, but hiding behind virtual images and satire is usually their strongest "weapon" to win over audiences and reactions

In Bulgaria there are several representatives of these "iconic" images. Among them in the last 5 years, undoubtedly, the most recognizable is Ivanka Kurvoazie, who is followed by 5.2 percent of the sample in the author's survey and by over 19 thousand on Facebook. She or he (nobody knows) exploited the COVID-topic most seriously right after the announcement of the first lockdown in Bulgaria. Her most engaging posts are related to other influencers in the sample – Prof. Mutafchiiski and Assoc. Prof. Mangarov. The witty Kurvoazie ironizes the clash between the two doctors, and elegantly supports the vaccination program, in her typical style, commenting in her "white bus of hope" that "vaccines enlarge the breasts"[23].

Much more active on the topic of the virus is another buffoon – Rumen The Cat[24], who's followed by 14.4% in my sample. Every single one of his chronicles of the pandemic collect, for example, more than 3,000 reactions. Another individual who is active on the topic is the Epic Bath Guy – a man protesting in a bathrobe, who has 68,000 fans on Facebook and is followed by 7.4 percent of respondents in the sample. Mainly, he is joking about the deeply criticized measures against the virus and the anti-vaccination sentiments[25].

THE FLIGHT OF EPHEMERA

These "supernovae" of social networks distort the model of information flow in an interesting way, unthinkable before the era of Web 4.0. They first manage to attract a large audience and thus – force gatekeepers in the media to notice and reflect them. But becoming an opinion

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23 See more at: https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=83867648 3452432&id=100019302640926

24 See more at: https://www.facebook.com/kotarakutrumen

25 See more at: https://www.facebook.com/epicbathguy/posts/301157178475089

leader is not a good enough reason to post a funny or heartbreaking meme, which is re-shared by more than 100,000 users. Content that can turn the average consumer into a one-day influencer must, in the first place, have social significance. Only this can provoke gatekeepers to present it in an official platform. The bad news for the ephemera is that after the problem is solved – with the mediation of journalists, their 15 minutes of fame are over. But this one-time act of influence they exert on the "gatekeepers" is many times greater than that of the other 6 categories of influencers. The reason for this is the energy of the audience, which they manage to accumulate.

19 seconds – that's enough for Maria Gospodinova to produce news №1 in Bulgaria. Her husband and another COVID patient are filmed and publish on "Facebook", literally fighting for their last breath on the stairs of the Infectious diseases clinic in Plovdiv – in November 2020. They fail to fight death. But their tragedy became top news in the country – first by BNT – the national television, and then by all media in the country. The result – officials from the Minister of health to the Prosecutor's Office, mobilized to resolve the problem with the lack of COVID-beds in Bulgarian hospitals during the second wave of the pandemic. 5 people were fired. The public expectation was justified – and for the ephimera remained the grief for their loved ones and their 15 minutes "in the spotlight".

METAMORPHOSES OF THE AUDIENCE

The audience is the most important "player" in the Multi-Step Flow model – for the simple reason that both the media and opinion leaders are subordinated to the great goal – to reach it and influence it. Social networks give the public complete freedom – first, to decide how to satisfy its "information hunger". And then – easily to switch roles – and have the opportunity to transform into an opinion leader or even – in the media.

- *Opinion seekers vs. opinion avoiders* – Newsfeed's settings allow each member of the audience to decide whether they want to be an "opinion seeker" or an "opinion avoider". And the moment they get tired of being one or the other, with just a few clicks, they can enter the other category. Every user in a social network is free to follow or not certain media or opinion leaders; to limit whose posts they will see in their newsfeed; decide whether to open or close their newsfeed for posts by other users, etc. This gives the audience a unique chance to control the extent to which it is exposed to the information flow and to filter the influence of the various "players" in the communication process. In the case of COVID-19 – 58.9 percent of the participants in the author's survey admit that they are oversaturated with information and today less often follow the topic. Another 13.7 percent do not hide that they have avoided it from the very beginning of pandemic. However, 26.3 percent are more actively looking for information about COVID-19 today – nearly 2 years after its outbreak.

- *My mother, the influencer* – The philosophy of social networks, which is built on the sharing of information and opinions, greatly facilitates the formation and maintenance of opinion leadership – both among ordinary users and among the elite. The elite has the opportunity to emancipate from media and to communicate directly and unrestrictedly with their audiences – a process that has intensified in recent years. Ordinary users have the chance to establish themselves as opinion leaders in various categories – authentic, "web-born" and even ephimera. 21.9 percent in the author's survey admitted that they receive information about the virus from friends and relatives on the social network. At 14.8 percent, it comes from influencers, and at 59.6 percent – from the media profiles they follow. 10.7 percent do not hide that they have changed their opinion about the measures against the pandemic precisely under the influence of relatives and acquaintances. And another 13.3 percent – due to posts and discussions on social networks. However, the media remain the most influential – 29.6 percent have changed their minds, thanks to the information from them.

- *The audience as I-media* – In addition to the personalization of news-feeds, social networks allows users to receive only the most interesting and useful information about them – whether from the profiles of media, individuals or institutions, algorithms give the audience another option – easily to create their own media. Users can enter in the role of reporters, cameramen, editors, columnists – producing their own or selecting other media's content. This, of course, is also possible in blogs. But the functional interface of social networks allows this transformation of the audience to happen much faster and easier. And their personal "journalistic" platform to reach a potentially much wider audience than the blogosphere allows. Regarding the COVID-19 pandemic, consumers are not very active – less than 10 percent share information on the subject more than a few times a month.

MEDIA – COMMUNICATOR OR AUDIENCE?

Journalism undoubtedly plays the role of the "big loser" in the transformations of the media environment. The research shows that media lose their exclusivity in disseminating information and influence and agenda-setting. In social media, they find themselves both in the role of a communicator and an audience. Content producers are also obliged to take on the role of followers. More than 75% of journalists admit that they have to extract information from the public profiles of individuals on social networks on a daily or frequent basis. 81.8% follow experts – doctors, analysts, psychologists, etc. in the platforms. Nearly 50% extract information about COVID-19 from social networks. And as the biggest challenge in the pandemic – overloaded with work, they point their surrender to explain to society that the virus does exist and that vaccines and measures make sense.

CONSLUSION

Results show that the pandemic mobilizes all types of opinion leaders – authentic, elite, "web-born" and ephemera. New influencers are emerging in the "Facebook" echo chambers – especially experts in the field of science. Influential both in platforms and mainstream media, some of them are "monetizing" their social capital starting political careers in 2021 – a year, marked by a spiral of elections in Bulgaria. The analysis confirms that influencers, audience, and media are continuously exchanging their roles within the Web 4.0 era. The platforms have proven as a "nutrient medium" for opinion leaders to broaden their influence and reinforce messages sharply. Meanwhile, the audience accesses more diverse sources of information and mechanisms to set their own agenda in the social networks. A great challenge lies ahead of media – which need both to extract and produce information for the platforms, while disputing with influencers for their right to lead the socio-political debate.

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VIKTOR ORBÁN'S FACEBOOK ACTIVITY RELATED TO COVID-19 DURING THE FIRST WAVE OF THE PANDEMIC

ABSTRACT

Coronavirus reached Hungary in March of 2020. The initial reaction of the Hungarian government was comparable to other European responses. During the first wave of the pandemic, Hungary avoided a massive outbreak and the number of cases remained relatively low, making it possible for the government to communicate about their success. Viktor Orbán, who holds the position of Prime Minister since 2010 and who is currently leading his fourth government, is a central figure of European and Hungarian politics. His and Fidesz-KDNP's right-wing populist communication style caused numerous conflicts and criticism both from inside and outside of Hungary. Orbán's charismatic approach to governance and communication also applies to COVID-19. Special task groups and forces have been created to lead and organize the multi-layered defence against the pandemic, while Viktor Orbán became the face of the fight against the virus. Social media, especially Facebook is a popular and effective way for politicians in Hungary to reach their voters and create content for them. Viktor Orbán's Facebook page became one of the main platforms to announce important new actions and communicate about the pandemic. As a new development, Orbán started to prioritize this way of communication and began neglecting the appearances on traditional media. In this chapter, all of Orbán's coronavirus-related posts have been collected from the period between March and September of 2020. Using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) subcategories can be determined among the posts corresponding with COVID-19, hence Orbán's tone, communication style and intended messages can be identified and examined.

Keywords: COVID-19 Pandemic, Hungary, Political Communication, Populism, Social Media, Thematic Analysis, Viktor Orbán

METHOD

THEMATIC ANALYSIS

Thematic analysis is mainly used in psychology as a qualitative method for analysis, but there is a huge debate among scholars about its usage. This method is also applicable to other disciplines of social sciences, such as political science or communication studies. The main advantage of thematic analysis is that it can identify and analyse patterns within data (Roulston, 2001). Thematic analysis is flexible for processing large amounts of content and create a deep and precise summary (Boyatzis, 1998).

The method can transform the previously collected data by generated themes, codes and maps for the topics involved in the research, in my case the Facebook usage of Viktor Orbán, the prime minister of Hungary during the first wave of COVID-19 in Hungary.

The researcher has to create themes for the analysis, which themes target the most prominent features of the dataset concerning the target of the study and unveil patterns in it. The identified themes can help to understand the main research question by dissecting it into subdivisions. It is important to note, that thematic analysis is a qualitative method and as such, it does not concern itself with the frequency of various themes. Instead, the main goal is to understand the topic by how it is mentioned and what attitude the people using it have.

This social media watch research also uses thematic analysis and as such it is determined by the researcher's theoretical or analytic interest in the area. This study aims to understand how and in what way Viktor Orbán used his social media platform to communicate with his followers and the people of Hungary during the first wave of the pandemic. Thematic analysis of this subject won't produce a detailed overall description of the data, but just underlines the main aspects of the topic (Braun & Clarke, 2006). During the procedure the researcher has to look for meaning and relations between the patterns within the collected data set.

The author of this study worked on similarly approached research which also used thematic analysis as a method. In that case, the Facebook communication of single-member constituency candidates during the 2018 Hungarian General Elections were studied in relation with three topics: 1) the European Union and the United Nations, 2) George Soros and 3) the refugee crisis (Boldizsár et al, 2020).

COUNTRY CONTEXT

The first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic hit the world in March 2020. The leaders of the world had to react and act immediately as the population demanded response. Rally around the flag effect, which previously was mostly connected to international conflicts started to take shape, as the people needed something or someone to gather around (Mueller, 1970; Schraff, 2021). Hungary has been a popular research interest for the last decade and is used as an example for right wing populism and democracy backsliding (Halmai, 2019; Drinóczi & Bień-Kacała, 2020; Havlík, 2019). Viktor Orbán, the prime minister of Hungary is the most prominent figure of Fidesz-KDNP, the ruling coalition of Hungary since 2010. His speeches, actions, and illiberal style of governance are heavily discussed in the Hungarian social science community, but also internationally (Körösényi & Gyulai, 2020; Merkovity et al, 2021).

During the first wave of the pandemic Hungary again sparked a debate about democratic approaches: after the acceptance of the Coronavirus Act proposal several harsh criticisms arrived from the international scene, including from non-governmental organizations, national governments and the institutions and politicians of the European Union. Similar objections arose like the ones the Hungarian domestic opposition expressed. The main argument of the international critiques was that the Coronavirus Act allows the Hungarian Government to rule by decree and there was no guarantee that the Government will hand its authority back to the Parliament. The members and associates of the Hungarian government vehemently defended the Act and claimed that the international attacks are

unjustified, because the measures are in harmony with Hungarian and European Union law. Meanwhile this debate, along with the other European Union member states Hungary joined in a collective statement about the risks of violations of the principles of rule of law, democracy, and fundamental rights. During April and May, the most controversial actions of the ruling coalition were not realized from the Coronavirus Act, but from ordinary law-making processes. For example, the Parliament made administrative gender change impossible, interfered with the scope of power and financial sources of the local governments and made long term economic decisions unrelated to COVID-19. On the 15th of May Viktor Orbán held a press conference at Belgrade with Aleksandar Vučić, the Serbian prime minister. As a response to a journalist's question Orbán mentioned that the government could give the special powers back at the end of the month. It was underlined that he expects the critiques of Hungary to apologize.

Concerning the struggle against the virus, Hungary was relatively unharmed during the first wave of the pandemic compared to other European countries. By the beginning of summer Viktor Orbán and the ruling coalition could proclaim victory over the virus and celebrate their success. This background heavily influenced Viktor Orbán's Facebook usage and his messages to his followers.

THE THEME OF THE STUDY

The main topic of the study is COVID-19 and the subject is Viktor Orbán's Facebook communication. Before the pandemic, the prime minister used other platforms as his main tool of public communication (for example the National Radio or Television), but after the pandemic his social media usage increased and changed. The study tries to understand by thematic analysis how and about what did the prime minister communicate about during the first wave of the pandemic. The data collection includes all his posts in relation with COVID-19 from the 1st of March until the end of August. For the analysis phase of the study the posts were read through several times,

as a way to identify repeating patterns and connections. For the second step, broad codes were generated to create the basic differentiation of the subtopics. For the third step the codes were sorted into smaller subtopics and as a final forth step, a mind map was created connecting the subtopics to the bigger topics and to the main theme.

This process was repeated several times, as thematic analysis is not a linear procedure, and the researcher has to go back and forth between the different steps to create the intended scientific results.

RESEARCH GOAL

The main research goal is to understand the communication style, method, and tone of Viktor Orbán about a challenging phenomenon, such as COVID-19. What topics occurred in relation with the pandemic and how did the prime minister address these topics. This way we can understand the most important aspects of Orbán's communication and get a greater knowledge about the paternalistic political leader's modern political communication during a crises event. Thematic analysis allows us to reach these goals by identifying recurring patterns and themes in relation with the researched topic.

RESULTS

THE FORMAT OF THE POSTS

The 179 analysed posts from the 1st of March until the end of August show that concerning the format of the post, videos were the most prominent. In 92 posts the prime minister used videos with short descriptions. The videos were usually less than one minute long with the prime minister in focus. Posts using the video format can also be categorized into two groups. The first are videos where the prime minister is shown in an event, meeting, or activity. In this type of video, the posts are usually in connection with the daily duties of the

prime minister. The other group of videos are frontal ones, where the prime minister speaks to the public (Facebook users). In these, the prime minister announced some regulation changes, actions, or results. These videos are longer and contain more detail about complex decisions in relation to the pandemic. The prime minister tries to make connection in these with the users and as a new development, first announcements were made on social media, rather than on traditional media platforms.

The next most used format of post was photos or album of photos. Similarly, as with the videos, only short text description go along with the visual content, usually containing only a few sentences in both Hungarian and English. Posts using only text are nearly non-existent, and the few exceptions are mostly shares of other websites. The communication of the prime minister clearly follows a more visual and engaging path, long format texts and arguments are not one of his attributes.

It is important to note that Orbán numbered most of his posts by the days since the beginning of the outbreak until the last day of the state of emergency, which also thematized his page regarding COVID-19.

THE SUBTOPICS

Four main subtopics could be identified after the research:
- Mood
- International meetings
- Governance
- Rules

These four subtopics can be divided into several others and in the following each of these will be analysed and described with examples from the posts. A post can contain several subtopics, so there are overlaps between them, but these four main subtopics clearly stand out from the content of the prime minister.

MOOD

One of the main subtopics is named "mood", because it is an attempt to create an ambiance, atmosphere or feeling in the follower to get into an intended mood. The four subtopics of mood are an attempt to lead the reader into different directions:

- Unity
- "One of the people"
- "Orbán observes something"
- "The opposition halts the fight"

Posts falling under the unity subtopics are related to the messages about the need of united efforts against the virus and the need to stand together to prevent the crisis. It is important to note, that the opposition is usually left out from this kind of posts. For example, on the 2nd of May, Orbán posted a about the 30th anniversary of getting into the Parliament with Fidesz with the following text: *"Thirty years of freedom. We needed cooperation in Hungary back then, and we need it now. Together we can do it!"*. This makes a comparison with the change of regime and the COVID-19 pandemic. Another recurring message is *"Together we will do it!"*. During the early outbreak of the virus, on 20th of March, Orbán shared a video about famous people singing Nélküled, a song credited by Ismerős Arcok. This song is culturally important for the right-wing political spectrum as it refers to the Hungarian minorities living in the neighbouring countries. At the beginning of the video Orbán can be heard, announcing a two-week lockdown, followed by the song. The text going with the video says that "no Hungarian is alone".

The "One of the people" category refers to Orbán portraying himself as an ordinary everyday man living among the general population. The best example for this type of posts are the pictures of him as he makes pickled cucumber just as an average Hungarian would do. The relation to COVID-19 is slim, but he made these post part of the coronavirus numbered posts. Another example for this kind of posts contains a video where Orbán and his wife enters a building, and at the body temperature check, he idlily chats with the personnel about the regulations and their duties.

"Orbán observes something" is closely related to "One of the people", but in these posts Orbán just observers an institution or an operation and makes comments or ask questions about the personnel. The prime minister intends to portray a competent and all-seeing leader, who not only makes decisions and operates the fight against the virus, but also oversees smaller operations. In multiple instances he visits hospitals and ask the staff about their needs and resources.

"The opposition halts the fight" is connected to the fact that the opposition parties did not support the Coronavirus Act. This provided the governing parties and the prime minister with a communication tool to mark the opposition as an obstacle against the defence. For example, Orbán made a post about the voting for the abolishment of the state of emergency and wrote this *"Vote on ending the state of emergency. Fantastic, once-in-a-lifetime opportunity! Those who cried dictatorship home and abroad can now extend their apologies!"*.

INTERNATIONAL MEETINGS

International cooperation and action became a cornerstone of political discussion during the first wave of the pandemic. Viktor Orbán's Facebook posts also reflected this as numerous dealt with this subtopic. The meetings can be categorized into three smaller groups:

- V4
- EU
- Other

V4 refers to the Visegrad 4 or Visegrad group. This is an international cooperation between Hungary, Slovakia, Czech Republic and Poland. The Fidesz-KDNP coalition pays high attention to this group, as in his communication the European Union and Brussels are usually in a negative perspective. Compared to this, during the first wave of the pandemic, Viktor Orbán highlighted in his Facebook communication as a strong and important alliance between the Central European nations. In his post on 11th of June, he shared

a video summary of a V4 summit, where he talks about how these nations succeeded in the defence against the virus compared to other European nations.

EU refers to the European Union. These posts dealt with the relation between Hungary and the EU. During this period both conflict and cooperation was on the spot. The prime minister's posts mirror this perfectly as there are examples of posts about the negotiations, but also about the conflict regarding the criticism of the Coronavirus Act. For example, Orbán shared Judit Varga (minister of justice)'s open letter to Vera Jurová, the Vice-President of the European Commission, where he described the open letter as *"This is how a Hungarian amazon fights"*.

The "Other" category refers to countries outside the EU, where Viktor Orbán or Hungary had a negation during the first wave. The most notable two, which come up in Orbán's posts are Serbia and Belarus. Serbia is a strategic partner of the Hungarian government, so a positive post was made by Orbán during this period and called Alexander Vucic his friend. Orbán's visit to Belarus was controversial, but in his posts a positive and cooperative feeling could be observed as Orbán sees the cooperation between the nations as potentially fruitful.

GOVERNANCE

This subtopic is a broad umbrella term which refers to various actions the prime minister takes in his position to prevent the damage of the pandemic. It has the following subcategories:

- Economy
- Consultation
- Health
- Old people
- Tools
- Healthcare

The economic challenges after the start of the first wave became evident and the prime minister gladly announced the various plans and government support to the different fields of the market. This was a permanent tendency during the time period and economic questions appeared in relation with nearly every subtopic.

Consultation mostly means the various council meetings with the different groups created to handle the coronavirus crisis, such as the various Action Group or the Operation Group. Orbán portrays himself as a leader figure, who listens to all advice, but is also competent in every question. It became a habit of his page to post photos or videos about him going to these meeting every morning, underlining that the prime minister starts his day early and finishes it late.

The "health" topic is also broad and contains three main subthemes. Orbán's post about health mostly concentrated to the various government actions to get tools and equipment, such as mask, medicine and breathing machines. As he said in one post *"Hope for the best, prepare for the worst!"*, which is a good example of his narrative where he portrays Hungary as a well-equipped and prepared nation. The healthcare and old people subthemes also make appearances in his posts, as in the first wave he stated the most important thing is to protect the elderly and the capacity of the Hungarian hospitals.

RULES

Rules refers to the various regulations and laws made to fight and prevent the spread of the virus. Viktor Orbán dealt with these questions frequently on his Facebook page and it became a platform for him to communicate about these decisions. It can be divided into three subcategories:

- Border
- Closure
- Laws/decrees

The closure of the border was one of the first action taken by most European countries and Hungary was no exception. However, in Hungary it is a marginal question, as the governing coalition heavily

thematized border protection and migration in the previous years. Orbán in his posts explains the need to monitor and safely operate our borders during these times.

Closure refers to the closing of schools, institutions, workplaces, and catering businesses, but also the regulations which controlled the movement of individuals. In his posts he not only gave explanations to the necessary actions, but also combined it with the "Mood" subcategory. For example, in his Easter post he wrote: *"This Easter is different, than the others. The perfume remains in the closet."* which refers to the Hungarian traditions where the boys visit the ladies and put perfume on their hair on Easter Monday.

Laws and decrees refer to the different legal actions initiated by the government or the governing parties. The prime minister regularly posted about this and shared details about them on his page. It became an extra tool for him to communicate about these decisions. The most prominent example is again the so-called Coronavirus Act accepted by the ruling coalition, but not by the opposition, which ignited the previously discussed "the opposition halt the fight" subcategory.

DISCUSSION

COVID-19 is not only a biological and healthcare challenge to the world, but also a shock to nearly every aspect of society. The political leaders of the world have been utilizing online communication since the 2000s, but the quarantines and "stay home" efforts quickened the process, as the example of Viktor Orbán shows. He was active on Facebook before, but this new tendency to communicate directly with his audience is a change of his behaviour, which previously leaned toward the usage of traditional mediums. His paternalistic communication is combined with modern social media trends and mixed with its elements. The prime minister creates content which could be found on an influencers page and the length of messages

or posts are catering to the shorter attention span of the users. The format of the posts, which is also important to note, instead of relying on texts the messages are carried in short videos or on photos.

Regarding the themes unearthed by thematic analysis, the prime minister's personal style of communication clearly shows what type of leadership model he wants to portray himself. The capable, overseeing leader, who is not that different from the ordinary people.

It is worth to question how the communication of populist political leaders will change in the face of future crises and how online social media communication forces them to innovate and adopt to the new ages. Viktor Orbán's Facebook communication during the second and third wave of the pandemic is also worth studying in further studies using thematic analysis.

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AN ILLIBERAL PRESS GENRE:
THE PRESS CONFERENCES OF THE
OPERATIONAL GROUP DURING
THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN HUNGARY

ABSTRACT

On 31st January in 2020, the Hungarian government decided to establish an Operational Group responsible for managing the coronavirus epidemic. The daily press conferences of this unit were the central forum of the government communications on the SARS-COVID-19 pandemic. As the pandemic period progressed, the public, instead of widening, has become narrower. The Operational Group began to increasingly ignore first the journalists' and later the rest of the (entirely legitimate) questions. A high degree of arbitrariness could be observed in the publishing of data, in the selection of journalistic questions and mediums, and in answering. Thus, the communication of the government has taken a very risky turn. In my study, I compare the communication practice with the definitions of the press conference as a press genre, the previous information policy principles of the Hungarian press history, and the professional recommendations of the crisis communication experts and academic literature.

Keywords: COVID-19 Pandemic, Government Communication, Illiberal Press, Political Communication, Risk Communication

I. INTRODUCTORY CHRONOLOGY

1.1 THE FIRST WAVE

The first wave of the pandemic was about waiting, finding a way, first encountering the unknown and over-insuring, taking previously unimaginable measures. The acquisition and use of protective equipment, quarantine measures and border controls, as well as closure of borders and the provision of a humanitarian corridor, have become central issues in government communication. The government declared a national emergency on March 11, 2020, and from March 16, education switched to a digital operation. The curfew was imposed on March 27, and even journalists were excluded from daily coronavirus press conferences on March 29. From March 30, the hospitals were led by military commanders. The Operational Staff repeated, to the point of boredom, the press conferences on the importance of hand hygiene rules, social distancing, and cough etiquette and asked citizens to follow the aforementioned rules. In Hungary, conflicting recommendations were made by the OS/OG to disguise the fact that protective equipment was not available not only to the general public but also to the medical community. This include doctors on duty at the front line, COVID centers. The first wave of the epidemic finally ended with lower-than-expected infection data and a loss of around 615 people (according to official data as of 31 August 2020[1]). However, the government had mitigated the epidemic measures since May. From June onwards, it was no longer an emergency but an epidemiological preparedness.

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[1]   https://hu.wikipedia.org/wiki/Covid19-koronav%C3%ADrus-j%C3%A1 rv%C3%A-1ny_Magyarorsz%C3%A1gon#A_m%C3%A1sodik_hull%C3%A1m, [access: 09.09.2021].

1.2 THE SECOND WAVE

After the epidemiological relief scheduled for the summer period, infection and mortality rates started to rise again in September at the beginning of the school year. The second wave was characterized by delayed interventions, late tightening of the rules, and a not steep but steadily rising mortality rate. The situation became grave in November when all kinds of gatherings were banned, hotels and public cultural institutions were closed. People worldwide, including the Hungarians, looked forward to the authorized coronavirus vaccines with high expectations and hope. The number of deaths approached 9,500, by which time the first vaccinations had been registered in Hungary on December 26, 2020. Healthcare workers, the elderly and the chronically ill were at the top of the vaccination list. They were followed by representatives of different professional groups (soldiers, police officers, educators, government officials, etc.) that are important for crisis management and the continuous operation of the state and the economy. Despite the vaccination program having been launched, Hungary came to the forefront of the World in the following months due to the exceptionally high number of deaths. The Operational Staff emphasized the dependence of the vaccination program on the production and supplier capacities in its communication. First Pfizer-BioNTech, then Moderna, and finally Astra Zeneca vaccines were authorized, but SinoPharm and Sputnik-V, which are still awaiting their distribution authorization in the EU, have also been administered in Hungary. By April, there was already enough vaccine available, so that anyone, who wanted, could have received the vaccine of their choice within a few days.

1.3 THE THIRD WAVE

Although by February 2021, the intensity of the epidemic seemed to have decreased significantly, the joy was too early. As of March, the third wave had taken its toll, according to epidemiological experts. New mutations of the virus infected people at such a rate that serious quarantine measures were implemented again. As the WHO

(2021a) pointed out, rising data had undermined citizens' confidence in epidemic management and government communication. People got tired in the first two waves of the epidemic, but by that time, they were informed by a well-established (automatized) communication machine. The Prime Minister tied the epidemiological relief and the possible opening to the number of 2.5 million vaccinated people.[2] That number Hungary achieved on the 6th of April, and then the night curfew was shortened. Two weeks later, having reached 3.5 million vaccinated people, the terraces and nurseries, kindergartens, schools and restaurants, already were opened.[3] Theatres, cinemas and restaurants reopened as well to those who owned a certificate ("vaccine passport") on the 1st of May. A month later, on May 23 rd, residents could choose to stop wearing a mask.[4] When the number of new deaths per day dropped below 10, the OS announced the end of the third wave.

1.4 THE FOURTH WAVE

By the time this conference is taking place, and these lines are being written, we are already at the beginning of the fourth wave, armed with vaccines and experience; experience in shutting down and restarting countries, economies, institutions, the capacity of national health systems, social solidarity, and government communication cultures and practices, the functioning of crisis media.

In my study, I analyse the informative work of the Hungarian body responsible for epidemic management, the so-called Operational Staff, based on its performance in the third wave. By then, the

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2 https://www.facebook.com/kormanyzat/photos/el%C3%A9 rt%C3%BCk-a-2-%C3%A9s-f%C3%A9l-milli%C3%B3-beoltottat-kezd%C5%91dhet-a-fokozatos-%C3%BAjraind%C3%ADt%C3%A1s-szerd%C3%A1t%C3%B3l/53389797-06174706/, [access: 08.10.2021].

3 https://koronavirus.gov.hu/cikkek/orban-viktor-35-millio-beoltottnal-nyithatnak-teraszok, [access: 08.10.2021].

4 https://koronavirus.gov.hu/cikkek/uj-szabalyok-jonnek-5-millio-beoltott-utan, [access: 04.08.2021].

framework of these unusual press conferences without journalists has been set and the illiberal features of government communication have become clear and obvious.

II. AT THE CROSSROADS OF PROFESSIONAL COMMUNICATION FIELDS

It soon became clear to the world public that COVID-19 embodies a challenge to humanity that has not seen for about a hundred years. The crisis posed a threat, not only in terms of health (regarding illness and capacity of healthcare institutions) but also economic, political, social and information terms. (WHO, 2020a)

2.1 THE POLITICAL COMMUNICATION TASK: THE DECLARATION AND MANAGING OF AN EXTRAORDINARY LEGAL ORDER ON A DAILY BASIS

The lack of any historical antecedents of the COVID-19 challenge was demonstrated above all by the fact that the legal basis for managing the situation was not clear. The Hungarian law did not mention the concept of a health emergency. The state of emergency was declared in accordance with Article 53 of the Fundamental Law regarding the extent of the threat, and an extraordinary legal order came into force. This allowed the government to create new regulations without control, suspend the application of certain laws, or deviate from statutory provisions. That is exactly what happened. New laws and government decrees have been enacted, only a few of which are highlighted: Hungary, Governmental Decree no. 40/2020. of declaring a state of danger (11 March 2020), Hungary, Act XII of 2020 on the containment of Coronavirus, Act I of 2021 of the containment of the coronavirus pandemic; (V. 5.) Government Resolution on the measures necessary for government communication related

to the epidemic. The latter allocated a minimum amount of money (in the third wave) for the epidemic and vaccine communication of the government, which was set at 16 billion HUF.

The extraordinary legal order system also meant that the government (like other governments) switched to crisis communication mode. They appointed a separate apparatus responsible for crisis management and communication. It has become the so-called Operational Staff.[5] The OS initially held daily press conferences, and then during the declining phase of each wave, sometimes only every 2-3 days or weekly. In the third wave, the already well-known faces (permanent crew) greeted the TV viewers. The key political message of government rhetoric is that the government is the protector and savior of the nation at all times, and that it has the necessary powers and means to protect its citizens.

2.2 THE HEALTH RISK COMMUNICATION TASKS

The outbreak of the SARS-COVID-19 epidemic also meant a significant communication challenge to the public health and epidemiology profession. The health and medical communication literature had been emphasizing the need to strengthen communication for years, on leading causes of death such as cardiovascular and cancer diseases, gastrointestinal diseases and accidents, due to changes in the disease spectrum. (Pilling, 2008) Because of this, epidemiological communication has been pushed into the background in Hungary, for about ten years. Until now. While in the first wave, the emphasis

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5   Members of the Operational Staff are: a) the Minister of the Interior, b) the Minister for Human Resources, c) the Director General of Public Security of the Ministry of the Interior, d) the National Police Chief, e) the Director General of the State Health Care Centre, f) the Director General of the National Institute of Hematology and Infectology of the South Pest Central Hospital, g) the Director General of the National Directorate General for Aliens Policing, h) the Director General of the National Directorate General for Disaster Management, i) the Director General of the National Ambulance Service, j) the National Chief Medical Officer, k) the Director-General of the Counter-Terrorism Information and Crime Analysis Centre.

was on presenting the symptoms of the disease and the basic hygiene rules, prevention and education, in the second wave, there was a greater emphasis on the capacity of the health system and following the rules. The anomalies in the communication were constantly part of the agenda.[6] There has been much criticism of the rhetoric that sought to relativize losses mentioning old age and chronic illnesses of deceased persons. By the time the third wave arrived, the availability of vaccines instead of the disease had been put in the spotlight, beyond statistical communications, the availability of the vaccines and the obligatory vaccine registration had become a key topic.

Of course, additional explanation had to be provided in all the three waves, following some upsetting government and/or epidemiological measures: in the first wave because of the evacuation of 60% of hospitals[7], postponed interventions and suspended specialist surgeries and the restructured national health care system.[8] It should have also been explained why we do not test the population extensively and why epidemiologists stopped contact tracing so early.[9] In the second wave, the domestic epidemiological profession became the target of the questions because of measures taken or not during the first wave and later the obligation to wear a mask, the acquisition of equipment, the purchase and administration of vaccines not authorized in the EU and the mandatory vaccination registration, which we all faced in the third wave. However, contrary to expectations, the citizens received political answers to these questions, not

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6 https://www.napi.hu/magyar-gazdasag/koronavirus-fertozes-jarvany-magyaror szag-covid-halal-biostatisztikus-lelegeztetogep-ferenci-tamas.719767.html, [access: 08.10.2021].

7 https://index.hu/belfold/2020/04/16/kormanyinfo_gulyas_gergely_erettsegi_ko ronavirus_jarvany_pp/, [access: 08.10.2021].

8 https://koronavirus.gov.hu/cikkek/korhazakban-szuneteltetnek-egyes-muteteket-es-vizsgalatokat, [access: 08.10.2021].

9 https://www.valaszonline.hu/2020/10/13/kontaktkutatas-jarvanyugy-karanten/; https://www.portfolio.hu/gazdasag/20200909/retvari-nem-szukseges-a-kiterjedt-kontaktkutatas-a-higienia-ved-meg-minket-nem-a-tesztek-447980; https://index.hu/belfold/2021/06/01/koronavirus-fertozes-iskola-emmi/, [access: 08.10.2021].

from scientists and experts, but usually from the Minister in charge of the Prime Minister's Office, Gergely Gulyás on the Government Info on Thursdays.

2.3 TASKS OF LAW ENFORCEMENT COMMUNICATION

Whatever the general requirement of law enforcement communication is, it has to meet the expectations of readiness, impartiality and legitimacy and has to display public service values and at the same time it has to be task – and organization-centric (Horváth, 2012). Police officers need to present each piece of news and information in a way that strengthens people's sense of security and trust in the police. There have been numerous professional debates over the past year and a half about what non-law enforcement tasks the pandemic has forced police officers to do (not to mention soldiers sent to hospitals). It is a fact, that internet fraud and abuse, counterfeiting of products (mainly concerning protective equipment and disinfectants), domestic violence, harmful psychological effects of confinement, and crimes caused by sudden agitation have come to the forefront. (Interpol, 2020) Supporting and monitoring the implementation of public health measures is not a typical police task in "peacetime". Monitoring and sanctioning civic behaviors such as leaving the residence during a curfew, following the 500-meter limit of dog walking, or coughing, sneezing and intimidating others with the previously-mentioned actions in public places, or even the interruption of a friendly conversation that broke the 1.5 meters rule, or keeping control of restaurants', pubs' or cafés' opening hours and the correct way of customer service, they all show beyond everyday patrol work, yet they became part of it. The police gathered information regarding the number of police measures, border police, logistics and humanitarian tasks. The OS did not fail to call the attention of citizens to legislative changes.

2.4 CRISIS COMMUNICATION AS A FRAMEWORK FOR PROFESSIONAL COMMUNICATIONS

Whether it is political, law enforcement or epidemiological communication, it is framed in our case by the pandemic. Due to the nature of the new coronavirus epidemic, it can be classified as a natural disaster, including geo-biological disasters (like epidemics in general) (Faragó, 1996). It is a cyclical crisis in terms of time and intensity. The historical significance of the crisis is shown by the fact, that more than 232 million cases had been registered worldwide and the number of fatalities is now over 4.7 million (28th of September, 2021). The first confirmed coronavirus infection was registered in Hungary on the 4th of March, 2020, and the Prime Minister reported it himself. Hungary recorded the first death on the national holiday (15th of March). There are not many recent elemental blows like COVID-19, that could provide a basis for demonstrating the comprehensive nature of the professional challenges of crisis communication, so we go back to 9/11 and the CERC (Crisis and Emergency Risk Communication) model that followed. (Sellnow & Seeger, 2013) This model arranges communication tasks in a 5-step process from the pre-crisis phase to evaluation. It is expedient for us as it interprets the main communication tasks in a public health context. (See the table below).

Table 6. The Stages of Crisis Communication

Stage	Tasks
Pre-Crisis	Monitoring and recognition Support public understanding Preparing of the residents for different crisis events Changing behavior (rising self-efficacy) Warning messages regarding possible threats Alliances and cooperation with agencies Message development and testing Development of consensual recommendations

Stage	Tasks
Initial Event	Empathy, reassurance, reduction in emotional turmoil Designated crisis/agency spokesperson and formal channels and methods Understanding of the crisis circumstances, consequences and anticipated outcomes Reduction of uncertainty Specific understanding of emergency management and medical community responses Understanding of self-efficacy and personal responses
Maintenance	More accurate public understanding Understanding of background factors and issues Broad-based support and cooperation Feedback from affected public and correction of any misunderstandings/rumors Ongoing explanation and reiteration of self-efficacy and personal response activities Informed decision making by the public based on understanding of risks/benefits
Resolution	Inform and persuade about ongoing clean-up, remediation, recovery and rebuilding effort, Facilitate broad-based, honest and open discussion and resolution of issues Improve/create public understanding of new risk (avoidance behavior, response procedure) Promote the activities and capabilities of agencies and organizations to reinforce positive corporate identity and image
Evaluation	Evaluate and assess responses (including effectiveness) Document, formalize, and communication conclusions Determine specific actions to improve crisis communication and response capability Create linkages to pre-crisis activites

Source: Reynolds & Seeger (2005): 52-53.

However, the Hungarian public had to be disappointed. Only a narrow spectrum of the above-diversified communication responsibilities was covered by the Operational Staff with its briefings and the coronavirus website and Facebook page. How much, we will see in the following.

III. THE SAMPLE, THE METHOD
AND THE HYPOTHESES

3.1 THE SAMPLE

We believe that the press conferences of the OS present issues concisely that can be discussed in the context of the SARS-COVID-19 pandemic regarding communication at the societal level. All the more, briefings show the faces of the crisis, so their communications are mirrors of crisis management, and the Hungarian (governmental and law enforcement and epidemiological) answers to the social questions raised by the pandemic. (Kriskó, 2021).

5 press conferences from 5 months of the third wave are the subject of the analysis, with 75 minutes total of media text from 5 days of the week. Each of the outreaches in the sample was given by 2 or 3 people: Lieutenant Colonel Kristóf Gaál (spokesperson of the National Police Headquarters) and / or Lieutenant Colonel Róbert Kiss (Deputy Head of the Operational Group on the Call-Center) and Dr. Ágnes Galgóczi (Head of the Epidemiology Department of the National Center for Public Health) or Dr. Cecília Müller (National Chief Medical Officer) informed the public.

The current study presents the results of a micro-level analysis of texts to the reader, acknowledging that this research, like all qualitative studies, is value-driven, subjective, and the number of examined items is relatively low compared to the total population. (Horváth – Mitev, 2015) Credibility is based on textual corpora as objectively existing facts (linguistically and visually shaped, fixed and retrievable) on the one hand, and on genre constraints as legitimate recipient expectations (MacQuail, 2015) on the other hand. The method is critical discourse analysis (CDA), whose meso and macro levels (discussed in detail) will be the subject of a subsequent study.

3.2 THE CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

Discourse analysis, using a predominantly qualitative approach, examines the relationship between language and social reality. It was influenced by Michael Foucault's theory of power, knowledge and discourse, and Pierre Bourdieu's work about power and ideology. (Johnson & McLean, 2020) The CDA seeks to answer the question, how social power is built and strengthened and what is the role of the language that is in it. Setting the historical context, the process of producing and receiving the text, and comparing them with social facts is important to them (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997). Their fundamental tool is analysing the rhetoric of political speeches, but it can be based on any communication by which recipients can be manipulated. The CDA is interpretative and explanatory, intended to go beyond the text. (Jahedi et al., 2014) Thus, linguistic facts need to be presented embedded in a social context. In this study, we only refer to the intertextual nature of the genres (Fiske, 1987) and to the fact that OS outreaches obtain their real and complete meaning with Thursday morning Government Info and Friday morning radio interviews of the Prime Minister, the Government Coronavirus Information Page, its official Facebook page and the Facebook profile of the Prime Minister together. (And this, too, is just one side of the coin, directed communication, the opposite of which is provided by alternative news sources, other professional and layman media texts, up to and including Internet memes.)

3.3 HYPOTHESES

We start the research with the assumption (H1) that in the third wave of the epidemic, the OS press conferences no longer strive to meet the real needs and expectations of the recipients at all, are poorer, schematic and reduced regarding their contents. They do not meet the expectations of successful crisis communication (H2) in terms of providing access to crisis locations and information, providing high-quality visuals, displaying dramas, action, providing a sense of relevance to recipients and thinking in thematic units. (Altheide,

1985). The Hungarian (government) information practice is mechanical data communication, which does not show sensitivity to the state of citizens (insecurity, loss of confidence, experiencing grief) (H3). The CDA aims to point this out with its tools.

IV. RESULTS

4.1 PRESS CONFERENCE AS A GENRE

The first objective control point of our qualitative research is the examination of the genre. Why? Because, as McQuail (2015) says, there are basic expectations regarding the genre generated in the recipients. When we hear that the operational body for crisis management is holding a press conference, we also know, as a layman, what should happen roughly. Content is not, but the form, structure, dramaturgy, roles, tempo, and reality reference of events are self-evident to everyone. We also agree with Swales's (1990) idea that the genre is a class of communicative events whose elements share some common communicative purpose. However, the goal is not always obvious. Broadly and metaphorically interpreted, the genre is merely a kind of framework in which social action can unfold. (Swales, 2004) Lassen (2006) encourages a more thorough examination of texts when he points out that the rhetorical goal can be derived from text (explicit) and derived from context (implicit). So, we also look at the social and media environment of press conferences. Within the framework of the present analysis, a genre is any category of content whose collective identity is more or less valued by the media and the public alike. (McQuail, 2015) According to this, there is some kind of consensus on the purpose, form, and meaning of the genre. So, both the viewer and the OS are aware that the daily briefings meet the need for information but are also shaped by the objectives of government and politics. Andrew (1984) emphasizes – and it is currently of a great significance – that the value

of the genre is given by cultural tradition. That explains the way how we Hungarians, in the age of the free press, in principle in democratic conditions, think about press conferences, and what we are used to such as how the journalism and content service profession has been doing over the time, but at least since the regime change. Such a tradition and expectation (existed), for example, until 19th March 2020 of a dialogical nature. According to the Hungarian literature, it is worth holding a press conference when a news item also requires illustration, or when the topic of the press conference is expected to provoke journalistic questions. (Nyárády & Szeles, 2004) Thus, it can be understood that a press conference with the exclusion of journalists is unusual in Hungary as well, which stands contrary to expectations. That's why we say that the OS has created a new genre of illiberal press that broke the previous conventions. It has become a non-interactive genre with no real questions. In doing so, it violated decades of national press traditions.

If we go beyond national frameworks, we also see that the press conference is most generally (also for international opinion groups/public) an event organized to officially disseminate information and answer questions from the media. Other approaches, especially from the point of view of public political communication, emphasize that the purpose of press conferences is to make public officials available to the public on issues. (Ekström & Eriksson, 2017) Availability is not the same as showing (and showing ourselves) in the press.

4.2 TEXT ANALYSIS

At the text level, it is relevant what the focus points of the text are, who the actors are, what the statements are, what the connection between the sentences is, certain word type issues, references inside and outside the text, pointers and time planes deserve attention.

Micro-level analysis shows highly disciplined jargon and interpretation of facts as statistical data. As media texts, press conferences are very "dry" with little related illustration.

The themes of the Operational Staff's briefings were dominated by vaccinations and getting vaccinated in the third wave. Issues in which the Hungarian government could not show bright (good, impressive) results, such as the issue of treatments and cures, were lost. We did not hear about the Hungarian health data, the number of deaths in international comparison, the availability of treatments and their effectiveness to each infected person, and so on. And although more and more virus variants had appeared, there had been less and less talk about the (variable) symptoms and course of the disease. Political PR goals had appeared in the thematization – vaccination success communication – while the number of victims had grown at an unprecedented rate and was among the highest in the world. The enemy, the virus (18 mentions) was presented via other lexemes with great emphasis, like epidemic (41), disease (40). And although more and more virus variants had appeared, there had been less and less talk about the (variable) symptoms and course of the disease. Political PR goals had appeared in the thematization – vaccination success communication – while the number of victims had grown at an unprecedented rate and was among the highest in the World. The enemy, the virus (18 mentions) was presented via other lexemes with great emphasis, like epidemic (41) or disease (40).

Figure 28. Key Topics of the Third Wave of the Pandemic in Hungary
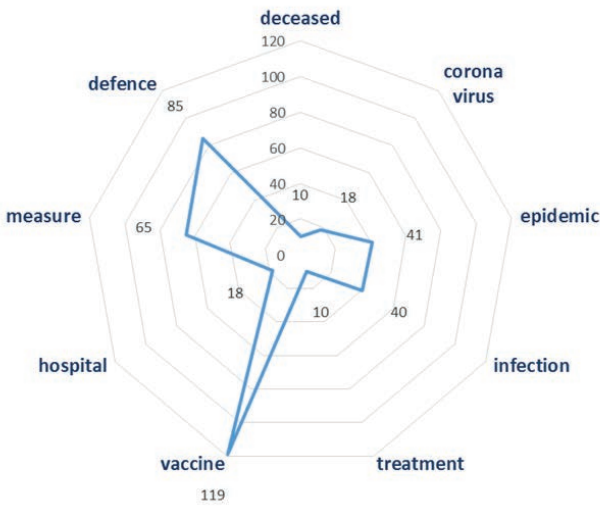
Source: Author's own elaboration.

The communications were highly depersonalized. The subjects (objects!) of the sanctions and information most often appeared in the communications as an individual (28) or a person (26) ('We took action against the person…'; 'We brought the person under control…'; 'We found a person in the washroom of the catering room…'; etc.). The words 'individual' and 'person' have no gender, no age, no social role, they get lost in the benevolent obscurity of distance. An exception is the presentation of epidemiological data, where the number of deaths is automatically followed by the addition of "mostly elderly, chronic patients". 'Compatriot' lexeme also appeared twice. Respectively, in the third wave, young people are mentioned. Children were never mentioned in the five briefings examined, family only once (See Figure 29).

Figure 29. Number of Mentions of Different Agents
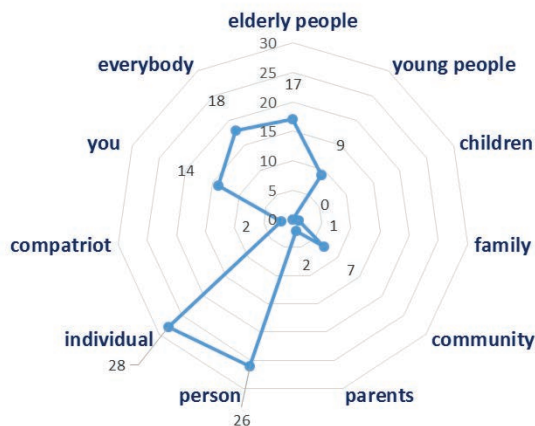
Source: Author's own elaboration.

Journalists usually play a considerable role in the traditional press conference, but in the sample in question, they were mentioned only four times, when spokespersons read aloud the questions sent in advance to the Operational Staff ('We will now continue with the journalist inquiries.'). The number of questions answered decreased in the third wave significantly, as the OS devotes time to answering two questions, typically.

The use of possessive personal signs and verb conjugations (for action verbs) contradicts the requirements of a completely neutral press communication (keeping distance) when the staff speaks about itself: our police officers, colleagues, we took action, decided, made a decision, implemented. (Where again we see the impact of the law enforcement profession: camaraderie, community, team spirit, broad representation).

The presence and proportion of the main themes and agents are crucial because media messages (do not only influence) but create reality for the recipient. They show a filtered and distorted image in which the recipient searches for their place, personal role. However,

the factsheets depict the reality of police officers, epidemiologists and doctors (and the government), and it seems as if they have made no effort to link this image to the life of their recipient in the third wave. Regarding conjunctions, the police communication contains co-ordinating conjunctions mostly, we encounter conjunctions that create a connection, like 'and', and 'as well'. The inferential conjunction is almost exclusively 'so'. Of the subordinate conjunctions, it is 'that' (with 82 occurrences) and 'those' (relative conjunctions – 15 occurrences) which dominate the sentences. Unsurprisingly, among postpositions, 'because of' dominates (with 27 occurrences), primarily concerning sanctions and secondly in the reasons for measures and decisions (including in police and health risk communication).

Social deixis (Adamik et al., 2004) are found at the opening (greetings), passing on words, and closing (ranks, titles, status, assignment, addressing). There are no other relationships than what the people holding the briefing embody with each other.

Deixis of time (pointers) lead to an overemphasis on continuity. Temporal forward and backward references (anaphora and cataphora) were also crowded at the expense of grammatical correctness. We come across the forms of "so far", "still", "continuously". E.g.: "In order to continue our successful and effective control of the coronavirus epidemic further and to preserve our current control results…" We find forward and backward references, adverbs, inflections, and signs together in one structure. Because of this, the whole text is sometimes like a pulp, a never-ending story, as the WHO puts it, it makes the cooperation and caution of the citizens worn out in the new waves of the epidemic. The present and the future are more emphatic than the past in the time dimension (as shown below, in the Figure 30).

Data is not the same as information, and this is the main problem for the outreaches. They provided data, not information. Data could not be interpreted on their own, and their retrieval was not ensured, citizens did not receive any support from the OS for their explanation and evaluation. The coronavirus information page has not yet

contained a retrievable database. Remarks made by the Chief Medical Officer such as 'This is a really important number.' or 'All of this data is very important.' do not provide much guidance for the audience.

Figure 30. Time Dimensions of Communications
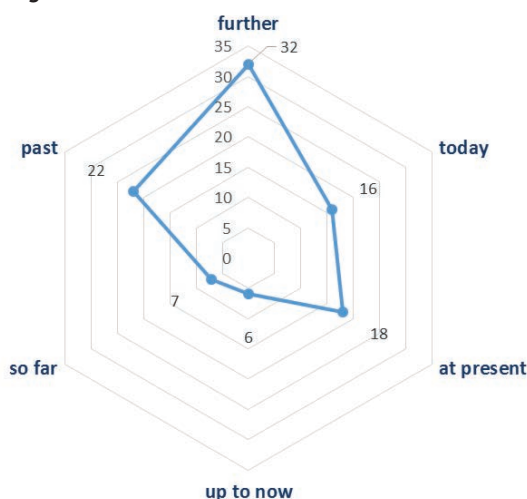
The above-mentioned issues are closely related to the cognitive needs of the recipients, such as cognition, knowledge, competence. Serving these needs presupposes that the OS communicate the information in such a way, that the citizens can hear out the causal relationships, sub-whole relationships, relevance, etc. from it.

As the linguistic analysis pointed out, explicit explanations appear in summaries of the Police only exceptionally, in the snatched illustrative examples. The data is about losses, but the emotional side of it has been ignored all along. Although the number of victims (infected and deceased) in the third wave was higher than expected, the voices of compassion and mourning did not change, the standard sentence of human compassion remained unchanged throughout:

"We hereby express our compassion to the relatives of the deceased."

V. FINDINGS

The two professions (law enforcement and epidemiology) speaking hand in hand dominated the press conferences in half. Considering that the press conferences were broadcast on television, the OS did not exploit the power inherent in visuality. There were no video clips, no edited shots, only two infographics were used repeatedly to illustrate current indicators of police action and epidemiological data. The camera angles and plans, if they had changed at all, the viewer saw merely talking figures, talking heads (mostly upper bodies). The media was not given admission to the place of the epidemic (health and social institutions, vaccination points), despite several editorials requesting this in an open letter. Although in the third wave, information was dominated by the vaccine issue, there was no communication in line with international recommendations that can inspire confidence in vaccines, manufacturers and healthcare staff (and the actions of the crisis management team). We see communication that serves political purposes without explicit political messages appearing in the outreaches. These are referred to by the content (key themes), the form, the (non-political) lexemes used and the omissions (silences).

Finally, the following table (Table 7) compares the expectations declared by each field with the practice implemented in the control of the Hungarian epidemic.

Table 7. The Expectations of Each Profession towards Communication and Practice

Crisis literature (Anthonissen, 2009)	Epidemiology / Public health (national level) (NNK)[10]	Policing (Horváth, 2012)	National practice (in the 3 rd wave)
Caring		Satisfying the need for security	

<hr>

10 National Health Center

Crisis literature (Anthonissen, 2009)	Epidemiology / Public health (national level) (NNK)[10]	Policing (Horváth, 2012)	National practice (in the 3 rd wave)
Committed	Placing community interests ahead of individual interests		
Providing guarantees			Built for simplicity and repetition of messages
Precisely timed			Regular, mechanically repetitive, delayed
Communicated by a suitable communicator (built on authentic faces)			Messaging stability with the same faces
Based on preliminary plans	Recognizing the importance of layman communication, taking into account its beliefs		In the absence of plans, it is burdened with contradictions
	Following the values of the public service (readiness, impartiality and legality)	Following the values of the public service (readiness, impartiality and legality)	Following the values of the public service (readiness, impartiality and legality)
	World Health Organization (2020a)		
	Managed at the nation-state level (led by governments working with civil society and communities)		Led by the Operational Staff on behalf of the Government

Crisis literature (Anthonissen, 2009)	Epidemiology / Public health (national level) (NNK)[10]	Policing (Horváth, 2012)	National practice (in the 3 rd wave)
Targeted	Community-centric (given their knowledge, capabilities and vulnerabilities)	Task – and organization-centric (strengthening the organizational image via the work)	Police and doctor-centric
	Participatory (based on community responses)	Building a public order partnership	Authoritative, revelatory
Specific	Data-driven (based on facts)	Based on situation, risk and hazard analysis	Manipulating statistical data, mechanically repeating
	Open and transparent (regarding knowledge, unknowns, uncertainties and errors)	Reflecting a culture of doubt and worry-free operation and action	An encryptor that arbitrarily selects and omits the data
Restoring confidence	Confidence building (for governments, but primarily for healthcare workers and pharmaceutical companies, preparations and treatments)		Propagandistic, redundant
Providing comprehensive information (displaying facts, intentions, emotions)	Integrated (strives for a complete response)	The information is lawfully handled	Answering fabricated questions, excluding real questions

Crisis literature (Anthonissen, 2009)	Epidemiology / Public health (national level) (NNK)[10]	Policing (Horváth, 2012)	National practice (in the 3 rd wave)
	Inclusive (with regard to vulnerable and marginalized groups)	Partial power over others – driven by living a deep and constant satisfaction by obtaining outside characteristics? (ID, pistol, truncheon, uniform, position)	It operates with uniformized messages, considering the recipients as a homogeneous group
	Coordinated (eliminating duplications and gaps)		It is extremely centralized
	Accountable		It is beyond criticism

Source: Author's own elaboration.

All this shows that the OS, as an instrument of the Government, continued the usual political communication rather than enforcing aspects of crisis communication. In the absence of a meaningful dialogue, the OS did not incorporate the expectations, concerns and criticisms of the recipient into the practice of communication, so the press conferences could not fully perform their uncertainty-reducing function and confidence-building task. At the same time, the television broadcast of the outreaches always occurring at the usual time and with the permanence of the faces of the crisis, reflected a high degree of stability. The genre has become empty from many perspectives, the power of visuality has not been exploited by the OS and the invariance of the dramaturgy of the briefings has made boring scheduled statistical data communication unreliable and uninteresting.

VI. HISTORICAL HORIZON
AND POLITICAL CONTEXT

For the people of the 21st century, especially in the heart of Europe, perhaps what they are experiencing is astounding. But if we look back at our media relations, the principles of information policy, from a historical perspective, it may be easier to understand – if not to accept – dysfunctional functioning.

With the outbreak of the First World War, propaganda in Hungary began to gain serious importance as a means of disseminating opinions and disseminating revolutionary ideas, as well as disseminators (institutes, secret societies). It went in hand with agitation, arousing the masses for political purposes, which could be done through public speaking or the press. After the First World War, the concept was already saturated with a strong negative connotation and meant the pre-planned spread of biased views. Propaganda, while it was not averse to lying and fraud and used tendentious distortion, it was also a moral issue from the beginning. Hostile propaganda is morally objectionable, but Hungary's external propaganda (as an activity aimed at remedying injustices) is not. (Sipos, 2011: 52-55).

We are talking about a country where the press was not free even when this was stated by law (see People's Law II of 1918 for an example), as regulations have restricted its operation in many cases and especially in extraordinary situations. The press was not free not in the Horthy era (1919-1945), in the Rákosi era (1947-1956), or in the Kádár era (1957-1989). We are talking about the press and media history and media culture of a country where censorship has returned to the press from time to time, where the Prime Minister may have decided to establish, further publish or change the nature of periodicals where the Minister of Interior had the right to ban them on a political basis. And in times of war, the Defense Act gave authority to take action against journalists. Hungarian press historians (Kókay et al. 1994) characterize the period between 1918-48 as the one during which the Hungarian press ceased to operate according

to universal professional norms, writhing in the yoke of various ideologies and alternating revolutionary waves, governments and political will.

After the Second World War, the institutions that determined the mass media fell into the hands of the state. The one-party system abolished press pluralism. The socialist democracy of the Kádár era was formal, which did not ensure the involvement of the masses in public affairs. In the official terminology of 1958-72, the concept of the public was not even rooted, even the Press Act of 1986 only mentioned it among the interpretative provisions. (Takács, 2012) After the 56th revolution, a kind of limited publicity was born. Some authors use the concepts of semi-public (Angelusz, 1996) and simulated public (Kalmár, 1998), because although the scope of taboos has narrowed down, the most important issues and the foundations of the system have not been attacked or questioned.

The first media law (Act I of 1996 on Radio and Television) was enacted in 1996, followed in 2010 by the second, currently in force. This regulation also applies to print and internet media products, supplemented by the 2010 CIV. Act on Freedom of the Press and Basic Rules of Media Content. The fact that there are serious issues to be tackled in the Hungarian press and media regulation even today, was already pointed out by the Venice Commission in its report of 2015. The report found that the media law "restricts press freedom; the bias inherent in the Media Council's policies make objective news reporting impossible, the government's spending on news is not transparent and the advertising tax continues to seriously distort the media market. In the VC's opinion, journalists are not sufficiently well protected, as the media law permits arbitrary sanctioning of press products. The VC has also found that the Media Council and the public media board are made up of political appointments and are not sufficiently independent."[11]

So what we have experienced is not new, but its danger has only been highlighted by the global health crisis.

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[11] https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/E-8-2015-010112_EN.html, [access: 08.10.2021].

VII. SUMMARY

In our study, we analysed the press conferences of the Operational Staff, the central tool of the Hungarian government's COVID-19 communication. We have found that the genre and the consensual (press) norms are being violated at numerous points. As a result of the influence of politics, the dialogue, the possibility of articulating questions, which, as the experts say, is the soul of the genre, disappears from the briefings. The main purpose to make officials available is not materialized, the assigned professionals repeat statistics without comparability and traceability. The nonverbal dimension of communication shows a lack of interest (monotonous tone, mechanical intonation, increased speech rate, etc.).

Visually (also) poor content, with constant dramaturgy, without vivid messages, awaits those people who are still paying attention to central government information in the third wave. Police and epidemiology also embarrassingly pay attention to the values of impartiality and anonymity, so the reality of the epidemic does not come to life or affect the viewer at all. There are no elements in communication that can build and / or restore trust. There are requests and exhortations (everyone will continue to follow the rules and get vaccinated), but we find no trace of community commitment (contrary to WHO recommendations). At the heart of the statements are the efforts of the communicator side, which reflect the value of team spirit, camaraderie, and the partial power over others that evokes law enforcement culture. What is missing from communication is everything that is participatory, community-centric, partner-oriented, and that provides space for concerns and objections that are open, accountable, and transparent. And political influence is much more manifested in silences and shortcomings than in explicit messages. Overall, the results confirm that there is also a serious deficit in democracy and freedom of the press, which has affected citizens who have been paid with PR tools in the crisis. However, we are talking about a country whose history in the 20th century is by no means unprecedented in terms of restricting the press, and even a tool from

time to time. Research can be further deepened (and necessary) in the future, both in terms of media content and the socio-political (historical) context and media culture.

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"WAKE UP AND THINK OF THE CHILDREN!":

THE AMBIVALENT RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN MOTHERHOOD, FEMININITY, AND ANTI-VACCINATION

ABSTRACT

Anti-vaccination sentiments have grown strong in public discourse in recent decades, as online environment has proved to be fertile setting for spreading conspiracy theories and false news. The study sheds light onto a pressing problem of tackling false news on social media, providing valuable insights into the arguments, fears, emotions, and views of people, especially mothers, struggling to link seemingly conflicting concepts of "good mothering", anti-vaccination and properly "doing gender" online. Research employing discourse analysis and netnography approach to Facebook threads that are discussing arguments concerning vaccination of children reveals a strong anti-vaccination discourse on social media targeting mothers using notions of traditional femininity, idealized motherhood, and visions of 'natural' immunity to paint vaccination as a poor choice for a responsible mother.

Keywords: Anti-vaccination, Motherhood, Social Media, Femininity, Disinformation

INTRODUCTION[1]

Anti-vaccination sentiments have grown strong in public discourse in recent decades and especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, as the online environment has proved to be a fertile setting for spreading conspiracy theories and false news. Anti-vaccine groups are using social networks to spread dubious health information, creating their own content without any evidence to confuse users who access their pages (Ortiz-Sánchez, Velando-Soriano et.al, 2020, p. 1). There is evident gender-based differences when it comes to decisions regarding vaccination. Recent surveys found men were more likely to take the COVID-19 vaccine, compared to women, whilst existing studies show that the "vast majority" of people commenting, sharing, and liking anti-vaccination information on Facebook are women (Madhawi, 2020). Another significant aspect, which is important to this research is the fact that women are over-represented within alternative medicine, both as consumers and as service providers (Shahvisi, 2019). Therefore, it is essential to comprehend, how notions about femininity and motherhood relate to decisions about vaccination.

The dominant discourse of contemporary motherhood supports "intensive mothering", coined by Sharon Hays (1996), which implies reinforcing traditional gender roles and providing undivided attention to the child, in order to ensure the best possible environment for his/her development (Schoppe-Sullivan, S.J., Yavorsky, J.E., Bartholomew, M.K. et al., 2017). "Intensive mothering" and Western culture has also gradually transformed childbearing and rearing from a natural phenomenon into a strictly medicalized process, valuing the physical wellbeing of the child and mother above all else, and stressing the superiority of medical knowledge over any alternatives, including a woman's own knowledge of her body and instincts (Miller, 2005).

At the same time alternative medicine and esoteric well-being is often assumed to be attractive to women because it is coherent with normative femininity (being caring and gentle, having strong communication skills, taking emotions seriously, and seeking to care for rather than cure) as well as it legitimizes the relationality that women are socialized to embody in care-giving in their feminine gender role (Sointu and Woodhead 2008). It is important to stress that recommending against vaccination is common amongst esoteric well-being practitioners (Ernst, 2001).

Therefore, although the dominant discourse of motherhood both stresses the importance of "Western medicine" and places the weight of health and other decisions on the shoulders of the mother, various alternative discourses have also emerged. "Hypnobirth" movements, "free range parenting", "yummy/slummy mommies" etc., challenge the principles of "intensive mothering" (Das, 2019). However, many of them continue to acknowledge the framework of the dominant discourse instead of creating a new one. Thus, this study explores the ambivalent relationship between the dominant discourse of "intensive mothering", femininity and the "anti-vaccination" movement: the connection between gender roles, imposed by a patriarchal society, and the "anti-vaxx" movement supporters.

The study raises the following research questions:

1. How is the dominant discourse of intensive mothering reproduced or challenged in the posts and comments of the opposers of child vaccination?
2. What are the core arguments employed by "anti-vaxx" supporters?
3. How does the notion of traditional femininity play out within the "anti-vaxx" discourse?
4. How does the patriarchal concept of motherhood influence decisions about vaccination?

This research employs a discourse analysis and netnography approach to Facebook threads that are discussing arguments concerning the vaccination of children. Analysis of two Facebook groups "Atsaucīgo māmiņu forums" [Sympathetic Mothers' forum] and

"Vakcīnrealitāte" [Vaccine reality] is carried out for a period of eight months (October 2020 – May 2021), when the discourse of vaccination grew in strength due to the vaccination of adults against COVID-19.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND RELEVANT EMPIRICAL STUDIES

ALTERNATIVE MEDICINE, ANTI-VACCINATION, AND FEMININITY

Vaccination decision is not simply a matter of two opposing viewpoints – to vaccinate or not to vaccinate, it includes a spectrum of attitudes from complete refusal to confident acceptance. Parental vaccination decision making involves cognitive, psychosocial, and political factors influenced by current scientific, cultural, and media environments (McNeil et. al, 2019). Studies show that vaccination decision making was influenced by personal, family or others' experiences, i.e., generally a recall of reactions to vaccination or others' perspectives on vaccinating, and external sources, such as health professionals or institutions (McNeil et. al, 2019). And judgements, particularly in situations of uncertainty, are more likely influenced by information that is familiar, salient, and recent. Social networks are seen as sources of influence in decision making perceptions as well. However, the use of the internet for "research" to support decision making is concerning as non-medical websites include inaccuracies, rumors, and myths that contribute to fear and hesitancy (Tickner, Leman & Woodcock, 2009).

All studies agree that the mechanisms to spread the anti-vaccine messages are the use of personal stories, talking about the risks of vaccines and their components, the business of the pharmaceutical industry and conspiracy theories, sometimes supported with links to websites based on no evidence. Anti-vaccine users seem to grow more cohesively on Facebook than pro-vaccine groups (Schmidt,

Zoll & Scala, 2018). Anti-vaccine groups are using social networks to spread health information, creating their own content without any evidence to confuse users who access their pages. To do this, most of the time they use alleged stories about children who have suffered side effects that end up moving the readers; a fact that impacts more than the scientific data provided by health agencies (Ortiz-Sánchez et. al, 2020, p. 10). With the ascendance of a post-factual culture, arguments relying on evidence, reproducibility, and consistency are liable to have ever less traction.

When it comes to the vaccination of children, anti-vaccine groups raise doubts about the administration of multiple vaccines at such early ages and the lack of individualization of these drugs. Their fear lies in the possible adverse effects and the constant change in the vaccination schedule, as well as in the differences between autonomous communities. This is linked to the belief that because the disease has very low incidence it is not necessary to vaccinate children (which is, in fact, due to the vaccine) or because they believe in natural remedies or alternative medicine, so people in the anti-vaccine group end up looking for information that confirms their beliefs (Ortiz-Sánchez et. al, 2020, p. 2).

Recommending against vaccination is common amongst alternative medicine practitioners especially within chiropractic, homoeopathy, and naturopathy. There are several reasons why women are more inclined to alternative medicine. First, medicine is often inadequate in meeting the differential needs of female bodies and women patients. Women's health testimony is deemed to be less credible, knowledge about both women's health issues and the specificities of disease in females are inadequate, and women receive inadequate treat-ment for a range of health problems, leading to higher morbidity and mortality, this may be partly due to the sluggish pace of change of patriarchal values within medicine (Shahvisi 2019, p. 101). Second, women's interest in alternative medicine can be contextualized within a broader trend of women's greater interest in spirituality and the holistic milieu. Alternative medicine care is often assumed to offer attributes that are commonly identified with normative femininity,

that is, being caring, being gentle, having strong communication skills, taking emotions seriously, and seeking to care for rather than cure (Shuval & Gross, 2008, p. 51). It is theorized to be attractive to women because it is coherent with, and legitimizes, the relationality that women are socialized to embody in their caregiving but at the same time validates notions of self-care which subvert the stereotypical care role and recognize the importance of a woman thinking about her own well-being rather than that of her dependents (Sointu & Woodhead, 2008).

"INTENSIVE MOTHERING"

The mediation of motherhood on social media points to a juxtaposition of two discourses – "the emancipatory, feminist revival of women asserting themselves against the white-coated, often male, medical community" and the "neo-liberal, self-regulating, self-managing, highly individualized discourse of ideal births and ideal birthing modes which sit within the intensive motherhood discourse" (Das, 2019, p. 498). Das proposes to treat these different discourses as 'two sides of one coin', whereas other researchers go even further and compare motherhood discourses to a spectrum or a dynamic organism. A 'spectrum' of motherhood discourses, according to Steiner and Bronstein (2017, p. 69) includes "free range" parenting on one side, where parents feel that children should be self-reliant and independent, and are given more freedom, and "helicopter parenting" supporters on the other side, focusing on the risks and responsibilities of parents (especially, mothers), representing "intensive mothering" ideology in its most extreme forms.

The dominant discourse of motherhood both in traditional and new media is of 'intensive mothering', coined by Hays (1996) in *"The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood"*. Hays explores, how society has constructed a 'right' kind of mothering which urges mothers to sacrifice "unselfishly [..] their time, money and love on behalf of sacred children", while simultaneously valorizing "a set of ideas that runs directly counter to it, one emphasizing impersonal relations between

isolated individuals efficiently pursuing their personal profit" (Hays, 1996, p. 97). Even though the 'intensive mothering' discourse is based on the values of 'white', middle-class families in a neoliberal society, its influence is felt in other groups and even cultures (Das, 2019, p. 495). 'Intensive mothering' pressures the mother to invest enormous physical and emotional resources into the wellbeing of the child, leaving other interests or priorities unattended, even under-taking risks.

"Intensive mothering" echoes pro-natalism and favours medicalization of the whole pregnancy and labour experience, striping the woman of her decision rights and holding the medical experts' views above all else; the pregnant woman and woman in labor is deemed a 'broken machine' that needs constant monitoring and tinkering with, paying insufficient notice to her own knowledge of her body (Tiidenberg, & Baym, 2017, p. 2; Yam, 2019, pp. 81–82.). The main role and goal of a woman is to ensure a healthy child and then devote her life to raising him. According to Tiidenberg and Baym, "intensive mothering" also stresses the importance of surveillance, constantly observing one's own actions and comparing them to others, to ensure the 'up-to-code' mothering according to society's standards (2017, p. 2). As a result, new mothers' access social media to gain support, as well as to 'perform' their mothering as a successful venture (Schoppe-Sullivan et. al., 2017, p. 277), practicing 'sharenting' and showing-off their children as a token of success (Lazard, 2019, pp. 1–2).

Hays and other researchers point to the inability of "intensive mothering" to deal with problems of modernity, as the ideology is based on the assumption that 'all the troubles of the world can be solved by the individual efforts of superhuman women" (1996, p. 177). Parents, and especially mothers, regardless of subjective options or opportunities, bear the weight of the responsibilities of not only their own wellbeing and health, but also the weight of making the 'correct' decisions for their children, in order to succeed in an invisible, never-ending competition (Meng, 2020, p. 173).

As mentioned earlier, social media provides a fertile platform for various discourses, challenging some particular aspects of the dominant discourse, or even creating alternatives outside the borders

of what is presumed 'normal' or appropriate (Yam, 2019, p. 93). Micalizzi argues that the scene of counter-narratives of motherhood is rather fragmented, as they tend to contrast and interact with each other and the dominant discourse as well (Micalizzi, 2020, p. 7). They might be described as fluid and ever changing. Tiidenberg et. al. speaks of "yummy mummy" discourse that brings forward aesthetic values, women's sexuality, and desire parallel to being a good mother, discarding discomfort and physical changes of the body as part of motherhood (2017, p. 8). While this discourse is maintained mostly by "influencers", its norms are acknowledged and taken into account by average social media users as well (Williams et. al., 2017, p. 10.). A rather sharp contrast is the "slummy mummy" discourse that refuses "shallow" beauty standards and allows the woman "be normal" without excessive worrying of losing the "baby weight" etc.; however, both these discourses, while trying to challenge, accept the value system of the dominant "intensive mothering" (Orton-Johnson, 2017, pp. 2–3).

"Alternative" discourses of motherhood include the narratives and practices that, for instance, denounce Western medicine and focus on the 'natural' aspects of mothering, starting from the 'hypnobirthing' movement to aromatherapy, naturopathy, and homeopathy, etc., focusing on the empowerment of women's 'natural' powers (Das, 2019, p. 501). Social media offers a playground to both show support to different choices, as well as to challenge the norms of 'intensive mothering' and 'neoliberal individualism' (Steiner, Bronstein, 2017, p. 73), allowing women to battle their uncertainties and find comfort in advice or experience others have gone through.

MOTHERS AND SOCIAL MEDIA

Researchers, studying motherhood in the 21st century, do not view mothers as a "homogeneous group", instead they focus on the subjectivity, exploring, how women experience individual mothering, varying in forms and rich in complexity (Lazard, et. al., 2019, p. 4). The everyday life of contemporary mothers is closely bound to social

media, which in recent years have become platforms for digital diaries, "safe spaces" (Archer, Kao, 2018, p. 124) for social support, and even forums for those unanswered questions that usually are directed towards medical specialists.

Even though some research suggests, that both men and women choose to share their parenting experience and create visual narratives regarding their children on social media, Holiday, Densley & Norman (2020) argue that it is women who do it more frequently. According to Fox and Hoy (2019) even up to 90% of women spend around 7 hours per week on their smartphones to gain advice, to share pictures or to converse with 'baby brands'. Women access social media to 'vent' and share frustrating anecdotes from everyday life (Archer, Kao, 2018, p. 123). *Facebook* may be a platform for strengthening 'feminine identity' or gaining a sense of affirmation and empowerment; however, it may also serve as a structure for solidifying 'cultural norms through replicated gendered interactions' (Schoppe-Sullivan, et. al. 2017, p. 287). Stories in traditional media have been often constructed through a 'masculine' prism, ignoring or even claiming the topics of interest for women not news-worthy (North, 2016, p. 328). Social media expand the space for practicing motherhood, adding another dimension, while still being concerned with the offline world's problems.

The digital, extended place, intertwining mothers on the internet or 'mamasphere' (Orton-Johnson, 2017, p. 2) may incorporate a sense of dualism and contrasts. It is a 'performative space' (Archer, 2019, pp. 52–53) for actualizing the motherhood experience, but also may be a platform for displaying 'correct' ways of 'doing gender' and 'doing motherhood' (Schoppe-Sullivan et. al., 2017, p. 278), as well as participating in social rituals. Social media may serve also as 'place of resistance', where to create one's own narrative and identity outside the mass media, dominated by patriarchal discourse that stigmatizes, sexualizes and pathologizes labour and the woman's body, according to Shui-yin Sharon Yam (2019, p. 97). However, these 'transformative spaces' may easily become yet another platform designed for echoing long-standing normative ideas about the nature of motherhood and the role and identity of the mother: it's a double-edged sword, simultaneously

protecting and inspiring, and, on the other hand, functioning as a weapon of destruction by creating unrealistic social standards and stimulating mothers' rivalry (Orton-Johnson, 2017, p. 8; Chae, 2015, p. 519).

With the rise in popularity of social media, researchers have also brought up the question of the level of digital competency among new mothers. Lupton has concluded that women, sharing sensitive information about their family have only just begun to understand the seriousness of the situation (Lupton, 2017, p. 2). Mothers, especially new mothers, are vulnerable on the internet, facing potential risks regarding sensitive information ending up in the wrong hands (Fox & Hoy, 2019, p. 425; Chalken, Anderson, 2017, p. 2) and other dangers. However, potential gains, for instance, the joy, knowledge, and bargain deals from sharing social and health information, seem to outweigh the dangers in the short run.

METHODOLOGY AND DATA

The research is carried out by the means of network analysis. Network analysis is a multi-disciplinary method that features structural intuition, systematic empirical data, graphical imagery, and the use of mathematical or computational models. Network analysis enables researchers to map out the interrelationships among objects and attributes both in the media agenda and the public agenda The advantage of the network analysis approach is that it moves beyond mere hierarchical rankings, allowing for analyses of social processes in the network (Guo, 2012). The other method employed in this study is discourse analysis. Discourse analysis offers a way of seeing how society experiences the world. Discourse analysis provides the opportunity of exploring a virtually infinite range of spoken and written text types, including texts on social media. Critical discourse analysis serves as tool in looking at what discursive choices have been made in representing the world in a certain way. Discursive choices can show what is assumed about the world, what practices

are possible, what practices are not (Sunderland, 299). In this study, discourse analysis will be used to analyse how vaccination choices are related to motherhood and what role the patriarchal concept of motherhood plays in this process.

A thorough analysis of two major *Facebook* groups – "Atsaucīgo māmiņu forums" (AMF) (*Forum for Responsive Mothers*) and "*Vakcīnrealitāte Latvijā*" (VRL) (*Vaccine Reality Latvia*) – was carried out. AMF, created in 2014, is a private, but visible *Facebook* forum with over 27,000 members dedicated for discussing the topical experience of parenting and other social matters in a 'positive' manner. This forum is notorious for questionable advice and provocations on childrearing, discipline, and medical procedures. Its members are not only mothers as the name of the forum suggests, but also fathers and adults without children. Often comments and posts in AMF are related to the content produced by VRL. VRL positions itself as a "local business" with the sole aim of informing society about the reality of vaccination and to provide support for young parents to make an "informed decision" regarding their child's vaccination. The *Facebook* page, followed by more than 10,000 profiles, is run by Kristīne Duņeca, an ex-journalist opposed to vaccination. The page was closed and banned in late November 2021. The usual posts contain detailed personal accounts by anonymous (or semi-anonymous) people that have or had faced tragic vaccination side effects, advice to deal with vaccination-caused illnesses, including home-remedies and "natural" substances, information based on pseudo-scientific resources on the risks of vaccination, as well as "research" on the components of vaccines etc. Some of the information is accessible only by donation; pleas for contributions for the author are regular.

The analysis was done in several steps. First, all posts were filtered by keywords, containing words "vaccine" and "to vaccinate" (*"vakcīna, "vakcinēt",* etc.), their derivatives (*"vakcinēšana"* etc.) and synonyms (*"pote", "potēt"* etc.). All the keywords were applied individually. Second, posts were filtered by their date, concentrating on the period of October, 2020, to May, 2021. Third, all posts were read through, and only the posts, focusing on the vaccination of children, were included in the

sample. The final sample consists of 11 posts from AMF and 33 posts from VRL. A more detailed analysis of 33 posts on VRL reveals that there are too few comments from followers that are relevant to the study. Most comments echo other posts and replicate disinformation, appeal to the 'corrupt' pharmaceutical companies, government officials and medical professionals, without further discussion. Thus, posts and comments from VRL are not further researched here.

Of the 11 posts in AMF, 4 posts were related to "obligatory" vaccination (tuberculosis, whooping cough etc.) decisions, others – with vaccination against encephalitis or seasonal influenza etc. The rate of comments to these posts ranges from 45 to 615; "Likes" to posts are far less – from 1 to 15. Members of the group are eager to post their views and advice; "sharing" posts is banned. After careful deliberation and study of each of these 11 posts, detailed attention was brought to three posts: one of which exploring a situation, where the father and husband prohibits a mother to vaccinate their children, the second contemplating the pros and cons of vaccination according to the official calendar, set by medical professionals and institutions, and the final one asking women opposed to vaccinating to explain their choices regarding vaccination against COVID-19.

FINDINGS

Analysis of results proceeds with exploration of the three separate posts and comments on AMF. The first post is by a mother of two children, expecting a third, whose husband "suddenly", "after reading articles on Google", during the pandemic of "COVID-19", has become opposed to vaccines. She adds that she is also opposed to vaccination against all the "modern" illnesses; however, she expresses her concern and asks advice from members of AMF on how to approach this manner, when the views regarding vaccination are drastically different between a husband and wife. The post has 147 comments and 2 "Likes".

The most engaging or "Top" comments advise to seek compromise, "to talk things through" with the husband and to educate him about the risks of falling ill with these serious diseases to which vaccines have been available for a long time. Then, there follow comments urging the mother to vaccinate children "on the hush", without the husband knowing it, as the responsibility of children's health falls on the mother and "the mother will be blamed" if the child catches tuberculosis, diphtheria, etc. Other women add that "it's my child, I have given birth, I have the right to decide" and that the woman must take charge without having to explain or hide the vaccination fact. This sentiment is shared in other "Top" comments as well.

A thematic analysis of comments (Figure 31) shows four major threads of the types of advice, provided by members of AMF.

Figure 31. Visualisation of Themes of Comments Regarding Father Forbidding Vaccination of Children.
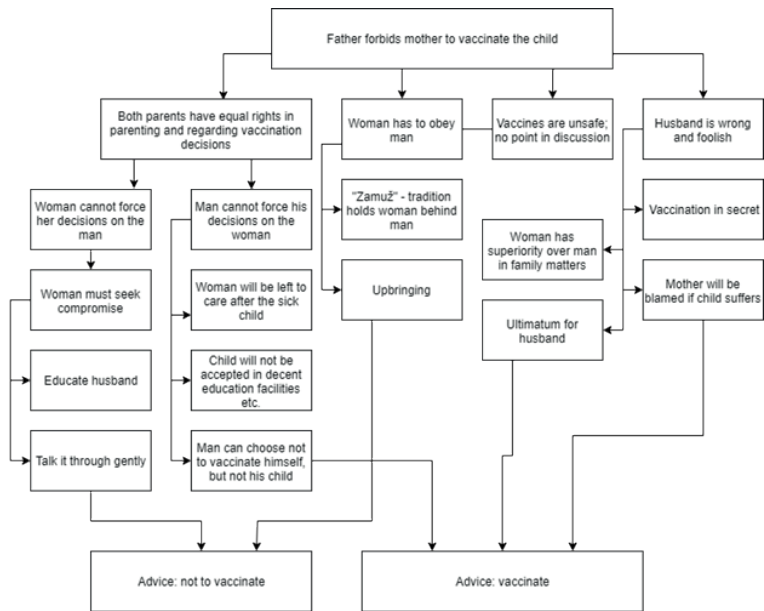
Source: Authors' own elaboration.

As mentioned before, the most popular comments urge either the mother to take charge and vaccinate the children without hesitation, ignoring the husband's concerns, or to seek compromise, as both parents share the responsibilities of children equally. A major part of comments considers the husband to be "wrong and foolish", urging the woman to vaccinate in secret or to give an ultimatum (for instance, withhold physical intimacy etc.) or exercise a mother's authority over the father in children's health issues. The arguments include society blaming the mother if the child should get sick, as well as reminding them that the mother usually takes care of sick members of the family and takes care of medical appointments, thus, has the right to overrule the father's decisions.

Other women argue that both parents are equally responsible and share equal rights regarding vaccination decisions. The major part of comments supporting this notion argue that the man cannot force his decisions on a woman, and they must come to a compromise together. Other comments reveal that, again, the woman will be left to care after the ill child; moreover, some education facilities will frown upon unvaccinated children or even deny acceptance. Finally, some argue that the man may choose not to vaccinate himself, but he is not entitled to risk his child's wellbeing.

Lastly, anti-vaccination sentiments are shared by a minority of commenters and are supported by several arguments. By reminding that both parents are responsible for their children, some women argue that the woman cannot force her decisions on a man and should talk it through "gently", educate him (and herself), but, if a mutually acceptable solution cannot be found, the woman should accept the man's rights and not vaccinate children. A more drastic approach is shared by even less women, arguing that the woman has to obey the man, as the woman is "behind" the man in all matters and that is the way certain woman have been brought up. Finally, several comments just express frustration with vaccination and are thankful for the man's "common sense".

The second post in the sample has been created by an anonymous user "Sim Sim" with a picture of a couple in its profile, seeking advice, whether to vaccinate a 2,5-month-old baby with all the "obligatory" shots according to the vaccination calendar. She is concerned that this is a very "early age" for a child to be administered such a number of shots, and even though "someone may call her old-fashioned" she ponders delaying vaccination. The post has 615 comments (and 15 likes). Although "Top" or "most engaging" comments to this post include doubts regarding vaccination, advice to consult VRL or accounts of serious reactions to the shots, most comments urge to vaccinate or express personal experience of vaccination according to the vaccination calendar. The argumentation employed by commentators is illustrated in Figure 32.

Members of AMF, who urge the mother to vaccinate according to the calendar follow several patterns, some of which are rational, some – purely emotional. Comments include a lot of accounts of personal experience or experience of close relatives that either have not been vaccinated and experienced severe illness or have been vaccinated and felt that they had escaped from harm. Then there are reassuring comments that these vaccines had been administered during their childhood, while Latvia was part of USSR, and they have not experienced any complications, thus, vaccines are safe. Also urging to vaccinate are members of AMF, who, in contrast, appeal to the benefits of modern medicine and advise to trust doctors and western medicine. Finally, there are emotional accounts stressing that choosing to delay or not vaccinate at all can be described as negligence towards the child and willfully putting the child's health at risk.

Another segment of comments urges the mother to delay vaccination as it could be "harmful" to the child's health during the first months of the life. Other commentators advise towards "mindful" vaccination and encourage weighing the pros and cons of each individual vaccine. Some of these comments include advice to choose only those shots that they themselves have received during childhood and to "stay away from modern cocktails" as they are harmful and not trustworthy.
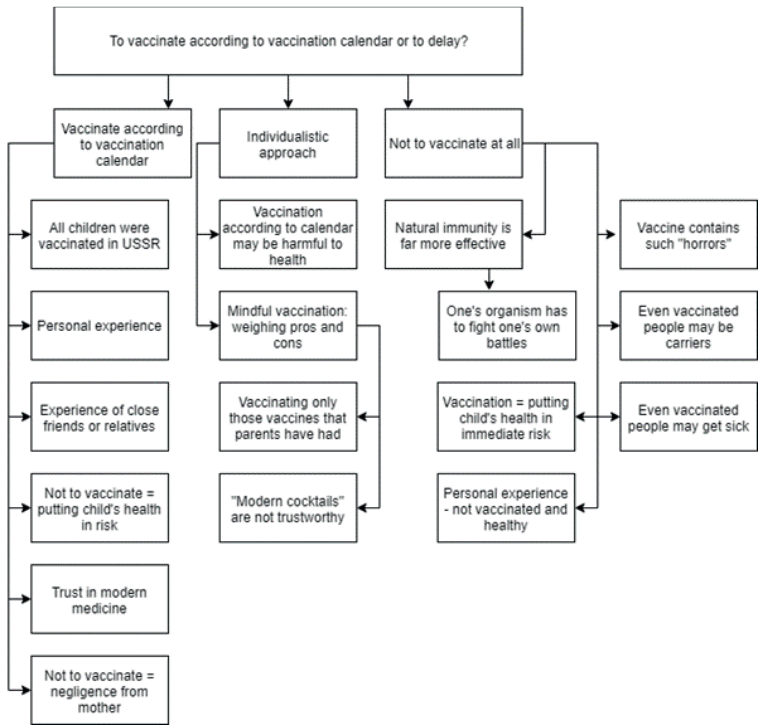
Source: Authors' own elaboration.

Finally, part of the comments include encouragement not to vaccinate at all, as "natural immunity is far more effective" and one's organism has to "fight one's own battles". Other arguments by members of AMF stress that a closer study of the "contents" of the vaccine reveals "horrors" hidden within, as well as the claim that even the vaccinated people may be carriers or get sick. Some commentators express their view that vaccination means "putting the child's health in immediate risk", as the possibility of catching these diseases (tuberculosis, diphtheria, hepatitis, etc.) is very low, but the possible complications from vaccination are almost inevitable, and will last for life. Lastly, the personal experience argument also is mentioned in this context, stressing that the person has not received any vaccines herself and is "perfectly healthy".

The third post of the sample is by an "experienced parent", asking those mothers, who choose not to vaccinate their children with "obligatory" vaccines, what they are planning to do regarding vaccines against COVID-19. The post has 13 "Likes" and 299 comments, most of which differ from the previously analysed posts, as the question is directed towards "anti-vaxx" parents. The comments that follow may be categorized in four groups (Figure 3).

Figure 33. Visualisation of Themes of Comments
Regarding "Obligatory" Vaccines.
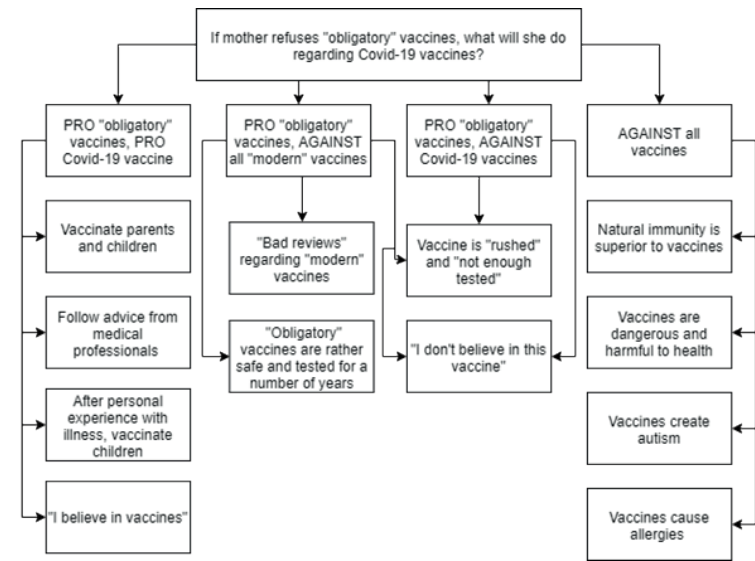
Source: Authors' own elaboration.

First, although a minority view in this discussion, there are members of AMF who stress that they "believe" in vaccines, that they have been vaccinated and have done the same for their children, emphasizing the role of medical professionals and the weight of advice from doctors, as well as sharing personal experience with serious illness. Second, there are two groups of comments that appear quite similar but do have slight differences: commentators who support "obligatory" vaccines, but are against all "modern" vaccines; and commentators,

which support "obligatory" vaccines, but are particularly against the COVID-19 shot. Comments explain that "modern" vaccines, e.g., against influenza, against cervical cancer etc., "have bad reviews", that there have been health complaints after receiving the vaccine. Moreover, "obligatory" vaccines "are around for a longer period of time", and, thus, have been proven safe, whereas "modern vaccine cocktails" may prove harmful or even fatal after a number of years, and the mothers "wouldn't want to risk it" with their child's health. Similar concerns regarding the speed of which a vaccine has been developed, the "rush", have been also expressed by commentators expressly rejecting the vaccine against COVID-19. Comments including claims that authors do not 'believe in" this vaccine and they "wouldn't want their child to be a lab rat" are common. Lastly, a significant number of comments include encouragement not to vaccinate children at all. These commentators echo views expressed also in other posts: "natural immunity" is superior to "synthetic", vaccines are harmful and dangerous to the health. Moreover, the commonly found misinformation stressing the "link" between vaccines and autism, or vaccines and allergies, is also mentioned.

In the discussion threads selected for the analysis, a number of discourses constructing the traditional female gender role can be singled out, which are constructed based on the denial of science and the praising of self-listening ("it is better to follow the body's wants") (Atsaucīgo māmiņu forums, 2020).

The experience of individuals (even if it is not their own experience) is valued more than a scientific opinion or a scientific study. In principle, there is a contrast between experience (valuable, to be listened to) and scientific research (not worth listening to). Here one can see connections with the thesis described in the theory, that conventional medicine can often seem alienated, derogatory from people's individual experience. In the analysed Facebook discussions, personal experience, even if not self-experienced, is assessed as more reliable than scientific research, which does not provide an opportunity to identify and to connect emotionally.

The belief that, parents who are skeptical of the vaccine are better as parents, more thorough, more sensitive, and smarter, is discursively created and maintained. Vaccines are positioned as an absolute evil, the worst thing a parent can do to their children: "I have not poisoned my children with vaccines and will not do so" (Atsaucīgo māmiņu forums, 2020). Discourse on faith in the vaccine as a sign of a limitation of the mind is repeated in the discussions. It is discursively stated that mothers who believe in vaccines are less educated, while vaccine skeptics have 'made my own research', so they go deeper, search for information, and 'educate' themselves. Such statements are often associated not only with intellectual superiority, but also with moral superiority: "I think with my own head and not someone's else. And yes, I do not belong to a crowd, because I am a Human who has a conscience, self-respect, and intelligence" (Atsaucīgo māmiņu forums, 2020).

Opponents of vaccination use a discursive technique opposing specialists of alternative medicine to specialists of conventional medicine. The former is described as better and smarter. This discourse positions alternative medicine as corresponding to traditional femininity. Alternative medicine care is gentle, taking emotions seriously, and seeking to care rather than cure and thus is more feminine. This cognition is also discursively reinforced by constructing the opposition of artificial (scientific) and natural (intuitive): "Natural immunity is countless times better than artificial". (Atsaucīgo māmiņu forums, 2021 Jan.). This reproduces the binary opposition between reason (masculinity) and intuition (femininity). The intuition of women, especially mothers, is contrasted with the advice of doctors and is given superiority: "Don't believe that doctors are smart, and you have to listen to them if MOTHER's intuition tells the opposite!" (Atsaucīgo māmiņu forums, 2021 Jan.). In this way, not only is the esoteric discourse about a woman as an intuitive being maintained, but it is also pointed out that it is 'natural' for mothers to know better than doctors, to intuitively feel the needs of their child. Thus, the role of the patriarchal female gender role is confirmed, in which women are socialized to embody caregiving and putting the well-being of others over her own well-being.

DISCUSSION

Regarding research questions, first of all, evidence of the reproduction of the "intensive mothering" discourse in the posts and comments on AMF, studied in this text, is visible. The weight of the sole responsibility over the child's health and well-being, as well as the pressure to make the correct choices in the child's best interests, is felt on "both sides", i. e., both among the "pro-vaccination" and "anti-vaxx" parents. Mothers express the need to "do what is best for the child", they speak of the pressure of society and fear of judgement, even blame, for their choices. Mothers, who argue for vaccination, express similar sentiments – some declare that not vaccinating a child is "negligence" and feel that they would be "frowned upon" if choosing to risk the health and lives of their children. They also advise others to seek information and educate themselves; however, they stress the importance of trust in modern medicine and professionals.

Mothers, who oppose vaccination, disclose resentment towards medical professionals and voice their mistrust for several reasons, the main arguments being previous personal negative experience (e.g., faulty diagnosis, miscalculated treatments), previous personal positive experience (not falling ill despite not being vaccinated), tradition and a "natural" way of life ("natural" immunity vs. "synthetic" drugs) or conspiracy theories ("Big Pharma" and greed of pharmaceutical companies or the government). Nevertheless, these mothers also feel the need to "educate" themselves on the pros and cons of vaccination, to seek the truth and make an "informed" decision, however – without help from certified specialists. A visible group of doubtful mothers (parents) exists that do not oppose vaccination altogether but express concerns, speak of "filtering" information and delaying vaccination in order to "be completely sure" and practice "mindful vaccination". These mothers speak of either "modern cocktails" that have not been fully tested and advise to "select" and vaccinate only "verified" vaccines that have stood the test of time or delaying vaccination according to the official calendar to wait while the immune system of the child is "strong enough" to take the shot.

As regards to traditional femininity and "anti-vaxx" discourse, the patriarchal concept of motherhood is used to influence decisions in favour against the vaccination. The discourse exploits the binary opposition between nature and science, rationality and emotionality, mind, and intuition. The mother's intuition is being opposed to conventional medicine and at the same time positioned as more valuable and important than the medical, science-based opinion. There is a strong discourse about 'mother knows best' femininity, for which alternative rather than conventional medicine is more appropriate. Thus, also influencing the choice in favour of not vaccinating.

In recent years, opponents of anti-vaccination have become increasingly active, significantly influencing the attainment of vaccination coverage against various infectious diseases. Doctors point out that every year in Latvia, about a hundred new mothers refuse to vaccinate their babies (Ozola-Balode, 2021). Various studies have indicated that social networks are used by the anti-vaccine groups to disseminate their information. The anti-vaccination groups base their arguments on people's lack of confidence in the information provided by health professionals and official sources about vaccines. Research shows that people who refuse vaccines are more likely to obtain information from social networks, not from health professionals or verified healthcare websites (Danielson, Marcus & Boyle, 2019). Our study reveals a strong anti-vaccination discourse on social media targeting mothers using notions of traditional femininity, idealized motherhood, and visions of 'natural' immunity to paint vaccination as a poor choice for a responsible mother.

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PARTICIPATORY CULTURE IN SOCIAL MEDIA: THE BIRTH AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE VISIBLE HAND MOVEMENT DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

ABSTRACT

During the COVID-19 crisis, social media, thanks to its participatory culture, played a crucial role in transforming everyday life. In times of social isolation in Poland, special attention is paid to the *Visible Hand* movement, in which the ideas of civil society are realized. Despite the assimilation of the pandemic, tens of thousands of people gathered on Facebook as part of local groups of the *Visible Hand* to continue to provide mutual, broadly understood, neighbourly help. This case study refers to ten selected local groups of the *Visible Hand* after a year and a half of the pandemic's start to check how the nature of the initiative has changed and whether it continues to implement the ideals of the civil society.

Keywords: Social Media, Participatory Culture, COVID-19 Pandemic, Visible Hand

S ocial networks are one of the most critical places in the Internet space. According to the Hootsuite and We Are Social report *Digital 2019*, 98% of internet users already used social networks or instant messengers before the COVID-19 pandemic, and 83% declared active involvement in social media in the described period. It was also checked that the average time that media users spend using social media during the day is 2 hours and 16 minutes. It is 1/3 of the total time spent on online activities. The COVID-19 pandemic has also convinced those previously not active internet and social media users to the network, as platforms like Facebook and Instagram provide a substitute for social ties (Kozinets, 2010). During the coronavirus pandemic, the number of social media users increased from 3.484 billion, representing 45% of the world's population, to 4.2 billion, representing 53.6% of the world's population. Only in Poland, before the pandemic, in 2019, 47% of internet users were using social media (Digital 2019), and in 2021 – already 68.5% (Digital, 2021). This means that Poland's number of social media users increased by 2.5 million (11%) during the pandemic year. In this challenging time of global unrest, people worldwide – almost overnight – used the media as lifebuoys for *homo socius* (Goban-Klas, 2020b).

The introduction of the lockdown was associated with the need to implement remote solutions for work and teaching and the growing importance of online services (Favale et al., 2020; Mishra, Gupta, Shree, 2020). Beaunoyer et al. (2020) emphasized that during forced isolation, the status of digital space changed from convenience to necessity, and technology became an integral part of everyday life, which changed the structure of Internet use time (Aymerich-Franch 2020; Drozdowski et al., 2020). As Troszyński et al. (2020) stated, Polish society underwent a forced accelerated digital transformation due to the first weeks of the pandemic. On the one hand, it gave a different dimension to the existing problems. On the other hand, new problem areas appeared, related primarily to the dissemination of fake news and disinformation, ultimately leading to the phenomenon of infodemia (Allahverdipour, 2020; De Caro, 2020).

The almost instantaneous transfer of most of the daily activities to the Internet around the world was possible, among others, thanks to the phenomenon of platformization. As Kelly (2017) notes, the Internet has become a network of platforms or their ecosystem. Internet users no longer navigate through hundreds of thousands of individual pages run by their authors but set up their accounts on social platforms such as Facebook or Twitter, which colonized the Internet, creating virtual spaces where the life of modern Internet users flourishes (Goban – Klas, 2020a).

Particularly important in the context of the participatory social media culture seems to be adopting the perspective proposed by Troszyński (2020) during the study of the first period of the pandemic in social media. The researcher noted that *social media* are primarily *the media – a social system* that performs certain functions: transmits information, creates a sense of community, allows you to monetize the viewers' attention, will enable you to share your opinions and – like traditional media – it is still responsible for setting the order and importance of topics for public debate (agenda-setting). Although the role of agenda-setting in social media is more complex, there are no dominant titles or broadcasts; the discourse is dispersed, often limited to narrow communication niches and circles of friends (Borden & Grzywińska, 2012; Feezell, 2018).

THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN POLISH SOCIAL MEDIA

In the first weeks, the public debate in social media in Poland oscillated around nine coronavirus discourses, the authors of which include: the aetiology and statistics of the disease; government's fight against the coronavirus; the consequences of *closing the country*; supplies and trade during quarantine; everyday life and social perception of the coronavirus; Polish welfare state during a pandemic, church

and politics, common knowledge about COVID-19 and conspiracy theories as well as politics and economy (Troszyński et al., 2020).

However, major coronavirus discourses did not obscure communication at the local level. During the period of limited mobility, the attention of social media users was also directed to the immediate environment (spatial and social), which to a greater extent meets the needs of social contacts and access to information (Janc & Jurkowski, 2020). In the case of the COVID-19 pandemic, the scope of most people's functioning has drastically narrowed to the area of their immediate neighbourhood. Hence, local communities faced the challenge of organizing mutual support and the flow of information about a crisis. One of the essential communication tools used by them and local governments are social media, especially Facebook. They enable involvement in the functioning of local communities. On the one hand, social media are a cheap, powerful tool that allows: disseminating information, communication and showing the transparency of local government activities. On the other hand, social media support the participation of residents because they involve people in the activities of institutions, political processes and management (Bonsón et al., 2015). The wide use of social media contributes to the transformation of opportunities to create a place, interact in space, and establish relationships with local activists and residents.

The decisive role of social media in the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic crisis was noticed at the beginning of the pandemic by numerous researchers discussing the role of social media in the era of social isolation.

Janc and Jurkowski (2020), examining the functioning of the profiles of Wroclaw housing estate councils on Facebook, noticed that the attention devoted to the threads of the SARS-CoV virus – increased in specific periods. The most incredible intensity of content strongly related to the crisis took place within about two weeks from the appearance of the first cases of infection. As the researchers emphasized, analysis of, among others, data from Google Trends shows that the periods of increased activity of Google search engine users in the search for *coronavirus* and traffic on Wikipedia

are reflected in a general outline by the number of posts regarding COVID-19 placed on the profiles of Wroclaw housing estate councils.

In Wuhan, the first epicentre of the COVID-19 pandemic, central governments' similar use of social media has also been observed. (Zhong, Huang & Liu, 2021). The Chinese government used social media to mitigate the problem of information asymmetry in its response to the pandemic crisis. Li, Chandra, and Kapucu (2020) describe the use of social media as a critical mechanism for central government action and shaping local government action to inform citizens, accelerate relief, and mobilize citizens and non-profit organizations to support government action and remedial action. Another example of research on the use of social media in the era of social isolation is the study by Sowada (2020). The researcher analysed materials published on a Facebook group named *Inicjatywna i Nieformalna Grupa Jeżycka*. It is a group created on Facebook and dedicated to the *Jezyce* community – the downtown district of Poznan. The researcher noted that during the first month of the pandemic, counting from the date of the first infection in Poland, this group performed three primary functions: informational, solidarity and psychological, and 41.2% of the posts were published on it (Sowada, 2020, p. 30). The above observations prove the adaptive power of social media, on which functional groups almost immediately adjust their activities to the current social situation (Weiman & Brosius, 2016).

SUBSIDIARITY EPIDEMIC – GRASSROOTS AID INITIATIVES BORN IN SOCIAL MEDIA

The studies mentioned above described how existing Facebook communities and institutions changed their communication due to the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic crisis. In response to COVID-19 new initiatives have also been established to help combat the pandemic or its consequences.

Also, in Poland, the most significant grassroots aid initiatives were created in the first eight weeks of COVID-19, counting the *zero* patient per patient. The effects of bottom-up aid initiatives in Poland were collected in the *Subsidiarity Epidemic* (Dudziak, 2020) report. During the pandemic, to support hospitals and medics, most of bottom-up initiatives were created. As part of just three fundraising initiatives (Siepomaga.pl, Caritas Polska and Wielka Orkiestra Świątecznej Pomocy) over PLN 60 million was raised to support hospitals. In the other two campaigns supporting medical professions (Polskie Krawcowe w Akcji and Koronazglowy.pl), nearly 700,000 protective masks for medics were sewn. As the organizers of the Przyłbica w Korona campaign estimate, over 600,000 helmets have been created and donated so far as part of related and twin grassroots initiatives. In turn, as part of the We Call Meals campaign, nationwide and local food chains offered over 220,000 meals to employees of hospitals, emergency stations and laboratory points.

Help was also offered for other groups, such as seniors, students, local companies or just neighbours. The best example of help offered locally is the more than 200 regional support groups within the *Visible Hand* movement. In addition, Caritas Polska allocated PLN 15 million to help seniors. Moreover, as part of the support for the youngest, 1,100 people were involved in voluntary tutoring (Math Clinic, Students for Students). There were also five aid initiatives offering the possibility of purchasing vouchers from local service providers, which buyers could use after returning to the *new normal*. It was then, in March and at the beginning of April, when most of the initiatives presented in the report arose. At that time, we called that period the *subsidiarity epidemic*.

From the perspective of over a year and a half, it can be seen that the outbreak of aid initiatives described in the report was primarily dictated by the sudden social mobilization caused by the crisis. Among the interpretative explanations within which the first weeks of the pandemic can be seen, Drozdowski et al. (2020) mentioned, among others, the coercion of looking for positives. It means that

media messages encouraged treating pandemics as opportunities for life changes, the rebirth of the biosphere or training in creativity.

A similar phenomenon of the birth of initiatives that focused on helping others during a pandemic also occurred in other countries. Examples of such initiatives is the *Frena la curva* (*Stop the curve*) campaign, operating mainly in Spanish-speaking countries, which mobilizes communities to support neighbours during quarantine. Another are the international campaign *Hack the Crisis* supporting the creation of local hackathons aimed at fighting the pandemic crisis, or the *Open Source Ventilator* – a Dutch group of engineers, designers, doctors and volunteers working on creating ventilator-related projects and sharing them with others via open license.

The activity of aid initiatives emerging in times of a pandemic is also described in special publications. Examples include describing the bottom-up involvement of Chinese volunteers in pandemic relief efforts and their role in fighting the crisis (Miao et al., 2021), activities of aid initiatives in Latin America (Franco, 2020), or development schemes of initiatives focused on copying with a pandemic (Fransen, 2021).

In the report, Drozdowski et al. also mentioned about the *collective sense of responsibility*. Men agree to give up some of their autonomy and throw themselves into a whirlwind of activities for the benefit of others because it requires this present time and collective sense of responsibility (*That's right*). Such exemplary activities: shopping for neighbours – also with local entities; sharing what they know, sewing masks, fundraising, therapeutic help and tutoring help etc. during the COVID-19 pandemic revealed the presence of solidarity and cooperation (e.g. neighbourhood shopping for the elderly, sewing masks, contributions supporting the functioning of hospitals). It is worth noting that the emerging communities and the sudden solidarity of Poles during the first weeks of the pandemic passed similarly to the solidarity outbursts observed after the death of Pope John Paul II or the Smolensk catastrophe, causing even greater social polarization (Brzeźniak, 2020).

THE BIRTH AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE
VISIBLE HAND MOVEMENT

As Chwat emphasizes, *the essence of the Visible Hand* is social mobilization (2021). This is evidenced by the rapid growth of the members of the group, initially founded by Filip Żulewski for friends, so that they could support each other during the difficult time of the pandemic on March 11, 2020. Just eight days later, on March 19, the group numbered over 90,000 users and several local groups located in Poland and Germany, France, and the USA. The goal of the *Visible Hand* community was to help people who find themselves in a problematic situation of social isolation. The group's name refers to the *Invisible Hand* – an initiative under which Poles helped each other in the times of the People's Republic of Poland. There is no anonymity on the web, however, so the modern hand must be visible. For over a year, the leading group of *The Visible Hand* has had more than 100,000 members, and more than 200 local equivalents were created.

The idea behind the initiator of the action from the very beginning was to associate people who wanted to help others during the pandemic in smaller, local groups, referring to the idea of neighbourliness (Kotus, 2007). The pace of development of the initiative and its momentum also attracted the attention of researchers. In the context of online neighbourhood help during social isolation, Paluszkiewicz and Olejniczak (2020) examined the actions of *The Visible Hand Poznań*. They pointed out that in the times of the epidemic crisis in 2020, neighbourhood aid gained value like never before. Researchers, however, adopted the definition of neighbourly help after Dziura (2012) as mutual help of members of the same community, realized not only by the closest neighbours but also provided to each other between the inhabitants of the entire settlement unit. Thus, *neighbours* are people who make up a given community, the spatial boundaries of which do not have to coincide with the edges of a given district. It is impossible to tell precisely where the *neighbourhood* ends. Similarly, in the virtual world, members of online communities often come from the same area. Still, it happens that

they live in places far enough away from each other that calling them *neighbours*, despite their joint activities for the benefit of a given group, could be abusive.

The development of communication technologies provides new ways of building a community in isolation from the connections resulting from spatial proximity. However, they still apply to neighbouring communities, allowing new tools concerning local mechanisms that define a neighbourhood (Lengyel et al., 2015). Literature provides examples of new forms of organizing neighbourly life (Capece & Costa 2013). One of them is the formation of numerous neighbourhood groups created by residents on social networks.

Social actions taken suddenly under the influence of a crisis in local communities and neighbourhoods testify to the strength of civil society, which in emergencies organizes self-help formations outside the family and state spheres (Opioła, 2018). In research on social solidarity, based on the example of *The Visible Hand*, Chwat (2021) uses the concept of networked social movements by Manuel Castells. Some include it in the theory of the so-called new social movements. It assumes that these days they differ significantly (e.g. in nature, structure and ideology) from movements for an industrial society, especially from the workers' movement (Castells 2015). So that, the essential attribute of the leading group and all examined subgroups of the *Visible Hand* is the common conviction of their members about the need for spontaneous, universal, mutual help, regardless of the government's actions (or in response to their insufficiency). The need for this assistance is related to diagnosing one's situation and others in the social structure and the location in the social distribution of goods. Disseminating information, networking and providing support in the real world requires no headquarters; the flows occur directly between the group members, which proves the open nature of the network, which allows one to use it at any time.

So far, research on the *Visible Hand* has focused on the initial period of the initiative, during which there was a strict lockdown, and the pandemic situation was fearful. More than a year and a half has passed since then; the ongoing pandemic is still a cause for concern

but has already been assimilated and has become part of everyday life. The phenomena related to infodemia also intensified. This phenomenon is defined as a flood of contradictory messages that cause indifference (Bulganová, 2020; Bulatović & Bulatović, 2021). Many of the initiatives that emerged during the solidarity spurt of the first months of COVID-19 changed their profile or suspended their activities. Therefore, we decided to check how the *Visible Hand* initiative still works more than a year and a half after its inception, what topics it deals with and whether it is still a tool for building a civil society.

METHODOLOGY

This case study was done with *Mixed Methods* (Schoonenboom &Johnson, 2017) using quantitative and qualitative content analysis. The research sample consisted of 10 purposefully selected local Facebook groups created as part of the *Visible Hand* initiative. The selection was made in such a way that the research sample represented cities of various sizes and different regions of Poland. The groups that make up the case study are presented in the table (Table 8). The number of members of each group was given as announced on August 2, 2021.

In order to create the database, all posts published in selected groups in August 2021 were aggregated. The research sample finally amounted to 420 posts (n = 420). Then, the aggregated posts were coded with a categorization key, which included variables regarding the number of interactions within a given post (likes, comments and shares), post type and post subject. Additionally, it was marked if the content of a given post turned out to be inaccessible (e.g. as a result of its removal by the post's author), and the name of the group in which the post was published was also specified.

Table 8. List of Groups Selected for Analysis

City	Group name	Number of members
Bielsko-Biała	Widzialna Ręka - Bielsko-Biała	1 248
Inowrocław	Widzialna Ręka Inowrocław	4 467
Lublin	Widzialna ręka LUBLIN	15 545
Olsztyn	Widzialna Ręka - Olsztyn	336
Radom	Widzialna Ręka - Radom	29 311
Starachowice	Widzialna ręka-Starachowice	5 667
Toruń	Widzialna Ręka - Toruń	4 826
Warszawa (Warsaw)	Widzialna Ręka - WARSZAWA	9 490
Warszawa (Warsaw) - Śródmieście Północne / Powiśle districts	Widzialna ręka Warszawa Srodmiescie Północne/Powiśle	1 291
Wejherowo, Reda, Rumia (three towns in total)	Widzialna ręka Wejherowo, Reda, Rumia	3 118

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

In terms of the type of posts, the following categories are distinguished:

- *I'll give away* – posts in which the authors informed about the willingness to help others, e.g. by giving away some of their items,
- *I need* – posts in which the authors informed about their needs and reported their willingness to accept help,
- *Someone needs* – posts where the authors informed about the need for helping people other than themselves; posts of this type could also take the form of sharing the posts of other people reporting the need for support within the group,
- *Thank you* – posts where the authors thanked other people for their help,
- *I inform* – posts in which the authors did not aim at any of the above-mentioned activities, but instead informed the other group members, e.g. about an opportunity to purchase some given product with a discount (often those posts were not connected with helping).

In terms of the subject of posts, 19 categories were distinguished within the categorization key. Posts were assigned to a given type in accordance with the leading topics covered in a given post (e.g. helping animals). If it was not possible to indicate one dominant topic, but,

e.g. two – a given post was assigned to two topics simultaneously. Additionally, if a post was not fit for any of the thematic categories, it was assigned to the *Other* category.

The following thematic categories were adopted as part of the analysis:

- *Small things* – posts regarding clothes, books, toys and other everyday items,
- *Contact* – posts regarding searching or sharing a contact, e.g. to service providers offering a given service,
- *Animals* – posts regarding help for animals, looking for a home for animals or informing about a lost animal,
- *Big things* – posts regarding furniture, electronics/household appliances and other large items,
- *Fundraising* – posts regarding initiatives focused on seeking and gathering voluntary contributions (most of the times – financial),
- *Food products* – posts regarding food products (e.g. offering them),
- *Medical* – posts regarding medical equipment, and helping for the sick or medications,
- *Transport* – posts regarding the transport of a given person or item,
- *Advising* – posts regarding the need to receive advice on a specific issue,
- *Volunteering* – posts regarding the need or opportunity to become a volunteer,
- *Psychological support* – posts regarding both professional psychological support as well as support through conversation and spending time with another person,
- *Missing person* – posts regarding a missing person,
- *Job* – posts regarding job search,
- *Apartment* – posts regarding the search for an apartment for rent or purchase,
- *Domestic help* – posts regarding help at home, e.g. in the form of childcare or cleaning,

- *Walking the dog* – posts regarding walking the dogs,
- *COVID* – posts regarding COVID-19 (e.g. vaccinations),
- *Help for medics* – posts about supporting hospitals and health professionals.

The quantitative and qualitative analysis of the collected data allowed us to find the answer to the research questions posed in the study:

1. What are the main topics discussed in the *Visible Hand* groups, and how do they differ from the topics discussed during the first weeks of the pandemic in Poland?
2. What types of posts are published within the Visible Hand groups?
3. What do the local groups of the *Visible Hand* have in common, and how do they differ?
4. How are the interactions of the *Visible Hand* community members different depending on the types of posts and the topics covered in them?
5. How, and if so, do the groups of the *Visible Hand* still implement the ideas of civil society?

ANALYSIS OF THE CONTENT OF POSTS PUBLISHED WITHIN THE VISIBLE HAND GROUPS

The number of posts published in the analysed groups of the *Visible Hand* differed significantly. Among the 420 posts published in August 2021, almost half (191 posts) came from the *Visible Hand* group from Lublin. The following largest groups were groups from Warsaw (96 posts), Inowrocław (48 posts) and Starachowice (32 posts).

Figure 34. The number of posts in each group (n=420).
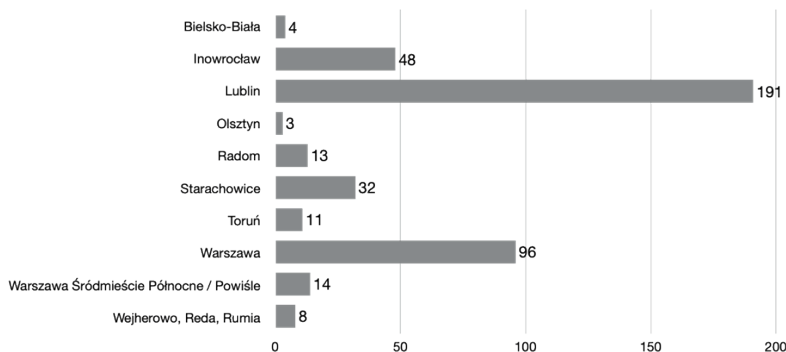
Source: Authors' own elaboration.

Only 53 posts were published in the remaining six groups (including Bielsko-Biała, Olsztyn, Radom and Toruń) 13% of all posts. One possible explanation for the above is the number of members of each group – the four groups with the most posts are among the six most numerous groups. An important exception to the above observation is the *Visible Hand – Radom* group, in which only 13 posts were published, even though it is the largest of the analysed groups – almost 30 thousand members.

Concerning the types of posts, the vast majority concerned reporting needs for help – either in relation to one's own needs (175 posts) or in relation to the needs of other people (97 posts). Posts of this type took the following form, for example:

> *Hello. I need a reference to a proven pediatric dentist, whom I will get to as soon as possible. It can be a private one that is accepted at the dental institute. Thank you very much*

Slightly fewer posts concerned the willingness to give something back (66 posts) or inform (56 posts). By far, the least number of posts was a *thank you* for something (11 posts).

Figure 35. The Types of Posts (n=405).

Source: Authors' own elaboration.
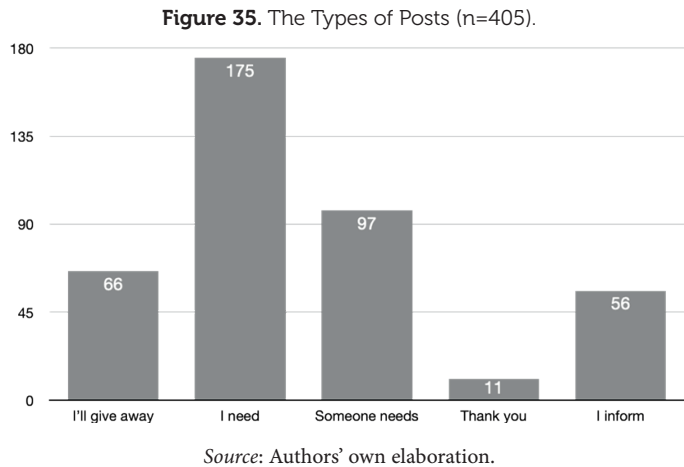
Thus, the nature of the *Visible Hand* groups still mainly concerns helping – reporting the needs for receiving aid, as well as the possibility of offering help – which has not changed since the inception of the initiative in March 2020.

Concerning the subject of published posts, there is also a significant variation in the frequency of raising specific topics. While the five most-discussed topics (categories: *Small things*, *Contact*, *Animals*, *Big things* and *Collection*) accounted for as many as 293 posts, the remaining posts (except for the *Other* category) were only 83 posts – so over 3 times less.

Figure 36. The Topics of Posts (n=376).

Source: Authors' own elaboration.
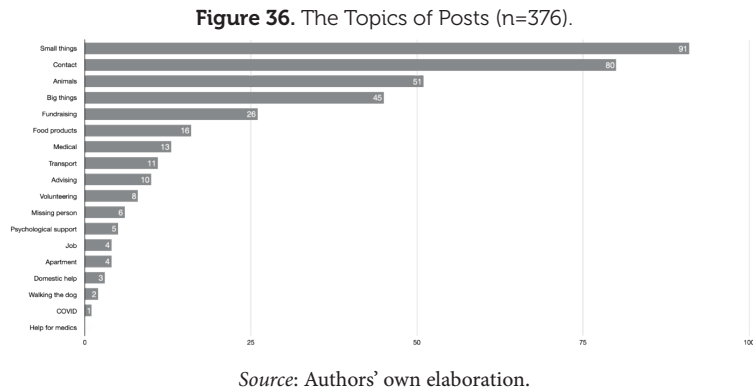
An exceptional example of a post concerning the most popular category – *Small things* – is a post from the Lublin group, which gained 54 likes, 61 comments and as many as 498 shares:

> *There is a poor person in Lublin who wants to sell these books*
> *because he has no bread. I promised to help.*
> *Maybe someone will be interested in something from this list and*
> *would like to buy?*
> *Then please let me know under the post or on priv.*
> *You live at LSM. I will be happy to give you the number on priv*

Despite the example above, most of the posts on reporting a need for help are shorter and similar to the following under the *Big Things* category:

> *For a single mother of 4 children, the refrigerator broke down. She*
> *cannot afford to buy a new one. Please help*

Characteristically, among the topics that are not the 5 most often discussed in the posts, three were discussed during the first phase of the pandemic (Dudziak, 2020; Chwat, 2021). The best evidence of the above observation is that among the analysed posts, only one concerned the topic of the COVID-19 pandemic, and none of them concerned the category of *Help for medics*.

Interesting observations concern comparing the number of interactions (likes, comments, shares) within individual posts with the types of posts and their topics.

Figure 37. The Number of Interactions within Posts Depending on Post Types
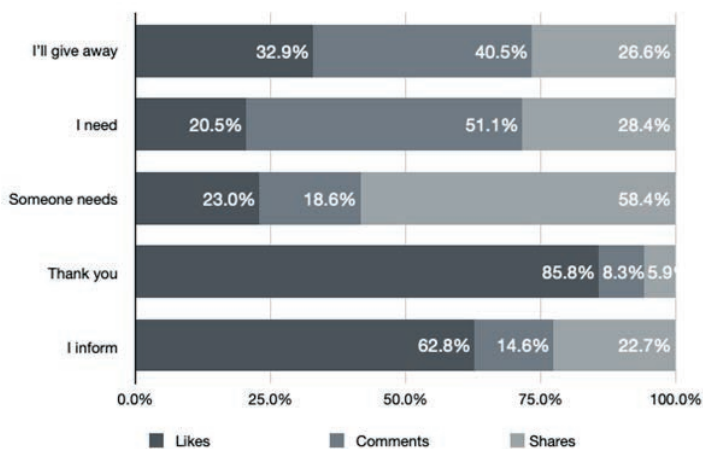
Source: Authors' own elaboration.

The summary of the number of interactions within posts, depending on their types, shows the different characteristics of these interactions. In terms of posts falling under the categories *Thank you* and *Inform*, by far the leading type of interaction likes the post. This can be explained by the fact that both types of posts most often do not require any specific additional action on the part of the group members.

A perfect example of the above is a post from a Lublin group, which won as many as 175 likes:

> *I would like to cordially greet the young lady, a dentist from the L. Clinic in Ponikwoda, who today, having a tiny patient in the chair, struck her memory, probably as part of killing stress, of a poem by Jan Brzechwa entitled* Frog.
> *I stood at the registration, heard and admired*

An essential type of posts by the *Visible Hand* community are posts describing the needs of people other than the author (*Someone needs*). They are characterized by many shares, while posts in which these needs are reported by the author himself as their own (*I need*)

are characterized by a high proportion of interaction in the form of comments. This may be because if you have identified a need with the post's author, it is easier to offer help directly in the form of a comment or ask some additional questions. An example of the latter is a post from the Lublin group, which, although very short, triggered a discussion of as many as 50 comments:

> *Wanted a good, empathic pediatrician, permanently, not for one visit*

With regard to posts of the *I'll give away* type, the predominant type of interaction is a comment, but it is not such a predominant type of interaction as in the case of the previously discussed types of posts.

There is also a significant differentiation in terms of the number of interactions within posts with the topic of posts. This analysis examined the 12 thematic categories of posts published most frequently.

The posts with the highest share of shares in particular concern categories such as *Animals*, *Volunteering* and *Missing person*. The explanation for the above may be that with regard to the two categories (*Animals*, *Missing person*), a key form of assistance may be to make the post available to your network of contacts, e.g. to help locate a missing person.

An example of this type of post is a post published within the Toruń group, shared 17 times, and starting with the following paragraph:

> *The search for our dad is still ongoing. Tomorrow is two weeks since my dad went on a bicycle trip that we will remember for the rest of our lives…*
> *At this point, we still ask for help in finding him*

Figure 38. The Number of Interactions within Posts
Depending on the Topic of the Post
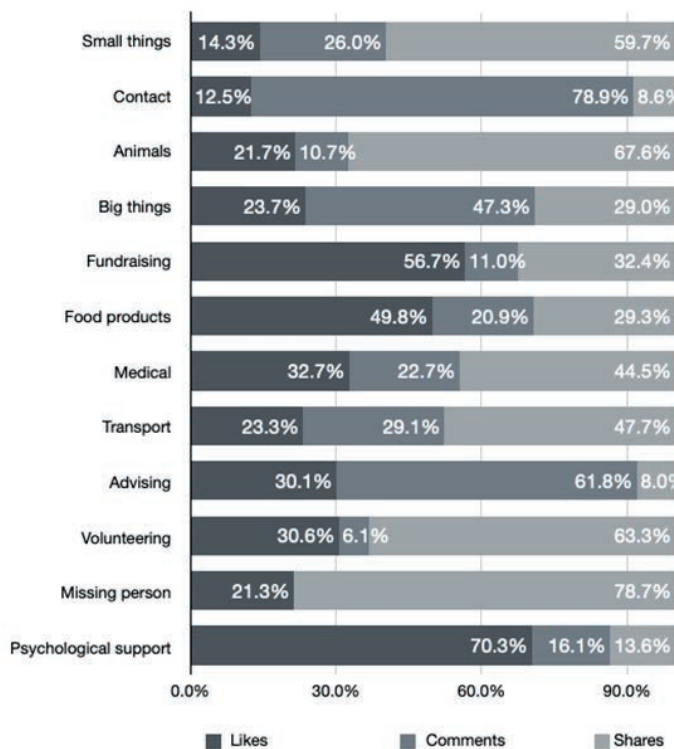
Source: Authors' own elaboration.

Posts with the highest share of interactions in the form of a comment concern in particular the categories *Contact* and *Advising*. In both of these cases, a good form of providing help may be to provide a direct answer (e.g. in the form of a comment) or to ask a possible additional question. This may justify the advantage of this type of interaction in relation to the indicated thematic categories of posts.

An example of a post with a request for advice is a simple post from a Warsaw group, commented 47 times:

> *Hello, I am looking for advice related to sleep, maybe a doctor*

On the other hand, posts concerning categories such as *Psychological support*, *Fundraising* and *Food articles* are characterized by the highest share of likes as the predominant type of interaction.

Importantly, only one post on the thematic category *Fundraising*, published in the group from Lublin, collected as many as 350 likes – which significantly affects the above observation in terms of the indicated thematic category. This post was not intended to encourage fundraisers, but rather to thank all of the people who helped by making a donation. The content of the post itself was short:

> *Thank you to everyone who contributed even a tiny brick*

The last analysis carried out on the collected data was a comparison of the scope of topics covered in individual groups of the *Visible Hand*. For this analysis, four groups with the highest number of published posts were selected, from the following cities: Inowrocław, Lublin, Starachowice and Warszawa (Warsaw).

The analysis showed some differentiation in the scope of the subjects covered by the research in individual groups. Within each group, the list of the two most popular topics (the leading topic and the second-placed topic) were different, which is presented in the following list of the number of posts in individual categories in selected groups.

Table 9. Comparison of the Topics Covered in the Most Active Groups (n = 246).

Group	Small things	Contact	Animals	Big things
Inowrocław	26	0	0	16
Lublin	26	51	39	8
Starachowice	0	6	9	2
Warszawa	30	16	2	15

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

An important additional observation confirming the diverse specificity of the topics of individual groups is that in the Inowrocław group no posts on the subject of *Contact* and *Animals* were published, and that only two posts on the subject *Animals* were published within the Warsaw group. At the same time in Lublin group almost 40 posts on the subject of *Animals* were published.

Despite the above observations, it is worth emphasizing that in each of the analysed groups, the most popular thematic categories of posts fell into one of the three most popular categories, i.e. *Small things*, *Contact* and *Animals*.

That said, the above observations indicate a certain differentiation within individual groups, in terms of the topics discussed, and at the same time reveal certain similarities in terms of the most popular topics.

SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

The situation at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic caused a sudden boom in aid initiatives that reached people in social isolation mainly through social media. The *Visible Hand* Initiative is an example of a grassroots aid initiative launched on Facebook, bearing the hallmarks of neighborliness, which flourished in the first weeks of the pandemic. Despite the passage of over a year and a half and the assimilation of the social changes taking place, a large part of the local groups of the *Visible Hand* did not suspend their activities, but changed their profile to one that takes into account the current needs of local communities.

Based on the presented results of the analysis, it is possible to refer to the research questions assumed in the work. The first key conclusion is that the most popular topics discussed within the *Visible Hand* groups are help in the form of donating / donating items (from clothes to furniture), help for animals and help in the form of sharing contact, e.g. to a specialist in a specific field. Thus, the topics

discussed within the *Visible Hand* groups are significantly different than those discussed during the first weeks of the pandemic (Dudziak, 2020; Chwat, 2021). This is evidenced by the fact that among the posts surveyed, only one directly concerned COVID-19, and none concerned helping hospitals or health care workers – while these topics were some of the most discussed topics at the beginning of the operation of the *Visible Hand* groups.

Another conclusion concerns the same types of posts published within the *Visible Hand* groups. Despite the fact that their subject matter is significantly different than before, still most of them concern helping – either indicating needs (your own or others), or confirming a readiness to help someone (e.g. being willing to give something back) or by thanking for the help received.

In terms of the differentiation of the *Visible Hand* groups, on the basis of the selected sample, it can be seen that individual groups differ from each other – both in terms of the number of posts (from just a few to nearly 200 posts per month) and their subject (some groups are dominated by the topic of helping by handing over things while in others – by handing over contacts or by helping animals.

Interesting conclusions also concern how group users interact with posts of various types and topics. In particular, the study showed that in terms of post types:

- Informing or thanking posts mainly collect interactions in the form of likes,
- Posts reporting the needs of other people bring interactions mainly in the form of shares,
- Posts of the nature of reporting your needs, in particular, cause interactions in the form of comments.

On the other hand, in terms of examining the impact of the topic of posts on the types of interactions, it can be determined on the basis of research that posts with the highest share of shares relate in particular to categories such as *Animals*, *Volunteering* and *Missing person*. The key thing is that with this type of post, the greater the reach of a given post is, the greater the chance of success – e.g. by finding

a missing person – and this could explain such a large amount of shares for this type of posts.

On the other hand, posts with the largest share of interactions in the form of a comment, in particular, concern the categories of *Contact* and *Advising* – which may result from the fact that in the case of these posts, the best form of support may be a comment and asking a question or simply advising or indicating appropriate contact.

The largest share of likes as the predominant type of interaction is characteristic of posts related to categories such as *Psychological support*, *Fundraising* and *Food products*.

The main conclusion of this work, combining the outlined theoretical part with the conclusions from the research, is the indication that the groups of the *Visible Hand* have evolved in terms of the subject matter, adapting to the surrounding reality and current social challenges. The formula of some of them has run out, as evidenced by the negligible number of posts published monthly.

Nevertheless, some of them, referring to the idea of neighborhood, actively work by promoting the sharing of things, sharing knowledge about proven services or facilities, and supporting broadly understood neighbors in difficult times. Such groups fulfill the idea of a civil society, because without waiting for institutional or family help, they animate the life of local communities, influencing the creation of a sense of neighbourliness, at least in its virtual dimension.

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CONSUMER TV HABITS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC: NEWSCASTS IN THE TIMES OF ISOLATION

ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated the importance of access to reliable and truthful information. In times of social isolation, television has become one of the main sources of information, which is confirmed, among other things, by the increase in the viewing time of news services. The analysis presented here is based on the analysis of the viewership of news services, as well as the analysis of the content of three news services in the first months of the pandemic in Poland – "Wydarzenia", "Wiadomości", "Fakty". The chapter also presents theories of media influence and the basic duties of a journalist in the context of journalistic ethics.

Keywords: Television, COVID-19, Journalistic Ethics, Newscast, Social Isolation

The informational function of the media is one of the basic ones on which the mass media rely for their activity. As experts emphasize today, the media presence has ceased to be their internal affair and has become a social problem. Journalism, especially information journalism, is treated as a social service that realizes the individual's right to truthful information (Michalski, 1998). And the importance of access to reliable and accurate information is particularly evident in crises when the media become one of our main sources of information. When entrusting the media with their attention, recipients expect the journalistic message to be truthful and additionally prepared following the principles of journalistic craftsmanship. This, however, is influenced by many factors – in addition to legal restrictions and obligations to one's employer – it can also be influenced by a sense of obligation to act in accordance with professional ethics. Reliable journalism today competes with other, mostly material values – for all information is a commodity that generates income.

TIMES OF ISOLATION

The breakdown of the COVID-19 pandemic in Poland can be placed somewhere in the middle of March 2020, when the first cases of SARS-CoV-2 infection were confirmed on Polish soil (*Pierwszy przypadek koronawirusa w Polsce – Ministerstwo Zdrowia – Portal Gov.pl*, 2020). In 2020, the Polish government imposed a number of restrictions to minimize the spread of the coronavirus, infections caused by it, and in the aftermath deaths. These restrictive measures led towards two strict lockdowns – one at the outbreak of the pandemic in spring and the second one during autumn and winter. Throughout the year and lockdowns, citizens' freedom of movement was fairly limited to handling everyday duties such as grocery shopping or work-related duties which could not be performed from homes. The sudden

closure of millions of citizens in their homes had several side effects both from an economic and social perspective. On the intersection of these two perspectives lays the Polish television market.

Table 10. Average Time Spent on Watching TV Daily

Year	Average time spent on watching TV daily*
2015	04:23:32
2016	04:21:45
2017	04:18:32
2018	04:17:08
2019	04:16:04
2020	04:20:58

Source: MK. (2021, January 7). *W 2020 roku wzrósł czas oglądania telewizji o 5 minut. Wydatki reklamowe spadły o 3 proc.* Wirtualnemedia.pl. https://www.wirtualnemedia.pl/artykul/ogladalnosc-telewizji-2020-rok-najpopularniejsze-stacje-programy-reklama. *in the format HH:mm:ss.

The first year of the COVID-19 pandemic had a remarkable effect on the Polish television market. First and foremost, it reversed the trend of lessening the average time spent in front of the TV observed before for three consecutive years (MK, 2021a). The average Pole in 2020 watched television for 4 hours 20 minutes and 58 seconds daily. Comparing it to the previous year, the jumps seem quite meaningful, exactly 4 minutes and 54 seconds more than in 2019. The data is all the more interesting because the almost five-minute increase in viewership recorded is the highest in seven years. It turns out that between 2014 and 2019 the increases, but also the decreases in the viewership were much slower. Market experts most often explain the aforementioned increase by one, but very important factor – the outbreak of the pandemic (MK, 2021a; Kurdupski, 2020). Faced with the lack or limitation of social contacts, millions of Poles were looking for a space that would offer them at least a substitute for social interactions, as well as satisfy their need for information, all the more increased by the appearance of a factor significantly disrupting their

existing lives. As the presented market data shows, for many people, the solution to these needs turned out to be precisely the space offered by television (Pankowski, 2020, p. 1).

At this point it is worth referring to media studies theories – studies show that for isolated people, television can serve as a window that presents the outside world within its frames, i.e., according to the accepted convention that the viewers are not always aware of (Bogunia-Borowska, 2012), especially in the case of people who cannot verify the information provided individually. Media content is polysemic – that means viewers can interpret it in various ways.

In this context, the framing theory created by R. Entman is also particularly important. The so-called framing selects and highlights particular aspects or issues and links them to promote a specific interpretation, evaluation, or solution (Entman, 1993). It can be assumed that a frame is a kind of narrative scheme to guide the understanding of the recipient of a message. The framework is based on the concept of the theory of perspective, according to which small changes in the formulation of descriptions of a situation may affect its interpretation (Scheufele, 2000).

In the context of the influence evoked by media, the agenda-setting theory of Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw is also relevant, according to which media have a considerable impact on directing the public's attention to issues that they believe to be important, and by addressing a given topic in the media, the recipient is convinced of its importance (Goban-Klas, 2004). Moreover, most research on the effects of media does not take into account the subtlety of meanings, the polysemy of media messages (i.e. the possibility of several interpretations), the viewer's unique personality and identity, and the social and cultural context in which the relation between the media text and the viewer occurs.

The influence of the media begins primarily in the sphere of cognitive and emotional processes that can influence motivational processes and direct human behavior. Thus, the effects of media influence, due to its impact on attitudes, can be divided into those

that strengthen attitudes (perpetuating beliefs), modify attitudes (crystallizing or making slight changes in them), and those that change attitudes entirely (Mrozowski, 2001).

Progressive mediatization makes reality invisibly intertwined with its media constructions (Bogunia-Borowska, 2011), creating the so-called "hyper-reality". The images built in the viewers' minds are deprived of their strong roots in reality and, thus, in truth, which creates room for various types of abuse. The crisis related to the observance of journalistic ethics is noticeable in the media today, which is confirmed by the interventions of such entities as the Media Ethics Council, the Ombudsman, and the Helsinki Foundation of Human Rights (concerning, among other things, biased media messages, resulting from solid polarization or the use of hate speech).

The impact of media in situations of isolation may be stronger, as a result of limited information verification and limited interpersonal contact.

TELEVISION AS A SOURCE

The main achievement of television is its ability to present remote events. It does not matter where we watch television, because we are watching something that is happening somewhere else and, through technology, becomes close to us (Williams, 1975). We are dealing with a mediated experience and the intrusion of distant events into the sphere of the viewer's everyday experiences (Giddens, 2002). This is well illustrated by Bauman: "All of us (…) inhabitants of the 'global telecity' are (…) witnesses of the injustices happening to people in even the most distant corners of the world" (Bauman, 2003). For this reason, among others, television was chosen as the subject of this study, which, following McLuhan, is treated as an activating medium requiring involvement and participation.

Further data strengthens the conviction, that the COVID-19 pandemic has had an unprecedented influence on the Polish TV market.

Table 11. Viewing of News Channels

News channel	2019 – % of market share	2020 – % of market share	Change in %
TVN24	4.466%	5.358%	19.97%
TVP Info	3.645%	4.820%	32.24%
Polsat News	1.129%	2.032%	79.98%
TVP3	1.016%	1.098%	8.07%
TVN24 BiS	0.391%	0.494%	26.34%
Polsat News 2	0.089%	0.103%	15.73%
Superstacja	0.123%	0.051%	-58.54%
TV Republika	0.028%	0.050%	78.57%
Telewizja WPOLSCE.PL	0.004%	0.010%	150.00%
BIZNES24	0.000%	0.004%	-

Source: Kurdupski, M. (2021, January 11). *Oglądalność kanałów informacyjnych w 2020 roku wzrosła o 29 proc., TVN24 liderem*. Wirtualnemedia.pl. https://www.wirtualnemedia.pl/artykul/ ogladalnosc-kanaly-informacyjne-2020-rok-lider-tvn24-opinie-historia-powstania-kiedy.

The growing need for daily updates on the current situation in the country, but also around the world as the COVID-19 pandemic quickly turned out to be a global challenge, resulted in higher interest among the Polish audience in both news channels and news programs. Comparing the market shares of Polish news stations, namely TVN24, TVP Info, Polsat News, TVP3, TVN24 BiS, Polsat News 2, Superstacja, TV Republika, Telewizja WPOLSCE.PL and BIZNES24 on a year-to-year basis, it is worth noting at the outset that the combined market share of all stations increased in 2020 by almost 29 percent compared to 2019 (Kurdupski, 2021). Confirmation of Poles' greater interest in information in the first pandemic year is also provided by the fact that almost all of the mentioned stations noted audience growth. Only TV Republika registered a rather significant drop. Moreover, of the channels mentioned, only TVP3 improved its share by less than 10 percent. The remaining stations recorded market share and thus increased viewer interest in the content presented on these channels at the level of several dozen percent upwards relative to 2019.

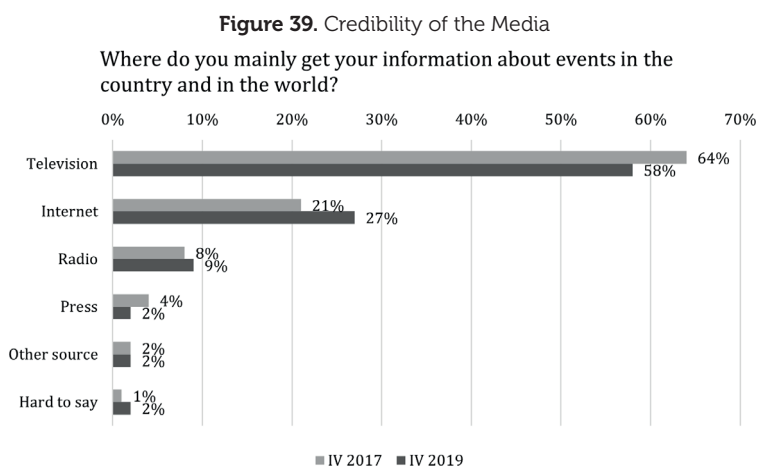**Table 12**. Viewing of News Channels – 2019 and 2020.

Newscasts	TV station	2019		2020		Dynamic in % of average number of viewers
		Average number of viewers	% of market share	Average number of viewers	% of market share	
Fakty	TVN	2 673 934	21.12%	2 675 356	21.16%	0.05%
	TVN24 BiS	245 991	1.94%	318 085	2.52%	29.31%
Wiadomości	TVP1	2 114 643	15.68%	2 204 367	16.50%	4.24%
	TVP Info	541 137	4.03%	725 082	5.44%	33.99%
Teleexpress	TVP1	1 956 057	20.32%	1 988 969	20.13%	1.68%
	TVP Info	538 754	5.60%	769 164	7.80%	42.77%
Wydarzenia	Polsat	1 913 854	15.49%	1 711 976	13.98%	-10.55%
	Polsat News	163 632	1.33%	297 475	2.43%	81.80%
Panorama	TVP2	1 076 719	9.95%	1 114 278	10.30%	3.49%
	TVP Info	397 974	3.69%	547 072	5.07%	37.46%

Source: MK. (2021, January 9). *„Fakty" wygrały z „Wiadomościami" w 2020 roku. „Wydarzenia" straciły widzów.* Wirtualnemedia.pl. https://www.wirtualnemedia.pl/artykul/ogladalnosc-programy-informacyjne-2020-rok-fakty-liderem-opinie.

What is more, comparing the same period among the most popular newscasts in Poland, i.e. TVN's "Fakty", TVP1's "Wiadomości", TVP1's "Teleexpress", Polsat's "Wydarzenia" and TVP2's "Panorama", it turns out that also in this dimension there was an increased interest among viewers (MK, 2021b). The average viewership of the leader of the list in 2020, i.e. "Fakty" TVN drew 2.68 million viewers. "Wiadomości" was watched by an average of 2.2 million people, "Teleexpress" 1.99 million, "Wydarzenia" 1.7 million, and "Panorama" 1.1 million. Thus, almost each of the newscasts recorded an increase compared to the previous year except for Polsat's "Wydarzenia", which recorded a 10 percent decrease in market viewership share compared to 2019. Interestingly, the biggest increases in the viewership of newscasts were recorded not on the main channels of the stations broadcasting these programs, but on news channels such as TVN BiS, TVP Info, and Polsat News. In the case of these channels, viewership of newscasts increased by several dozen percent. This in turn confirms

the data cited above in terms of increased interest in news channels as such, and also reinforces and confirms the greater need of Poles for information in the COVID-19 pandemic situation.

The coronavirus pandemic has therefore shown how important the media are in contemporary social life. The growing need for information, and therefore media demand among Poles reflected the need to maintain social ties (Pankowski, 2020, p. 1), which were particularly difficult to sustain by the imposed restrictions including various limits, health and safety measures, or restrictions on movement. It seems, however, that stating the fact of increasing market shares and viewership of individual TV channels and programs reflects only one side of an issue as complex as the transformation of news television caused by the SARS-CoV-2 Pandemic. The other aspect is the trust and credibility that viewers have in individual TV broadcasters and the related evaluation of their activities.

Figure 39. Credibility of the Media

Where do you mainly get your information about events in the country and in the world?

■ IV 2017   ■ IV 2019

Source: Omyła-Rudzka, M. Feliksiak, M. (2019, May). *Wiarygodność mediów* (Report No. 70/2019). Centrum Badań Opinii Społecznej. https://cbos.pl/SPISKOM.POL/2019/K_070_19.PDF.

According to the 2019 CBOS survey "Media Credibility", television remains the most important source of information about national and world events for a large part of the public. Admittedly, compared to 2017, a downward trend in the dominance of television in this

respect can be observed, mainly in favour of the internet. However, even in 2019, 58 percent of the respondents chose television as the first choice when looking for information (Omyła-Rudzka, Feliksiak, 2019, p. 1). Given the fact that the market share has increased in 2020, one can speculate whether this share could now be higher than that one recorded in 2019.

Table 13. Evaluations of Media Activities.

TV station	2019		2020		2021	
	% of positive grades	% of negative grades	% of positive grades	% of negative grades	% of positive grades	% of negative grades
Polsat	71%	10%	70%	10%	68%	10%
TVN	63%	20%	57%	23%	55%	23%
TVP	56%	32%	48%	38%	40%	44%

Source: Feliksiak, M. (2019, September). *Oceny działalności instytucji publicznych i mediów* (Report No. 118/2019). Centrum Badań Opinii Społecznej. https://www.cbos.pl/SPISKOM.POL/2019/K_118_19.PDF; Pankowski, K. (2020, November). *Opinie o stacjach telewizyjnych i radiowych* (Report No. 147/2020). Centrum Badań Opinii Społecznej. https://www.cbos.pl/SPISKOM.POL/2020/K_147_20.PDF; Pankowski, K. (2021, May). *Opinie o stacjach telewizyjnych i radiowych w kwietniu* (Report No. 55/2021). Centrum Badań Opinii Społecznej. https://www.cbos.pl/SPISKOM.POL/2021/K_055_21.PDF.

Taking 2019 as a point of comparison against data from the pandemic period, it is worth highlighting the rating that Poles gave to the three largest TV stations at that time. For it turns out that in 2019, Polsat's performance was rated as the best by Poles, with as many as 71 percent of respondents commenting positively on it and only 10 percent negatively (Feliksiak, 2019: 20). TVN, on the other hand, in the same survey was viewed positively by 63 percent of respondents and negatively by 20 percent. The most ambivalent sentiment was towards TVP, which received 56 percent positive ratings and 32 percent negative (Feliksiak, 2019, p. 20). In the third quarter of 2020, the Centre for Public Opinion Research (CBOS) conducted a similar survey, and while opinions about Polsat remained largely unchanged among respondents, the social assessment of the other two broadcasters changed. In the first pandemic year, TVN received

57 percent of positive opinions, a drop of 6 percentage points. At the same time, 23 percent of respondents were critical towards the broadcaster, an increase of 3 percentage points. TVP, on the other hand, received less than half of the positive ratings – 48 percent – and experienced a year-to-year fall of 8 percentage points. Critical opinions, on the other hand, increased quite strongly and accounted for 38 percent of the votes, increasing by 6 percentage points (Pankowski, 2020, p. 1).

Interestingly, when this information is juxtaposed with data from the next round of the survey conducted in the second quarter of 2021, a clear trend of decreasing positive ratings becomes apparent for both Polish public television and TVN, while opinions towards Polsat stagnated. In April 2021, according to the CBOS survey, TVN recorded its worst-ever result with 55 percent of positive votes and 23 negatives. Criticism of TVP's performance was even more criticised, with the public broadcaster receiving only 40 percent positive ratings against as many as 44 percent critical. Also for this broadcaster, this is historically the worst result of a decline in approval and an increase in criticism of its activities (Pankowski, 2021, p. 1).

Comparing the two sets of data analysed above, one can see that the COVID-19 Pandemic has significantly affected the current shape of the TV market in Poland. On the one hand, television broadcasters, including in particular owned newscasts and news channels, have significantly gained in popularity, to the extent that they were able to reverse the negative trend of decreasing time spent watching television for the first time in three years. On the other hand, increased consumption and a number of social determinants directly linked to the fight against and spread of the COVID-19 Pandemic were not reflected in increased confidence in the media content watched and, therefore, in the activity carried out by the key TV broadcasters in Poland. On the contrary, when compared to the situation in 2019, when TV viewing was lower, trust and positive evaluation of broadcasters' activities in 2020–2021 consistently decreased with a simultaneous increase in critical voices.

This suggests that although Poles watched more television, thanks to which they could stay informed about the current situation in the country and the world, and substitute their social contacts, they were much more critical of it. This criticism was particularly noticeable in the context of TVN and TVP, which recorded their worst historical results. Such a situation in the face of an epidemic state may indicate the violation of contested and universally acknowledged foundations of social life, that is the growing crisis of trust towards media institutions. Alongside the crisis of trust can follow the threat of cessation of media social functions such as being a watchdog and a pluralistic agora for the exchange of thoughts and ideas functioning in a given society.

It is worth mentioning at this point that the results of a study conducted by OFcom (2021) implicated that three in ten people (28%) said they had come across claims about the coronavirus, which could be considered false or misleading in the last week. The most common shares seen by respondents, from the prompted list, were: 'face masks/coverings offer no protection or are harmful' (seen by 23% of respondents); 'the number of deaths linked to coronavirus is much lower in reality than is being reported (21%); 'the coronavirus vaccine may reduce fertility (18%); and 'the coronavirus vaccine is a cover for a plan to implant trackable microchips into people' (17%).

JOURNALISM ETHICS VS THE PANDEMIC

As noted more than once above, journalistic ethics are especially important when the media is the primary source of information. The obligation of particular fairness requires journalists to exercise caution and professional judgment in evaluating the sources of information they use and to take care to verify them.

It is unacceptable for journalists to use unspecified sources or to duplicate information that has already been published without first checking its authenticity. Reliability may also be defined as acting

to present an objective, comprehensive picture of the facts – bias and revealing one's attitude toward a topic are considered illegal under the press law. Any bias in the discourse, whether intentional or accidental, is treated as a lack of objectivity. An important element of journalistic integrity is also informing the audience of gaps in information, the method used to establish facts, and the author's doubts. It should be remembered that the obligation to seek the truth does not make publication of the material contingent on finding it – because in practice this is not always possible.

From the perspective of the above discussion, it is worth looking at the content of news services during the COVID-19 pandemic – especially in its first months, i.e. March-June 2020. How the media presented the situation in Poland and around the world, and how they communicated information about further restrictions, may have had a direct impact on Poles' understanding of the pandemic. The analysis provided answers to two main research questions: in what context were health topics presented? what are the differences in presenting these issues between the news services? The analysis covered materials of three news services – "Wiadomości" TVP1, "Wydarzenia" Polsat, "Fakty" TVN from March 30 – June 30, 2020.

The analysis showed that content related to COVID-19, is presented in news outlets in connection with other topics – there is little material that focuses strictly on health topics. We can distinguish the following categories:

- Health-Policy – the pandemic situation is presented from the perspective of the actions of the ruling party, in particular concerning the introduced restrictions (e.g. "Sukces w walce z pandemią", "Musimy obronić demokrację w czasach zarazy", "10 dzień zwłoki senatu naraża Polaków");
- Health-Society – public reaction to restrictions, protests, and strikes, public discontent, fear of more cases of coronavirus (e.g. "Demonstracja mimo pandemii");

- Health-Economy – the materials in this category dealt mainly with the situation of entrepreneurs in connection with the introduced restrictions and economic government programs (e.g. "Polskie firmy rosną w siłę", "Spór o tarczę");
- Health-Sport – materials related to the closure of sports facilities and banning of sports events (e.g. "Wracamy do sportu", "Powrót na murawę");
- Health-Media – materials characteristic for public television, which presented its program offer in the news service ("Zostań w domu z Telewizją Polską", "Uczniowie lubią szkołę z TVP", "Muzyka w domu lekarstwem dla duszy", "Specjalna oferta TVP w czasie epidemii").

It is also worth noting that there have been dedicated programs for pandemic topics – e.g. "Koronawirus. Poradnik", "Uwaga! Koronawirus", which was fully dedicated to the topic of coronavirus. These programs were mostly health-related, with experts answering questions about, for example, the possibility of infection, symptoms, and the progression of the disease. Often there were also legal topics, such as the employment relationship during illness.

SUMMARY

The realization of the information function of the media is one of the key elements in the functioning of media companies. From this perspective, information is considered a commercial product that is sold in the most attractive form possible. The phenomenon of transforming information programs called infotainment is becoming more and more common – these changes concern not only the typological conditions of the programs but also how the narration is carried out. Stuart Allan (2006), an English media expert, believes that there are common features between news and entertainment nowadays – visual pleasure and the power of attraction are important, therefore a journalist has to consider them while creating

a news item. Crossing the border of "entertainment" is a significant problem, both from the perspective of the recipient of the message, as well as the authors of materials. On the other hand, experts warn that such actions may discourage more and more "sophisticated" viewers of news, who expect professional journalism.

Television, and news channels, in particular, give viewers a sense of "ontological security" that is lacking in everyday life. The reality presented on the screen is orderly and predictable. The weekday schedule repeats itself rhythmically every day, and the following days of the week have their recognizable, fixed elements, which concern mainly the evening programs. This way the viewers know what to expect on Monday, what to expect on Wednesday, and what to expect at the weekend. In addition, the schedule of TV programs is subordinated to seasons of the year, school seasons, or the rhythm of major holidays. Of course, there are situations – such as the COVID-19 pandemic – when the rigid rules of organizing the schedule need to be modified. However, the changes introduced are usually based on formats that are familiar to viewers.

The analysis of the viewing figures for news services and the content of individual programs shows that television was one of the main sources of information for many Poles during the pandemic. Social isolation weakened the personal contacts that could be replaced by television. The news services presented materials on the situation in Poland and the world, with particular emphasis on health issues. As it was shown, health was a category accompanying the presented information, and the dominant category was politics. Importantly, depending on the TV station, the message about government actions was presented in a different narrative frame (as success or failure). Thus, the context of the presentation of health topics depended on the news service chosen. It is important to note other accompanying categories such as economy, society, sports, or media.

It is also worth noting that the demand for information resulted in the extension of the time of public television news services. The presented TV materials rarely explained the introduced restrictions or legal regulations, this is what the public programs and dedicated broadcasts were devoted to.

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