

Studies by the faculty members of the ELTE
Department of Media and Communication

DISCURSIVE FRAGMENTS

MEDIA, POWER, AND COMMON SPACES

Edited by Gábor Polyák

Budapest
2026

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Greetings to the readers

A department is not merely an “organisational unit” of teachers who teach in the same degree programmes. It is not merely a collection of shared offices. Fortunately, it is not just an endless stream of administrative tasks. A department is a professional community. This is true, even or especially, when the departments of the faculties of humanities are much more diverse than those in other fields of science, in terms of qualifications, research areas, and networks of colleagues.

The Department of Media and Communication at the Institute of Art Theory and Media Research, Faculty of Humanities, Eötvös Loránd University, is one such diverse community. It is a cavalcade of literary scholars, linguists, philosophers, aestheticians, sociologists, lawyers, and communication experts. But we are all passionately committed to understanding the phenomena of human communication and social discourse. And what we understand, we write about, talk about, and teach about.

The Department of Media and Communication at ELTE is an island of freedom of thought and speech, of criticism and acceptance. It is a safe space, not because difficult topics and heated debates are excluded, but precisely because there is room for them here. No one feels that they cannot speak up, that their opinion is worth less than that of others, but neither do they feel that they can hide behind clichés in a debate. The department has an enormous responsibility in indirectly shaping the public sphere in the coming years and decades. Our students have a good chance of becoming key players in the journalism and communications industries.

Programmes in communication and media studies were launched at Eötvös Loránd University in 1992 within the Department of Aesthetics. In the first half of the 1990s, organisational independence was also established. In 2006, the Institute of Art Theory and Media Research was founded, with three departments: the Department of Aesthetics, the Department of Film, and the Department of Media and Communication. The founder and first head of the Department of Media and Communication was Péter György, followed by Anna Gács (2010) and András Müllner (2010–2015), from whom Ferenc Hammer took over as department head. Since September 2021, and expected to continue until September 2026, the author of these lines, Gábor Polyák, has been heading the department.

The department offers a bachelor's degree program in communication and media studies in Hungarian, as well as a master's degree program in communication and media studies in Hungarian and English. We teach approximately 500 students in these programs. In addition, we also teach students in the liberal arts bachelor's program, the communication and media studies minor program, and the media, film, and communication teacher training program. The number of students applying to our department is growing each year, but the number admitted fluctuates due to external factors.

In the bachelor's program, students can choose from journalism, media research, media design, participatory media culture, and radio/podcast specialisations. Starting in the fall of 2026, this offering will be expanded to include a specialisation in strategic communication. Master's students can specialise in communication and media studies or in digital business communication.

The PhD program in Film, Media, and Cultural Studies is part of the Doctoral School of Philosophy and offers a wide range of doctoral research opportunities.

The department cannot thank the external lecturers enough for enriching the course offerings with 50–60 courses each semester. Most of the lecturers are professionals with many years of experience in journalism, business communication, organisational development and other communication industries. Their knowledge and network of contacts are also essential to our students' success.

International relations are of utmost importance to the department. Erasmus partnerships provide indispensable opportunities for both teachers and students to gain experience. We have more than 35 Erasmus partnerships within Europe, supplemented by a few agreements outside Europe. ELTE is one of the few Hungarian universities that has not been excluded by the EU from European education and research cooperation. At the same time, both the department and the faculty need to strengthen their ability to obtain research funding.

The aim of this volume is to provide a snapshot of the topics the department's lecturers have been working on over the past few years. From prison radio to images of war, from political sectarianism to participatory action research, from climate crisis denial to the regulation of disinformation, from critical data studies to criminal law populism, readers will encounter a wide range of topics.

Dear Partners, Colleagues, and Students! On behalf of the ELTE Department of Media and Communication, I hope you find your time with us useful and enjoyable, and that you discover opportunities here that make you want to come back!

Budapest, 1 March 2026

Prof. Gábor Polyák

Media and penal populism: A Hungarian case¹

BÁLINT BARKI²

Abstract

This paper is to explore the role of the media in the rise of penal populism. First, it delineates the concepts of criminal and of penal policies and situates penal populism in this context. Then it addresses the relationship between penal populism and media and outlines the social causes that may contribute to the rise of penal populism. Finally, it offers a description of two early penal populist moves in Hungary, with a focus on the reasons for their introduction and on their media coverage. Penal populism is a form of criminal policy whereby professional considerations are subordinated to political ones aimed at vote maximalisation – but ignoring the potential societal consequences.

Introduction

Before examining the relationship between punitive populism and the media, it is worthwhile to define the role of punitive populism within the

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- 1 The article was originally published in the spring 2024 issue of *Médiakutató* (Vol. XXV, No. 1).
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legal system and to illustrate how criminal policy relates to criminal justice policy.

Before the 1990s, criminal policy was primarily a concept that summarized strategies developed within the criminal justice system, with two distinct components: criminal legislation and criminal law enforcement. Within the latter, the execution of sentences was given a role. Then, in the 1990s, “crime prevention, crime prevention policy and, as a new element of the system, initially incorporated criminal policy as well” (Pallagi, 2014b, p. 25). In this context – where criminal policy appeared not as social policy but as crime prevention policy – the task of criminal policy became the development of response methods to crimes that had already been committed (Pallagi, 2014b). Later, by the end of the decade, the view that criminal policy belonged to the social sciences became dominant in Europe; crime prevention, opportunities for the reintegration of offenders also became part of the concept (Pallagi, 2014b). In Hungary, the process described above took place at the legislative level in 2003 with the adoption of Parliament Resolution 115/2003 (X.28.) on the national strategy for social crime prevention. The resolution recognized crime prevention as a social policy, which was linked to criminal justice but went beyond its scope to set the goal of reducing the number of crimes (Pallagi, 2014b). As a result of this strategy, criminal policy became part of social policy, thus encompassing both judicial and non-judicial tasks in the fight against crime. Following this transformation, three main tasks can be distinguished within criminal policy:

- criminal justice policy, which summarizes responses to crimes that have already been committed,
- victim policy, which “designates tasks related to mitigating the disadvantages caused by crime” (Pallagi, 2014b, p. 28), and
- crime prevention policy, which includes strategies to reduce crime (Pallagi, 2014b).

Criminal policy deals with the criminal policy outlined above, or more precisely, criminal justice policy, and within that, issues of criminal substantive law. Criminal policy answers the question of what behaviors society or the political elite deem punishable and how (Pallagi, 2014b). Criminal policy was initially based on professional considerations, roughly until the 1980s, and the most essential principles and specific objectives

were generally accepted by the various political parties. After the 1980s, however, social phenomena such as terrorism and the spread of drugs came to the attention of the general public, posing new challenges for lawmakers. As a result, the scope of criminal law gradually began to expand, criminal law began to lose its *ultima ratio* character, and the constitutional limits of criminal law became increasingly relaxed. In the words of Miklós Lévy (2020, p. 1): “Instead of professional considerations, ‘voter-oriented’ approaches based on fear of crime came to the fore.”

The media as an influencing factor

The impact of the media on criminal policy is influenced by the efforts of media actors to continually expand their audience, which results in the over-representation of news stories depicting violent crimes, thereby distorting society’s perception of crime (Sacco, 1995). The public can easily conclude that the number of violent crimes is on the rise, which may seem to call for harsher penalties. Ferenc Nagy (2001, p. 3) also refers to this problem when he writes:

Politicians and the media should stop trying to tighten up legislation and sentencing as a quick fix, hammering this message into the public consciousness, which has been going on in our country for half a century.

The process described above is supported by research published by Vincent F. Sacco in 1995 during a period of change in criminal policy in the United States. Sacco found that the crime map presented by the media differs significantly from the actual data. This is most evident in the ratio of violent to non-violent crimes. According to statistical data, the vast majority of crimes are non-violent; however, the opposite is often portrayed in the media. Another problem is that the press usually specifically seeks out cases in which the perpetrator or victim has an atypical characteristic. It is also common for the age of perpetrators and victims presented in the media to appear much lower than what crime statistics show. This image is further exacerbated by the fact that the media generally does not show the links between becoming a criminal and social status, especially in the case of minority groups (Sacco, 1995).

The appeal of criminal topics can be attributed to the fact that criminal cases often possess a theatrical value. The personal lives of the victim and the perpetrator, or the nature of their relationship, can make the presentation of a crime fascinating. This dramatic value is enhanced if a celebrity is involved in the case or if the crime has fierce features. Technological advances have also increased interest in crime. In the 1990s, with the widespread adoption of satellite television, crime reports focusing on individual cases gained popularity, and growing competition put constant pressure on content producers to present increasingly violent and unusual crimes. This pressure was intensified by the spread of home video, which allowed viewers to witness various crimes and even suicides firsthand (Sacco, 1995).

These processes had a significant impact on society's perception of crime, and this could not go unanswered by the political class. The decline in confidence in public safety presented new challenges for decision-makers, who often responded to social pressure with simplistic solutions based on penal populism.

The social environment for the emergence of penal populism

The complexity of the concept of punitive populism is demonstrated by the fact that its definition is not uniform, even though certain elements recur regularly in the literature. Punitive populism first appeared in the United States in the 1980s. This was due to the crisis of the welfare state and criminal justice policy that began in the 1970s, as a result of which crime spread beyond the boundaries of the ghettos and the deterioration of public safety became noticeable to the majority of society (Gönczöl, 2014). In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Western democracies underwent profound social changes that caused concern and uncertainty among members of society. Tolerant behavior and thinking were replaced by the image of an enemy threatening the security of the community. The power of the state in this regard appeared to be clearly declining, meaning that its ability to integrate society was diminishing, and it lost the appearance of being able to maintain social order.

At the same time, the state still had its bureaucratic power and its demand for punishment. In the words of Zoltán Fleck (2014, p. 151):

The political state is strong enough to prevent vigilante justice and the loss of its monopoly on the use of force, but not strong enough to resist the temptation to promote the idea of social order in a way that will win popularity, or more precisely, to satisfy intolerant social demands.

This led to the emergence of new criminal policy movements, such as the victim-centered approach to criminal policy, and during this period, cost-benefit analysis found its way into criminal policy. With the deterioration of public safety, neoconservative voices also grew louder, seeing the deterrent power of punishment as the main solution. These movements led to the emergence of a new, punishment-centered criminal policy (Gönczöl, 2014).

Although the social uncertainty that increasingly undermined trust in the state began in the 1970s, punitive populism only gained ground in the 1990s, when a political attitude emerged that yielded to public pressure on certain criminal policy issues. In the period before the turn of the millennium, the concept of security became increasingly important, along with a decline in crime rates in most Western European countries. The reason for this, beyond the distorted perception of crime fueled by the media, is likely to be found in the global changes that began to cause significant existential uncertainty. Individual states increasingly turned their attention to global challenges, pushing local social tasks into the background. In order to defuse the resulting social tensions, the political elite, with the support of the media, brought the concept of public safety to the forefront. In an increasingly uncertain world, the current political elite ultimately promised to restore “order”, which became a means of punitive populism supported by public opinion (Gönczöl, 2014).

The concept of penal populism

The concept of punitive populism has been interpreted in various ways. In his article on vote-maximizing criminal policy, Miklós Lévy (2020, p. 165) quotes Tim Newburn, who argues that the concept refers to the increasing politicization of crime control, one of the main elements of which is that politicians are increasingly inclined to “bow to public opinion (or certain manifestations of public opinion) when making criminal policy decisions.” According to Katalin Gönczöl (2013), we can speak of criminal

populism when the political elite offers spectacular, quick, and seemingly simple solutions to complex social problems, with particular regard to behavior that is dangerous to oneself and others. She quotes David Garland, who argues that criminal populism often arises from emotionally charged responses to high-profile and rare crimes, such as terrorism and violent crimes committed with particular cruelty, which result in lasting political processes.

A common element of the various approaches is that legislation almost always refers to certain social pressures that demand “order”. This social pressure is fueled by the media, which distorts society’s perception of crime, and is also conveyed to the political elite, which yields to the pressure purely for the sake of winning votes and turns to punitive populism, regardless of the consequences (Gönczöl, 2013).

Penal populism and public opinion

As I mentioned earlier, the rise of punitive populism coincided with a period in the United States when crime rates were declining or stagnating in most Western democracies.

The question arises as to why the political elite believed at that time that punitive populist measures would increase their popularity. The answer probably lies in people’s declining sense of security, but this decline was not due to crime. Rather, it was caused by the loss of jobs that were believed to be stable, increasing migration, and changes in the familiar, traditional way of life. The political elite has reinforced this sense of insecurity, using the media to misinform the public. This situation has made public opinion receptive to simplistic proposals offering quick and effective solutions, such as punitive populism (Gönczöl, 2013).

The prominent role of the media is also emphasized in the research of Zsolt Boda, Gabriella Szabó, Attila Bartha, and Gergő Medve-Bálint (2014). In this study, the authors highlight that the media bears a serious responsibility in shaping public opinion about crime and the justice system. By presenting a distorted picture, the media can easily undermine public confidence in law enforcement agencies. However, it is also important to note that media representation of crime alone does not lead to punitive populism. In addition to media activity, the emergence of punitive populism also requires some form of social support, which may be linked to the political elite, but may also be linked to expert groups or civil society organizations.

These movements often respond to real social problems and correctly identify crime-related issues, but often reach erroneous conclusions when it comes to proposing solutions, thus presenting the public with punitive populism's seemingly logical phrases promising easy solutions – an important element of which is the belief in the deterrent power of punishment (Boda et al. 2014).

One of the main reasons for the popularity of punitive populism and belief in the deterrent effect of harsher punishments is that it “fits well with the political rationality supported by public opinion” (Gönczöl, 2014, p. 541). There is a seemingly obvious connection between deterrence and crime prevention, which can easily lead the public to the mistaken conclusion that harsher punishments result in less crime. Under pressure from public opinion or citing it as a reason, political actors resort to tougher penalties even if they do not expect this measure to solve the problem, regardless of its social consequences (Gönczöl, 2014).

Although I have focused on the mechanisms of the media that promote punitive populism, I would like to emphasize that the introduction of stricter penalties based on public pressure does not necessarily mean punitive populism. In a state governed by the rule of law, if the public is educated and informed, policy-makers can respond to its demands with modern, innovative, and professionally appropriate criminal policy measures. Thus, dialogue with an informed public can also result in stricter criminal policy (Gönczöl, 2014).

Penal populism in Hungary

Like other countries in the post-Soviet region, Hungary must face the fact that, as a result of prolonged dictatorship, society has no or only negligible independent democratic traditions, and therefore has a contradictory relationship with the new system introduced after the change of regime. The lack of trust, confusion of norms, and paternalism that developed under the dictatorship easily provide a basis for various political parties to engage in punitive populism. This probably explains why, while in Western democracies it is primarily far-right parties and the tabloid media that are blamed for the rise of punitive populism, in this region the political elite, especially center-right parties, bear a greater share of the responsibility (Fleck, 2014).

The changes following the transition to democracy brought about a decline in the quality of life for a significant portion of society. As I wrote earlier, periods of uncertainty that call into question the familiar way of life and cause upheaval can always serve as a breeding ground for punitive populism. In Hungary, experts dealing with criminal policy recognized the dangers inherent in the pro-order sentiment that followed the change of regime and tried to resist social pressure. As a result, until the 2010s, there was considerable consensus on the shaping of criminal policy, with theoretical and practical experts participating in its development and viewing it as a policy issue. This consensus rhetoric was changed in 2010 and then three more times by the Fidesz-KDNP party alliance, which won a two-thirds majority and had already made public safety a priority in its campaign. An example of this is Viktor Orbán's interview before the second round of the election, in which he promised that if his party won, they would make areas of the country that "still seem hopeless today" safe "within two days" (quoted in Lévy 2020, p. 167). After the 2010 parliamentary elections, the government – true to its campaign promises – included a chapter entitled "It's time to restore order in the country!" in its government program published on May 22, 2010. After the government program was announced, Viktor Orbán spoke separately about the issue of public safety. In his speech, the prime minister emphasized that people had previously felt that the laws were on the side of the perpetrators rather than on their side, so the new government would tighten the criminal code and introduce the "three strikes" system to serve as a deterrent. In Hungary, as a result of this promised and then implemented tightening of criminal policy, it lost its cross-party, consensual nature, thereby significantly weakening its policy features (Lévy, 2020).

During the codification of Act C of 2012 on the Criminal Code (hereinafter: Criminal Code), the legislator turned to punitive populism in several provisions. One of the most important such measures is the lowering of the age of criminal responsibility to 12 years for certain crimes. This measure, like other punitive populist measures in general, was incorporated into the code after the 2010 elections, specifically in response to public pressure (Gönczöl, 2013). As a result of this measure, the juvenile justice system, which had been functioning in an exemplary manner and had a long tradition, was effectively abolished. After the introduction of the new Criminal Code, the number of sentences involving actual imprisonment increased significantly, leading to overcrowding in prisons. In addition, the sanctioning of

the customs of groups at the bottom of society became increasingly common (Gönczöl, 2013). It is important to note that this trend can have harmful consequences for society as a whole, as these measures mask real problems and leave them unresolved in order to gain votes in the short term (Gönczöl, 2013).

The media and Hungarian penal populism

Although punitive populism only appeared at the legislative level in Hungary after 2010, Jobbik and Fidesz had already placed public safety and crime at the center of their campaigns before the elections. After the election, the government elevated punitive populism to the legislative level with the adoption of the “three strikes” law by parliament in 2010. During the codification of the new Criminal Code in 2012, it expanded the applicability of the “three strikes” law and reduced the age of criminal responsibility to 12 years for certain crimes. I believe it is worth examining these two measures because the media environment in the early 2010s offers a good opportunity to study punitive populism and the media.

The institution of the “three strikes”

With the introduction of the “three strikes” rule, the legislature doubled the sentence for violent, repeat offenders and, if the increased sentence exceeds 20 years, the offender must be sentenced to life imprisonment.³ With the introduction of the new Criminal Code, the regulations were further tightened, as it ruled out the possibility of conditional release for violent repeat offenders.⁴ The explanatory memorandum does not contain any information on the necessity of introducing this measure, particularly with regard to possible implications for public opinion:

3 1978. évi IV. törvény módosításáról szóló 2010. évi LVI. törvény, 2. §. Magyar Közlöny, 107. sz., 2010. VI. 23.

4 2012. évi C. törvény a büntető törvénykönyvről. 44. § (2). Magyar Közlöny, 92. sz., 2012. VII. 13.

The law also provides for actual life imprisonment. In accordance with the Basic Law, it defines the range of crimes for which the court may exclude the possibility of parole when imposing a life sentence.⁵

We do not know the reasons behind this regulation, as it is not supported by any official justification, commentary (Polt, 2013), or professional arguments.

These reasons are best sought in the political public sphere. The rhetoric of punitive populism was used primarily by representatives of the political right, and not only in Hungary. During its 2010 campaign, Fidesz also emphasized the need to establish “order,” but the introduction of the “three strikes” rule was probably not motivated solely by a desire to fulfill campaign promises to some extent, but can also be interpreted as a gesture toward Jobbik voters. In 2010, Jobbik achieved a surprise 12 percent in the parliamentary elections, with the central message of its campaign being the issue of deteriorating public safety, which probably played an important role in its relative success. During the campaign, the party called for tougher penalties in order to curb what it claimed was a rise in “Gypsy crime”, to use Jobbik’s terminology. In addition, they demanded an increase in the budget allocated to law enforcement agencies and the possibility of establishing and supporting self-defense organizations (Boda et al., 2014). The fact that Fidesz adopted Jobbik’s proposals purely to win over radical right-wing voters is also supported by the fact that the “three strikes” did not receive much media coverage either before or after its adoption. In the aforementioned 2014 study, Boda and his co-authors analyzed various media outlets to demonstrate the presence of punitive populism in the Hungarian media. The study examined two daily newspapers (*Népszabadság* and *Magyar Nemzet*), two tabloids (*Blikk* and *Bors*), and two online publications (*Index* and *Origo*). Of the 4,479 articles obtained, only slightly more than one percent (53 articles) dealt with the institution of the “three strikes” rule, and of these, only 13 articles supported the newly introduced regulation (Boda et al., 2014).

In terms of discursive frameworks, the portrayal of the “three strikes” institution as flawed and dysfunctional was present in both left-wing and right-wing newspapers, as well as in the two online and two tabloid newspapers. *Magyar Nemzet* also presented an image of a “cruel” and “vile world,”

5 A Büntető Törvénykönyvről szóló 2012. évi C. törvény indoklása, T/6958 Törvényjavaslat.

which, according to their interpretation, contributed to rising crime. The fact that the topic of the flawed law enforcement and justice system appeared in all the newspapers examined suggests that criticism of the system and the erosion of trust in it may serve as a basis for the spread of punitive populism. However, this is by no means inevitable. This is supported by an article published in *Népszabadság* on July 5, 2010, in which the author expresses his agreement that the increase in the number of petty thefts can undermine the sense of public safety. He goes on to say that the goal set by the government is understandable and worthy of support, but the proposed package of measures and the tightening of penalties have little practical use in terms of crime prevention (see Boda et al., 2014).

Lowering the age of criminal responsibility for certain crimes

The Criminal Code originally defined homicide, manslaughter committed in the heat of passion, bodily injury causing danger to life or death, robbery, and certain cases of looting, the Criminal Code lowered the minimum age of criminal responsibility to 12 years for juvenile offenders.⁶ These crimes were supplemented by Section 61 of Act LXIX of 2016 on the amendment of certain acts related to the fight against terrorism, according to which, in the case of the fulfillment of the elements specified in Sections 314(1)–(4) of the Criminal Code, perpetrators over the age of 12 are punishable.⁷ According to the explanatory memorandum to the Criminal Code, this tightening of the law was necessary because:

Violent assertiveness is also becoming increasingly common among children aged between twelve and fourteen, which is why it is necessary to amend the age of criminal responsibility, to hold children who commit blatantly aggressive, life-threatening crimes criminally responsible, and to lower the age of criminal responsibility to twelve years for certain serious crimes. The behavior of minors who commit such crimes suggests that, without appropriate assistance, they will

6 2012. évi C. törvény a büntető törvénykönyvről. 16. § (2). Magyar Közlöny, 92. sz., 2012. VII. 13.

7 Terrorizmus elleni fellépéssel összefüggő egyes törvények módosításáról szóló 2016. évi LXIX. törvény, 61. §. Magyar Közlöny, 88. sz., 2016. VI. 17.

not be able to integrate into society and lead a law-abiding life in the future, which is why the use of criminal law instruments is essential for special prevention.⁸

Violent assertiveness is also becoming increasingly common among children aged between twelve and fourteen, which is why it is necessary to amend the age of criminal responsibility, to hold children who commit blatantly aggressive, life-threatening crimes criminally responsible, and to lower the age of criminal responsibility to twelve years for certain serious crimes. The behavior of minors who commit such crimes suggests that, without appropriate assistance, they will not be able to integrate into society and lead a law-abiding life in the future, which is why the use of criminal law instruments is essential for special prevention.

The justification is only partially supported by statistical data, as the number of juvenile offenders increased by only one hundredth of a percentage point (from 0.19 percent to 0.20 percent) between 2009 and 2011 in proportion to the population. There was only one case of intentional homicide committed by a minor between 2009 and 2011. There is no data available on whether criminal statistics surveys on juvenile offenders or investigations related to the child protection system were conducted prior to the regulation (Lévay, 2020). With regard to the circumstances surrounding the enactment of the legislation, it is worth mentioning that Ervin Belovics, university professor and secretary general of the Supreme Prosecutor's Office, made the following statement about the age limit regulation at a conference held in May 2012: Until the last minute, the draft law contained provisions identical to those in the current law, i.e., that anyone who has reached the age of 14 at the time of committing a punishable act cannot be punished. However, the bill has now been amended to include a provision stating that perpetrators of homicide, homicide committed in the heat of passion, and the most serious cases of bodily harm may be held criminally liable provided that they were at least 12 years of age at the time of the offense and had the insight necessary to recognize the consequences of the offense (Lévay, 2020, p. 169).

The fact that this issue, which is important from the perspective of children's rights, child protection, and criminal policy, was not raised once during the eighteen months of the legislative process, but the text of the

8 A Büntető Törvénykönyvről szóló 2012. évi C. törvény 16. § indoklás, T/6958 Törvény javaslat.

provision was ultimately included in the law during the final week of the codification process, strongly suggests that “the lowering of the minimum age of criminal responsibility was based not on criminal policy considerations, but on purely political decisions” (Lévay, 2020, p. 170). The regulatory environment is influenced by the fact that both domestic and international public opinion is increasingly focusing on the issue of child and juvenile offenders, the causes of crime, and possible responses to it. In this context, the legal regulation of the problem is also the subject of ongoing debate (Pallagi, 2014a). One of the reasons for this may be that, despite being considered shocking and very rare, crimes committed by young or child offenders, especially violent crimes, receive a lot of media attention due to their news value. In order to increase readership, the media reports such cases as quickly and as sensationalistically as possible. Moreover, these news items often appear with the implication that one of the reasons for the crime is that the relevant criminal law regulations are not strict enough. This heightened attention can easily distort the public’s perception of reality, creating the impression that, under the current regulations, the act in question may go unpunished or that the penalties are not strict enough. This situation is further exacerbated by the fact that various media outlets often publish statements claiming that the number of violent crimes committed by minors is on the rise. This can easily make society receptive to the solutions offered by punitive populism (Pallagi, 2014a).

The lowering of the age of criminal responsibility did not receive much more media coverage than the introduction of actual life imprisonment discussed in the previous section, despite protests from UNICEF and other civil society organizations against the tightening of the law, pointing out that the provision probably violates the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.⁹ Although the few newspaper articles written on the subject do not allow for general conclusions to be drawn, the articles that appeared in the mainstream press point to an important problem in the presentation of criminal policy decisions. The criticisms voiced by the experts were generally valid, but the media outlets considered authoritative at the time reported that after the introduction of the legislation, prison sentences could be imposed on children and they could also be arrested during the proceedings (Pallagi, 2014a). Two articles were published on the subject in HVG and two

9 ENSZ egyezményt sértett Magyarország az UNICEF szerint. HVG, 2012. VI. 26.

in Origo¹⁰, which primarily dealt with the criticisms of the ombudsman and UNICEF and the provision's conflict with international treaties. Neither the first HVG article nor the Origo articles mention exactly which crimes would be subject to the lowering of the age of criminal responsibility. HVG remedied this omission a few hours after the first article was published by publishing the government's response to the criticism. In contrast, Origo's position only softened six months later, when it wrote in an article in November 2012 that there was no consensus on the introduction of the new regulation. It is worth noting that the articles do not address the other conditions that must be met in order to apply the new regulations, nor do they mention that, in order to standardize prosecutorial practice, the deputy chief prosecutor issued a circular specifying the steps that must precede the filing of charges in cases involving juvenile offenders as defined by law (Pallagi, 2014a, p. 1). Although the articles quoted experts, they omitted important information that would have helped readers form an adequate opinion on the subject, which may have hindered the development of a relevant social debate.

Conclusions

The emergence of punitive populism is a rather complex, multi-factor process in which the role and responsibility of the media vary in importance. Since the final decision rests with political decision-makers, they undoubtedly bear greater responsibility in this matter. However, the media's portrayal of crime is always a factor in the rise of punitive populism due to its distortion of society's perception of crime. This distorting effect can lead to a decline in individuals' confidence in public safety, even when crime is actually on the decline. The media also plays a significant role in presenting what are considered to be appropriate responses to crime. If various media outlets directly or indirectly suggest that penalties are not severe enough, or that tougher penalties will reduce crime, they inevitably steer public opinion toward punitive populism, making it more receptive to such solutions proposed by

10 Alaptalannak nevezte az UNICEF tiltakozását a KIM. HVG, 2012. VI. 26.; ENSZ egyezményt sértett Magyarország az UNICEF szerint. HVG, 2012. VI. 26.; Ellenzi a büntethetőségi korhatár leszállítását az ombudsman. Origo, 2012. V. 15.; Nincs szakmai konszenzus a büntethetőségi korhatár leszállításáról. Origo, 2012. XI. 28.

the political elite. At the same time, the Hungarian example presented here shows that the media's responsibility in this matter may even be negligible. In Hungary, political parties have introduced the rhetoric of punitive populism into public discourse. At the same time, the role of the media in the rise of punitive populism is unquestionable due to its influence on the perception of crime. Although the distorting effect of the media does not necessarily lead to punitive populism, if media actors were able to show restraint in their portrayal of crime in the constant news race, and if they were to inform the public adequately about the real situation regarding public safety and present crime in all its complexity, then it would probably be much more difficult for the political elite to influence public opinion with their often harmful populist solutions.

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Data, society and politics: An introduction to Critical Data Studies¹

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Abstract

The aim of this study is summarizing the history, fundamental questions, issues, methods, areas of application and contradictions of Critical Data Studies, which emerged more than a decade ago in response to the challenges of big data. Furthermore, the text places the issues raised by CDS within the broader history and context of the quantification of human life and social sciences in general.

Keywords

Critical Data Studies, Big Data, datafication, epistemology, data mythology, dataism.

Introduction

The aim of this essay is to provide a comprehensive overview of the short history, observations, directions, methods and contradictions of Critical Data Studies (hereinafter referred to as CDS) responding to the phenomenon of Big

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- 1 The article was originally published in Hungarian in the Kritikai adatkutatás (Critical Data Studies) issue of the social science journal *Replika*. The English version presented here is a revised and edited version of the original Hungarian text. Bátorfy, Attila 2024. Adat, társadalom és politika. Bevezetés a kritikai adatkutatásba. Kritikai adatkutatás, szerkesztette Bátorfy Attila és Katona Eszter. *Replika* 134. (2024). 7–22. <https://doi.org/10.32564/134.1>
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Data. Big Data has burst onto the scene in a socio-cultural environment in which, on the one hand, politics, business and society expected the academic institutional system to produce solution-oriented, profit-driven, immediately applicable knowledge, as described by John Ziman (1996) in his concept of “post-academic science”, while on the other hand, the dominance of the “tyranny of metrics” (Muller, 2018) has been sought to be extended to areas outside the natural sciences for decades. It is important to draw attention to this because Big Data is only the next, albeit significant shift in the history of the datafication of human activity, and the reservations about it are, in many cases, familiar epistemological, critical, and sociological insights. It should therefore be clarified that in this context, the study operates on two levels: its specific focus is on the socio-critical analyses of the scientific and political paradigm called Big Data that shapes our everyday lives. At the same time, it follows from the above that CDS continues an existing, often non-critical tradition, so the study also seeks to place it within a larger historical narrative.

Background: Data criticism before critical data “studies”

Critical Data Studies, which is a countermovement to Big Data³, existed long before two geographers, Craig Dalton and Jim Thatcher, first gave it a name (Dalton & Thatcher, 2014). The epistemological problems arising from the measurement of the world were already articulated during the Enlightenment, but these considerations, as well as the diverse philosophical and social problems emerging from the use of the data generated, remained hidden for a long time and had to be brought to light by knowledge archaeologists such as Michel Foucault, Mary Poovey, Lorraine Daston, Theodore Porter, David Wootton and Daniel Rosenberg. We could even say that the power and economic advantages derived from their utilization concealed

3 However, everything started much earlier than we might think. In his latest book, for example, Asheesh Kapur Siddique sees the origins of the “Big Data-based” state in the organization of the British colonial empire’s administration (Siddique, 2024). Frédéric Kaplan and Isabelle di Lenardo go even further when they say that the size of data is relative, so throughout history, from Mesopotamia onwards, humanity has experienced numerous “Big Data moments”, characterized by an extraordinary increase in the amount of accumulated data (data acceleration regimes) compared to previous periods (Kaplan and di Lenardo, 2017).

these problems from the outset. Especially when we consider that, thanks to the data generated by measurements, modernity has gifted humanity with new, often celebrated words and concepts such as growth, standardization, planning, efficiency, management, rationalization, automation, average, bureaucracy and even normality. The initial promise of the Enlightenment was Daniel Kehlmann's eccentric and cantankerous Humboldt⁴, who thought it an assault on reason if the height of a hill could not be determined. In contrast, the reality of the Enlightenment was Adolphe Quetelet's *l'homme moyen*, or average man.⁵ Quetelet, originally an astronomer, wanted not only to study the laws of society, but also to create them, just as he had done with the laws of physics. Social physics (*physique sociale*), as he borrowed the term from the angry Auguste Comte to describe social statistics based on mathematical formulas and data analysis, was used by Quetelet and his followers to understand the types of people who fall in the middle of the normal distribution curve. Using measurements and statistics he wanted to identify people free from physical and mental extremes, deviations and abnormalities, and, on the other hand, to produce them in the future on the basis of these criteria. For Quetelet, this biopolitically defined average human being was the key to the organization, management and planning of the (nation) state, and the basis for the eradication of various social aberrations, such as *immorality* (Porter, 1986, pp. 52–55). This anthropometric principle based on average and normality – or, in James Vincent's words, “statistical Frankenstein” (Vincent, 2022, p. 222) – has a chilling manifestation in the monstrous creation of one of the greatest mind who ever lived, Francis Galton: eugenics also based on the normal distribution curve (Cryle & Stephens, 2017, pp. 212–260; Vincent, 2022, pp. 229–234), as well as numerous other horrors and misunderstandings resulting from the mismeasurement of humans' body, behavior and their performance (Gould, 1981/1996; Muller, 2018).

4 Austrian author Daniel Kehlmann's book *Measuring the World* is an entertaining parallel semi-biographical novel about the German natural scientist Alexander von Humboldt and the mathematician Carl Friedrich Gauss, combining fictional and real elements.

5 The French word *moyen* actually means middle, see for example: *moyen âge* = Middle Ages. Statistical terminology also refers to the average as the mean value, and the simple average as the arithmetic mean.

But why did we make a detour via Quetelet? Measuring the average person, whether in a physical or *moral* sense, using statistical methods, as well as (re)producing them tells us a lot about the nature of different types of data. Let us recall again Kehlmann's Humboldt, as Quetelet's imaginary antagonist. In Kehlmann's novel, Humboldt, however caricatured he may be, is a metaphorical figure of the joy of knowledge. Humboldt conducts experiments and measurements twenty-four hours a day, shocks himself with electricity, ties himself to the ship's mast, climbs into the crater of a volcano, swallows strange and dangerous things, and is almost fainting with excitement at the introduction of the Paris metre. His tools are various instruments, which were created not only for more accurate measurements, but also to eliminate the misjudgements of human sensory experience. In contrast, German statistics, or their English equivalent at the time, political arithmetic⁶, originally the science of the state⁷, creates artificial data that does not exist in nature and depends on the position, interests and concerns of the questioner by quantifying human activity. That is why it matters who asks the questions, with what intention, what they ask, what they consider important to know, what and how they use this knowledge, and what they make public and what they keep secret.

Scientific and popular discourse on these issues has always been extreme and linked to numerous other controversies. However, the grandiose narratives that preceded the unfolding of Big Data seem to have been somewhat disappointing, albeit to varying degrees. If we consider the Horkheimer and Adorno's dataphobia of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* ([1947]; 2002) as a starting point, then subsequent generations have produced their own critical readings of social engineering based on data. For Horkheimer and Adorno, the language of data derived from the logic of the Enlightenment

6 There was a fundamental difference between German statistics and English political arithmetic. While the former aimed to provide a general description of the state, the latter focused on the mathematical analysis of various local demographic data. It is worth noting that although political arithmetic replaced German descriptive statistics in most of Europe in the first half of the 19th century, political arithmetic was in turn replaced by the word statistics in common usage (Desrosières, 1998, pp. 16–19).

7 The word “statistics” originally comes from the Italian word *statista*, which was used to refer to state officials. The science did not originally arise from a desire to understand society, but from the need to assess the state's assets and wealth and to better organize the state.

is the language of homogenization, uniformization, atomization, commercialization, word magic and, ultimately, totalitarianism.

The blindness and muteness of the data to which positivism reduces the world passes over into language itself, which is limited to registering those data. Thus relationships themselves become impenetrable, taking on an impact, a power of adhesion and repulsion which makes them resemble their extreme antithesis, spells. They act once more like the practices of a kind of sorcery, whether the name of a diva is concocted in the studio on the basis of statistical data, or welfare government is averted by the use of taboo-laden words such as 'bureaucracy' and 'intellectuals,' or vileness exonerates itself by invoking the name of a home land. The name, to which magic most readily attaches, is today undergoing a chemical change. It is being transformed into arbitrary, manipulable designations, the power of which, although calculable, is for that reason as willful as that of archaic names. (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002, pp. 134–135).

The historical analyses of authors with perhaps less tragic experiences than Horkheimer and Adorno, such as Foucault, James R. Beniger, Theodore Porter, the recently deceased James C. Scott, and Susan Buck-Morrs, guide us along the ominously similar paths of Enlightenment and modernity. Towards simplifying, standardizing, normalizing, homogenizing knowledge, systems and classifications that serve the controlling-planning state, which are fed by rich and dense data and which ensnare every aspect of human life through control masked as security, justice and efficiency. This is the basic idea of Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* ([1975]1995), the panoptic and normalizing surveillance that comes from the mutually reinforcing pair of science and power based on the monitoring of others, as the origin of his system of power technology. Beniger analyses partly the same process in *The Control Revolution* (1986), which is more restrained than others' views, in parallel with the dawn of the information society, pointing out the double-face of infotechnological responses to crises in state governance. Beniger's 19th century, although on a different analytical plane, resembles Theodore Porter's 19th century. According to Porter, the result of the 19th century, with its maniacal pursuit of objectivity and blind faith in numbers, is the biological and administrative standardisation, the accounting culture, the bureaucratic order, and the increasing pressure on the social sciences to

quantify (1995). James C. Scott writes in *Seeing Like a State* (1998) that the goal of every modern state is to make society and its citizens schematically and simplistically “readable”, as this is the basis of state organization and planning. Nevertheless, Scott’s historical examples (the parcelling of forests and agricultural land, Soviet kolkhozes and planned economy, rational urban planning) show that the greater the schematic abstraction of the needs of society and citizens, and their simplification for the sake of readability, the greater the catastrophe that the associated “improvement” and social engineering intentions can cause. Finally, according to Susan Buck-Morrs, data and their representations, like graphs, diagrams and cartograms, have been agents of capitalist ideology since the 18th century and, as such, contribute to the reproduction of social inequalities (Buck-Morrs, 1995).

It is surprising that the texts classified as “Critical Data Study” seem to ignore the above precedents, even though many of their problems are identical. Nevertheless, this seems also understandable, since CDS goes beyond the above to address a very specific phenomenon, namely Big Data: the enormous and rapidly growing, diverse, comprehensive, detailed, high-resolution, computer- and software-processable, manageable, searchable, analysable and interconnectable relational data assemblages (Kitchin & Lauriault, 2014; Iliadis & Russo, 2016).

Critical Data Studies enters the scene: The promises of Big Data

The foundational text of CDS is danah boyd and Kate Crawford’s 2012 essay *Critical Questions for Big Data*. In this article, the authors essentially raise all the important questions of what would soon be called CDS. All of boyd and Crawford’s questions about Big Data are also basic questions about any scientific and technological innovation: who will benefit from it, who will find it useful, and who will profit from it? The authors analyse the phenomenon of Big Data as an interaction between three dimensions: technology, analysis and mythology, and make several provocative statements, some practical and epistemological, others ethical.

It is worth pausing here for a moment to consider mythology. As Horkheimer and Adorno point out the paradox of how speaking about data can mesmerize the language and the mind, the evangelists of Big Data have never been stingy with magical promises.

Chris Anderson, the then influential editor-in-chief of *Wired* geek magazine⁸, who, incidentally, is currently the founder and CEO of a company that produces drone control software, celebrated in 2008 that the flood of data would spell the end of theories and scientific methods. Anderson saw the significance of the era, then called the *Petabyte Age*, in that the use of simple statistical and mathematical models would render questions of cause and effect and meaning completely irrelevant, and theories about human behaviour, language use and society could finally be discarded.

Forget taxonomy, ontology, and psychology. Who knows why people do what they do? The point is they do it, and we can track and measure it with unprecedented fidelity. With enough data, the numbers speak for themselves – he wrote.

Anderson also reckoned that abstract scientific methods based on the trinity of hypothesis-model-test would be thrown out the window. According to Anderson, the big questions of science have become competing models and theories in every discipline, which are nothing more than “beautiful stories starved of data” that cannot be proven or falsified. However, Anderson argues that this fuss is meaningless because it is irrelevant to ask why there is a connection between things; it is enough to simply establish that there is a connection between them. Big data analysis reveals these connections and patterns where scientific methodology has no chance of gaining insight. Anderson’s 2008 article is generally cited with malice by CDS as a particularly arrogant example of the hurrah optimism of the late 2000s.

But Marc Prensky (2009), who also coined the term “digital native,” spoke with similar devotion about big data at the time. Of course, the metaphors of the business press and tech-media also contributed to the success of the concept of Big Data (Puschmann and Burgess, 2014). By the early 2010s, the enthusiasm had become so intense that David Brooks, in 2013, called the philosophy proclaiming the omnipotence of data, which bordered on mysticism, dataism, and its followers dataists (Brooks, 2013). It is true that the proponents of the Big Data revolution themselves like to call their approach dataism (Lohr, 2015).

8 Chris Anderson is an American journalist and entrepreneur who was editor-in-chief of *Wired* magazine from 2001 to 2012. His praised 2006 bestseller: *The Long Tail: Why the Future of Business is Selling Less of More*.

Boyd and Crawford did not let Anderson and his ilk get away with their orthodox hubris, which David M. Berry calls ontotheology (2011, p. 12), referring to the fact that apologists for Big Data believe in a form of digital computability that produces such a destabilising amount of knowledge and information that it lacks the regulatory power of philosophical thinking. This is precisely why boyd and Crawford's provocative points mentioned above confront the established claims of Big Data culture with statements that are misleading at best and unverifiable at worst. The Great Promise of Big Data is (was) – as if one were reading Comte, Lord Kelvin or Karl Pearson's reverent odes to the objectivity of positive science – that the large amount of data available produces more objective, accurate, higher quality, more neutral, context-free, meaningful and usable knowledge than traditional, inductive scientific methods of knowledge production. By eliminating the human factor and theory from the analytical framework, humanity can make more rational, efficient and cheaper decisions that contribute to the common good, from better organisation of state subsystems and reduction of social inequalities to the development of medicines with previously unimaginable efficacy.

There are aspects of Big Data that make it particularly attractive to the social sciences, both methodologically and theoretically. Since the end of the 19th century, social science has struggled with the problem that it cannot study all people at once, as physicists do with atoms or biologists with molecules. Even the largest samples represent a tiny percentage of societies, and it is from these samples that general, legally binding conclusions must be drawn and, as in the natural sciences, predictions made about the behaviour and decisions of social groups. Quetelet and Galton, followed by many statisticians and sociologists of the 19th century, were convinced, sometimes from radically different positions, that societies are created, driven and organized by laws that can be described mathematically, similar to those in the natural sciences. They sought to fill the gap between the Part and the Whole with various statistical and mathematical methods, which often proved to be adequate, sometimes insufficient, and at other times misleading. The size, simultaneity, scalability and relationality of Big Data seemingly eliminates this gap between the Part and the Whole by making it possible to analyse hundreds of parameters of hundreds of thousands/millions of people, providing social research with new, detailed information and correlations that it could only dream of before, or did not even know existed. Duncan J. Watts compared this

transformation to the revolution in astronomy and chemistry two hundred years ago and argued that it is unreasonable to insist that the study and understanding of human and social behaviour using Big Data methods is an illegitimate scientific method. In his view, abandoning it would not only be a huge missed opportunity, but also unethical towards society, especially since Big Data analysis frameworks already employ protocols that minimize the likelihood of harm (Watts, 2014). Kate Crawford, however, responded to similar claims⁹ by saying that “it is a failure of imagination and methodology to claim that it is necessary to experiment on millions of people without their consent.” (Crawford, 2014).

Boyd and Crawford argue convincingly that these promises and claims are part of the private mythology and sales strategy of Big Data, so we should be sceptical about some of them, if only because of our historical experience. Thus, the absolute objectivity and accuracy of numbers and data is based on the false assumption that raw data is neutral. This is an old mistake, already pointed out in the 17th century. Bacon, Boyle and the inductionists themselves saw particles (i.e. raw data) as pure knowledge, free from theory and untainted by interests (Poovey, 1998, xviii), meaning that the neutrality of data is just an old promise in new clothing. As Geoffrey Bowker pointed out, raw data is an oxymoron, because all data is already somewhat “cooked” (2005). Bowker’s reference to Claude Lévi-Strauss’s 1964 book *The Raw and the Cooked*¹⁰ refers to the fact that data does not “exist” but is created through a series of ideological and methodological considerations, interests and technological processing. In addition, even the most pristine database often needs to be cleaned, standardized and made consistent: prepared for analysis through a series of human decisions. Although Big Data claims that data presents bare facts in their neutrality, it is difficult to imagine not wanting to associate meanings or causalities with these results, especially since the road to hell is often paved with the confusion of correlation and causality. Bernard Jansen and his colleagues go so far as to state that, due to the conceptual confusion between count

9 The debate involving Watts, Crawford and others erupted after it was leaked that Cornell University, commissioned by Facebook, had used data from 600,000 users to study how their emotions and decisions could be influenced and how they would respond to these manipulation techniques.

10 *Le Cru et le cuit* is the first volume of Lévi-Strauss’s four-volume *Mithologiques* series. The last volume was published in 1971.

and measure, the numbers describing people in Big Data are mostly false, and that researchers and algorithms commit old, well-known logical and statistical errors and fallacies when analysing Big Data. Such errors include selection/sampling biases, the curse of dimensionality (databases with too many elements), the crowdtruth problem, and Simpson's paradox (Jansen et al., 2022).

In his etymological analysis of the English words data, fact and evidence, Daniel Rosenberg points out that the Latin root of datum is dare, or to give, so in terms of meaning, data is something that is given, a self-evident argument. In contrast, fact comes from the Latin *facere*, meaning to do, which refers to something that has happened or exists. Finally, while evidence is derived from the Latin *videre*, meaning to see, so evidence is something we experience with our eyes, something we witness. Thus, in Rosenberg's interpretation, data is contrary to both the meaning of fact and evidence, insofar as fact is an ontological concept, evidence is epistemological, and data is rhetorical. Rosenberg argues that "when a fact is proven false, it ceases to be a fact. False data is data nonetheless." – highlighting the contradiction between data and truth (Rosenberg, 2013, p. 18).

Some of Boyd and Crawford's observations relate to the possibilities and promises of analysis itself. They also put forward a number of arguments to prove that Big Data, understood here in the narrow sense as very large data sets, does not necessarily provide more accurate, higher-quality analyses than samples containing smaller amounts of data. Furthermore, methods that are supposed to enrich social science or marketing communication knowledge in theory, such as scraping (downloading data with the help of small robots) and analysing conversations on social media platforms, become analysable and meaningful only after a series of subsequent interventions (bots, identification and filtering of inactive members, anonymisation, etc.) and other practical, but human considerations.

Ultimately, the authors are strongest when discussing the ethical dilemmas of using Big Data. Big Data culture can only become a success story if it has access to data, but this immediately raises several questions. Access alone does not mean that the use of data is ethical, lawful, and does not violate personal rights. Furthermore, access to data is asymmetrical. For example, employees of social media sites have unlimited access to personal data, while other researchers have only limited access and must pay for it, which they are increasingly unable to afford compared to governments and advertisers. One could argue that researchers are still better off, as users and civilians often

do not even have this level of access to Big Data, so, as the authors argue, the digital divide between the “Big Data rich” and the “Big Data poor” continues to grow. All this is happening without data broker companies having any accountability or reporting obligations regarding how they use this data, to whom and for what purpose they sell it, and they are preventing any attempts to regulate them.

Attempt(s) to create a discipline: Power and institutional systems

Some of the texts that followed boyd and Crawford’s debate-initiating article are summaries of concerns of varying amplitude. Viktor Mayer-Schönberger and Kenneth Cukier highlighted the disappearance of privacy and the rise of “data dictatorship” that quantifies every little detail of life as the main risks, and considered the regulation of “data barons” necessary in addition to the need for widespread social control (2013, pp. 166–203). Rob Kitchin, also a geographer, described these not as risks, but as a series of events that have already occurred and give cause for serious concern (2014 b). The aforementioned seminal essay by geographers Craig Dalton and Jim Thatcher, *What Does A Critical Data Studies Look Like, And Why Do We Care?* largely repeats the main findings of boyd and Crawford’s article and further develops the problem by incorporating the experiences of geoinformatics, which deals with the mapping of place, space, time and people. At first glance, it may seem surprising that it is two geographers who are giving a name to the systematic critical examinations that are gathering momentum against Big Data, but the recording, tracking and visualization of natural resources and human activities linked to location raises a host of problems in itself. Although Dalton and Thatcher’s article is primarily a call to geographers to critically engage with the normalizing hegemony of Big Data, which has always taken on new guises throughout history, the questions they raise are relevant to all disciplines. These questions are as follows: What historical conditions led to critical questions about Big Data arising in the first place? Who controls and directs the production and analysis of Big Data, and what motivations and constraints guide their work? Who are the subjects and objects of Big Data, and what kind of knowledge do they produce? How is Big Data used in the production of places, spaces and landscapes? What other kinds of knowledge can Big Data help us to produce?

While we still only have partial answers to these questions, to the question Dalton and Thatcher posed in the title of their essay, Rob Kitchin responds with the concept of *data assemblage*, which clearly echoes Deleuze and Guattari's theory of assemblage, bringing together the apparatus that defines the framework for CDS. Kitchin argues that data assemblage is a complex socio-technological system consisting of numerous interconnected tools and elements whose primary task is to produce data. This assemblage consists not only of data infrastructure, such as a large system, data warehouse or archive, but also encompasses all the technological, political, social and economic tools that determine the nature and functioning of assemblages. These apparatuses and elements interact and shape each other through a complex network of contingent and complex relationships (Kitchin, 2014b, 24). In other words, CDS must examine not only the data itself as an object, but also the entire network of actors and institutional system that played a role in the creation of the data, as has been done repeatedly in the analysis of the scientific institutional system and the application of actor-network theory in the sociology of science (see: Merton, 1973; Latour, 1987; Law, 2004).

In 2016, Andrew Iliadis and Federica Russo presented the development of CDS as a discipline in its historical context (Iliadis & Russo, 2016). It is worth looking at their article in terms of the amount of material it covers, and it becomes clear that Dalton and Thatcher's desire found open ears, "It was on the tip of everyone's tongue" (Dalton et al., 2016, p. 1).

This can mean two things. One is that in just two short years, they managed to reach out to representatives of many scientific fields, and they were concerned with roughly the same issues. The other is that the critical label attached to existing data practices/data science, as has happened before in the history of science, invited many to comment on something that was in vogue. In any case, Iliadis and Russo's article can be a real treasure trove for those who want to navigate the fertile realm of CDS.

The authors do not mince words: they view data as a form of power that generates enormous profits for companies built on data technology, that is capable of manipulating culture as well as human emotions, and that also gives researchers the weapon of the appearance of objectivity. They list numerous pieces of evidence that data is often used without the knowledge of those concerned, that data is often hijacked by research agendas serving industry profit goals, and that there is no adequate self-regulation, industry protection, or protocol against hackers and secret service surveillance.

“While data are all of the above and more, they are also conspicuous in their absence – a lack of data is another indication of power, the power not to look or to remain hidden” they write. Despite the many known problems, however, they believe that there are no brakes the Big Data train, as in just a few years, referring to Rob Kitchin’s observation, “Current research trends in the social and natural sciences (and also in the humanities – AB) indicate a general prioritization of data-intensive and positivistic approaches over long-held postpositivist and critical approaches.” Those involved in social theory have certainly had their own bitter experiences over the past decade when their theoretical articles submitted to journals have been rejected.

The applicability and certain concepts of critical data studies

Critical data studies is somewhat similar to *critical cultural studies*. Although its observations, interdisciplinary methods, and even ideals have been incorporated into many fields of science, relatively few researchers bear the badge of CDS on their lapels. This was already clear when Iliadis and Russo’s article was published, as they sought to collect older and newer scientific and popular works from all directions that could be said to have been written in the spirit of CDS.

Some of these works, as well as some that have been written since then, continue to refine the theoretical framework and research methods of CDS, others do the dirty critical work, while still others strive to chart new directions (Hepp, Jarke & Kramp, eds., 2022; Jarke & Bates, eds. 2024). In terms of applicability, the latest category is more exciting, as most of these go beyond theoretical debates and conduct concrete research, in some cases even articulating activism. Such are the studies on *data justice*, which present and analyse the role of Big Data and algorithms in reproducing social inequalities, maintaining oppressive structures, and even in racism and genocide (O’Neill, 2016). Feminist critiques of Big Data (D’Ignazio & Klein, 2019; D’Ignazio, 2024) and research on *data literacy* aimed at reducing digital divides (D’Ignazio, 2017) also touch on the issues of *data justice* and representation. Activism that can be classified as countercultural praxis constitutes the representation policy offshoots of *data justice*. *Counterdata* encompasses community-based, “unofficial”, participatory data collection practices that oppose state, official or corporate data collection and the reality they interpret, and which restore the right to raise questions that

form the basis of data collection to the community of citizens (Olojo, 2024). The concept of *missing data* also reflects on representation, or rather the lack thereof, including datasets “that do not exist but should” (Onuoha, 2016). The lack or concealment of data is often due to historical, political or business strategy reasons, and identifying these gaps and urging their replacement is also an important area of CDS (Jungs de Almeida et al., 2024). *Data colonialism* (Couldry & Mejías, 2019; 2024) refers to the complex system of relationships that puts every aspect of human life at the service of capitalism through datafication. Studies and monographs on *dataveillance*, a term coined from the combination of data and surveillance, deal with the abuse of the private sphere, surveillance and control, and the intertwining of autocracies, data broker companies and advertisers (Dijck, 2014; Zuboff, 2014/2019). The findings of CDS can also be applied to critical approaches to the visual representation of data (Engebretsen & Kennedy, eds. 2020), as well as to the issues of *smart city* concepts, as the data-driven urban planning and management (Mattern, 2021).

Criticisms and contradictions of CDS

The term CDS can be somewhat misleading, as it may suggest that the writings included in this category are not related to specific empirical research projects. This is true for many of the studies and monographs cited in this article, but not for others. The classic texts of CDS are rather though provoking, transdisciplinary commentaries on the dangers posed by Big Data and its epistemological, social, political and ethical implications. This may provide ammunition to those who classify *data science* and Big Data-based social and humanities research as *hard science*, similar to the natural sciences. Since – they may say – because Big Data has finally freed the *soft* sciences from their methodological laxity, ideologization and interpretative nature, they enjoy immunity from criticism that does not have the rigorous *scientific* apparatus of methodology at its disposal. Thus, the findings of CDS are nothing more than annoying mosquito bites on the rhinoceros-skin of *hard science*.

Although a small number of writings born out of CDS do indeed paint frightening dystopian pictures of the present and the future, the majority of them still argue that Big Data is a huge opportunity, but one that comes with responsibility. At the same time, many scientists can feel that this is

simply a moral nagging and virtue signaling. As Craig Dalton, Linnet Taylor and Jim Thatcher (2016) note, “(W)hen you append ‘critical’ to a field of study, you run the risk of both offending other researchers, who rightly point out that all research is broadly critical and of bifurcating those who use critical theory from those who engage in rigorous empirical research.” Thus, the political and activist nature of critical theory can be burdensome for scientists, even if they themselves are aware of the political and power issues surrounding data and are bound by scientific ethics. For this reason, CDS must remain open to counter-criticism, otherwise it will itself become dogmatic.

Of course, there have been and still are those who say that the problems highlighted by CDS are shadowboxing. This is partly because, from a *realpolitik* perspective, despite all the concerns and scandals, Big Data has swept through everything from state organisation to science, and to people’s everyday lives, and it has been possible to survive it. On the other hand, the new revolution, artificial intelligence based largely on Big Data, is raising the same questions again, so now we should focus on that. Still others say that CDS is actually a 21st-century reincarnation of various forms of pessimism (technopessimism, numerophobia), and just as previous dystopias did not come true, the chances of a Big Data apocalypse are slim too. Numerous counterarguments point out that the views of CDS are unfairly one-sided, while the risks pale in comparison to the overall societal benefits brought about by Big Data.

However, the biggest opponents of the issues pointed out by CDS are the technology companies themselves and their conservative-libertarian commentators. According to their well-known arguments, any attempt at regulation, transparency, accountability and democratization is a serious interference with the freedom of enterprise and the free market. Data entrepreneurs and investors such as Elon Musk, Peter Thiel and David Sacks accuse those who campaign for the release of user data collected by their companies for open research purposes of using it only to justify their far-left *social justice* theories.

Open data, and within that, open government and open science movements, seem to be stalling worldwide despite a temporary improvement in regulations (such as the Responsible Research and Innovation [RRI] framework in European Union science funding). In many countries, governments and scientific institutions are narrowing the availability and accessibility of open and free data, citing various reasons. There may be

conflicting arguments for this. For roughly a decade, there has been a process of converting publicly funded government and scientific data into commercial commodities, so that ultimately only those who can afford to buy them benefit from this data (Lindman & Kuk, 2015). Others, however, point out that the slogans of open data, open science, and government accountability are being used and hijacked by profit-seeking companies as a Trojan horse. Using open public data they question and manipulate the methodology and results of research data that has become available in this way, and to establish a counter-narrative to the scientific consensus, while these companies are not subject to open access regulations (Levy and Johns, 2016).

Conclusion

A decade ago Hungarian information theorist, László Z. Karvalics considered the then new data pessimism against Big Data as a classic moral panic (Z. Karvalics, 2015). Karvalics placed the “what if” world he exposed on the shelf of fictional and esoteric literature, together with the so-called “criticisms” (2015, p. 191).

The critics regard the enthusiasm of the prophets of the ‘brave new world of data’ as ideology or religion, and they happily pose the role of minority gatekeepers of collective conscience exposing Orwellian scenarios. If this starting point and intellectual attitude did not already dominate academic discourse, considering itself as critical, and if more and more publicists did not assume that media attention could be aroused by focusing on an apocalyptic data future, then we might still think that we are on time. But unfortunately, we are too late. (Ibid, p. 191.)

Almost all of those who once contributed to CDS and applied critical theory in the social sciences are themselves researchers who use Big Data. However, the problems raised by CDS did not come up as possibilities, potential risks, or negligible side effects, but as an ongoing reality that has only grown stronger since then. Over the past decade, well-known scandals and abuses surrounding the use of Big Data by governments and companies, including the illegitimate influencing of voter intent, the establishment of

total surveillance systems, algorithmic manipulation of content sharing, and manipulation of research data, all draw attention to the fact that the problems pointed out by CDS were already valid at that time. Although some platforms, data companies and researchers have begun to incorporate aspects of CDS into their practices, the AI revolution unfolding before our eyes will continue to provide much work for critical theory.

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Theories and approaches to labor market discrimination against women¹

FRUzsina Gulya²

Abstract

This article examines the principal theoretical frameworks used to explain labor market discrimination against women. It distinguishes between biological sex and gender, the latter understood as socially constructed roles rooted in stereotypes and power relations. The analysis draws on micro-, meso-, and macro-level theories, including human capital theory, models of statistical and taste-based discrimination, and approaches associated with feminist legal theory. Attention is devoted to the social and institutional mechanisms that hinder women's – especially mothers' – participation in the labor market. Building on Catharine A. MacKinnon's dominance framework, the article critically evaluates traditional legal approaches organized around the concepts of sameness and difference, arguing that gender inequality should be understood not merely as a moral concern but as a fundamentally political problem.

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Keywords

Labor market discrimination, gender roles, motherhood and employment, power relations, feminist legal theory.

Introduction

Labor market discrimination against women remains one of the most persistent forms of inequality in contemporary societies. Although modern legal systems formally recognize the principle of equality, women continue to experience disadvantages in access to employment, career advancement, wages, and working conditions. These inequalities cannot be explained solely by individual choices or isolated acts of discrimination; rather, they arise from a complex interaction of social expectations, institutional practices, and broader relations of power.

Understanding these patterns requires an analytical perspective that goes beyond strict legal definitions of discrimination. Women's labor market position is shaped by gender roles, stereotypes, and social expectations that influence both individual behavior and institutional decision-making. As a result, discrimination may operate not only through explicit exclusion but also through structural mechanisms embedded in social and organizational contexts.

This article examines the principal theoretical approaches used to explain labor market discrimination against women. It draws on insights from sociology, economics, social psychology, and feminist legal theory to demonstrate that gender inequality operates at multiple levels of social organization.

The structure of the article is as follows. The first part reviews major theoretical explanations of women's labor market disadvantage at the micro, meso, and macro levels. The second part introduces the main arguments of feminist legal theory and its critique of the purported neutrality of law. The final analysis presents Catharine A. MacKinnon's dominance perspective, highlighting its implications for understanding gender inequality in the labor market.

Theoretical approaches

Women's social position has long been a widely researched topic in both Hungarian and international scholarship. Numerous studies – across sociology, psychology, social psychology, media studies, and legal scholarship, among other disciplines – examine women's disadvantages from different perspectives. Additional explanations applicable to women can also be found in research on other vulnerable or subordinated groups. It can generally be observed that all developed Western societies exhibit differences in power and status, and consequently the social positions of women and men differ. Because gender inequality theories are diverse, it is useful to group them according to their level of analysis³. Such classification also helps to illustrate where and how legal regulation can intervene – or potentially intervene – in discriminatory processes.

Micro-level theories analyze social problems – in this case, discrimination against women – at the level of individuals; meso-level theories focus on groups and organizations, while macro-level theories examine processes at the societal level. Whether one proceeds from the individual toward society or in the opposite direction, these theories are often interconnected and are best interpreted as elements of a broader analytical system.

At the individual level, a common economic explanation of labor market participation is human capital theory. According to this approach, individuals accumulate knowledge through education and later through work experience and training, thereby increasing their “productivity.” This explanation appears somewhat paradoxical since women are overrepresented in certain educational categories – for example, more women than men hold tertiary degrees⁴. The apparent contradiction is explained by the conditions under which such investments yield returns: due to childbirth and subsequent caregiving responsibilities (including school holidays and children's illness), women are more likely to interrupt employment for shorter or longer periods. These interruptions subsequently translate into disadvantages in labor market participation.

3 The classification originates from Höpflinger and his co-authors and is cited by Beáta Nagy (2001): *Női menedzserek* [Women Managers]. Budapest: Aula Kiadó, 208 p.

4 Data of the Hungarian Central Statistical Office on the distribution of the population aged 25–64 by level of educational attainment [%]. https://www.ksh.hu/stadat_files/okt/hu/okt0027.html

A social-psychological explanation of the difficulties women encounter in accessing leadership positions is provided by the double-bind framework. The double bind describes a paradoxical situation: if a woman in a task-oriented group behaves in accordance with stereotypically “female” expectations – being gentle, friendly, cooperative, and compliant – she may be perceived as unsuitable for leadership. If, however, she exhibits behaviors stereotypically associated with leadership – such as decisiveness, independence, and proactivity – she may be judged as having “lost” her femininity or as behaving too “masculinely.” A related phenomenon, long studied in the United States, is the so-called “queen bee” effect⁵. According to this concept, women who attain leadership positions may, like a queen bee, tolerate few other women around them, provide limited support for other women’s advancement, and display little solidarity. Such dynamics may hinder women’s workplace mobility (Carli & Eagly, 2007a, 2007b).

Meso-level explanations include approaches that interpret women’s disadvantage at the organizational or intergroup level. These include theories of gender stereotypes. Stereotypical thinking refers to reasoning in rigid and inflexible categories. Gender stereotypes encompass the external and internal characteristics presumed to be typical of members of a particular group – women or men. As commonly described, men are stereotyped as dominant, rational, objective, independent, decisive, competitive, aggressive, capable of leading others, and strong in mathematics and the natural sciences, with interests in business, sports, and politics. Women, by contrast, are stereotyped as compliant, intuitive, respectful toward men, emotional, subjective, credulous, dependent, sensitive to the needs of others, caring, self-sacrificing, and skilled in housework and childcare. According to social role theory, gender stereotypes emerged and persist primarily because of the gender division of labor (Eagly & Wood, 1999).

5 The “queen bee syndrome.” see first: Staines, G., Jayaratne, T. E., & Tavis, C. (1974). The queen bee syndrome. *Psychology Today*, 7(8), 55–60. For further research on the topic see: Derks, B., Ellemers, N., Van Laar, C., & De Groot, K. (2011). Do sexist organizational cultures create the queen bee? *British Journal of Social Psychology*. Available at: <https://bpspsychub.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1348/014466610X525280>; Ellemers, N., Van den Heuvel, H., De Gilder, D., Maass, A., & Bonvini, A. (2010). The underrepresentation of women in science: Differential commitment or the queen bee syndrome? *British Journal of Social Psychology*. Available at: <https://bpspsychub.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1348/0144666042037999>

Studies of mother–child interaction suggest that differences in the treatment of boys and girls appear from the earliest stages of socialization. Parents – and later caregivers, teachers, and educators – tend to attribute different traits to infants depending on whether they perceive the child as a boy or a girl. This process plays a central role in gender socialization, that is, in the learning of gender stereotypes. Although this issue is not directly central to the present paper, it is nevertheless illustrative to mention Albert Bandura’s social learning theory. The theory describes the familiar process through which a child’s behavior is shaped by rewards and punishments, namely through the reinforcement of expected behavior by parents, caregivers, neighbors, and even passersby. However, “desirable” behavior differs for girls and boys, and through reinforcement children internalize what society regards as appropriate conduct for each sex. Differences can be observed in clothing, hairstyles, selected toys, and descriptive labels⁶. By approximately the age of two, children are already aware of whether they are boys or girls and can categorize others accordingly (Bandura, 1969).

Hajnalka Fényes provides a comprehensive account of gendered patterns in education, including the role of the hidden curriculum. In addition to the explicit transmission of knowledge, educational institutions also convey social norms, including gender stereotypes. Over the course of schooling, children quickly learn that girls are considered “hardworking”, while boys are regarded as “smart,” albeit sometimes lazy. By the time young people reach the stage of career choice, they already possess socially embedded expectations associated with gender roles, and both sexes are directed toward occupations considered traditionally feminine or masculine. In this way, gender stereotypes and social inequalities are reproduced from generation to generation, together with their negative consequences (Fényes, 2010).

Another important example concerns stereotypes attached to mothers of young children as workers, which may make re-entry into employment more difficult. As discussed under the concept of the “motherhood penalty,” research findings suggest that mothers are often not considered ideal employees. The perceived risk of “frequent absence” due to childcare

6 For a study on gender stereotypes in Hungarian illustrated storybooks and children’s novels, see: Pálóczi, B., & Nagy, B. (2017). Gender stereotypes in fairy tales and children’s books. In M. Kovács (Ed.), *Társadalmi nemek: Elméleti megközelítések és kutatási eredmények* (pp. 85–102). Budapest: ELTE Eötvös Kiadó. Available at: <https://unipub.lib.uni-corvinus.hu/3354/>

responsibilities is a typical factor that places women at a disadvantage during job interviews compared with childless women and male applicants. The possibility of a child's illness is likewise interpreted through traditional parental roles: in the case of a mother returning to work, it often does not even arise that the father – whose economic activity is assumed to be continuous – could assume caregiving responsibilities for a jointly raised child during illness⁷.

According to the stereotype content model, individuals evaluate others along two primary dimensions: whether their intentions are good or bad (i.e., whether they are perceived as warm or likable) and whether they can carry out those intentions (i.e., whether they are competent). The combination of these dimensions produces four categories. A group perceived as competent but disliked may be viewed as threatening⁸. Fiske notes that groups perceived as incompetent but warm include, for example, older people and housewives. Applied to gender stereotypes, men tend to be perceived as competent, whereas women are perceived as warm; consequently, women may be regarded as less competent than men in the labor market (Fiske, 2006).

In what follows, the analysis does not focus on statutory definitions of discrimination but rather on two families of economic models: taste-based discrimination and statistical discrimination. Ultimately, these involve individual decisions and could therefore be treated as micro-level explanations. However, because they are implemented through employers' decisions concerning hiring, promotion, wage bargaining, and post-child bearing employment conditions, they are discussed here within the framework of meso-level explanations. In the process of stereotyping, an individual applies expectations and associations concerning a group to a specific member of that group. Prejudice introduces an affective component that shapes how individuals relate to a person based on their perceived group

7 It should be noted that arranging childcare – whether due to a child's illness, school holidays, or days without formal instruction – may lead to a loss of income once available leave has been exhausted. If the father earns a higher wage, his staying at home with the child may represent a greater financial loss for the family than the mother's absence from work. This provides a rational explanation for why mothers more often remain at home with the child; however, in my view, this does not mitigate the harmful effects of the underlying stereotype.

8 Fiske classifies feminists in this category as well.

membership. Prejudice may be strong even in the absence of personal experience and can nevertheless significantly influence decision-making. Discrimination refers to differential treatment – such as avoidance or refusal to hire – based on such categorizations (for example, the assumption that women are less competent or less reliable). In taste-based discrimination, employers or coworkers simply prefer not to work with members of certain groups; classic formulations distinguish employer, coworker, and customer discrimination. From the employer's perspective, discrimination may appear in the rejection of applicants or in lower wages, while from the perspective of coworkers it may affect wages and promotion decisions (Lovász & Telegdy, 2009; Fiske, 2006).

Statistical discrimination arises from limited information. In labor market selection processes, those responsible for hiring decisions typically know little about applicants beyond the materials submitted in the application, such as the résumé and, where required, a motivation letter. These documents do not reliably reveal how dependable, diligent, resilient, or committed a candidate may be. To avoid additional costs⁹ – and, it might be added, to avoid asking legally prohibited questions during interviews – decision-makers may fill these informational gaps by relying on perceived characteristics associated with the candidate's social group¹⁰. Beáta Nagy refers to the phenomenon as “false-based discrimination” when men, particularly in male-dominated occupations, underestimate women's potential performance. While statistical discrimination relies on supposedly empirical information, false-based discrimination is based on inaccurate beliefs (Nagy, 2001; Lovász & Telegdy, 2009).

At the macro level, it is also useful to mention expectation states theory and the concept of diffuse status characteristics. In task-oriented groups, members form expectations about others' future performance based either on experience or on diffuse status characteristics. Such characteristics include gender, motherhood (or pregnancy), age, and education, each of which may influence expectations of performance. These expectations may persist even when gender, as a general status characteristic, is irrelevant to the task, because men are typically accorded greater esteem, respect, importance, and presumed competence. As a result, women often begin

9 The employee proves unsuitable, and the selection process must be restarted.

10 Accordingly, both prohibited interview questions and stereotypes associated with women as a group of employees may place women at a disadvantage.

from a disadvantaged position. Competence alone may not suffice women may need to perform above average and demonstrate exceptional ability to overcome socially constructed disadvantages rooted in stereotypes concerning women's suitability for leadership (Ridgeway & Bourg, 2004).

Alice H. Eagly and Wendy Wood's sociocultural – also known as social role – theory argues that when physical differences between the sexes were crucial for survival, a gendered division of laboremerged as a practical necessity. In post-industrial societies, however, although physical strength and endurance are less decisive than they once were, this traditional arrangement has largely persisted. Shared cultural knowledge about women and men – of which gender stereotypes form an integral part – is reproduced through processes of socialization (Eagly & Wood, 1999).

Feminist Legal Theory

The emergence of feminist legal theory is closely connected to feminist movements and is rooted in the development of critical legal thought. Critical legal scholarship directs its critique toward the classical liberal – or traditional – legal worldview that became consolidated during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and that continues to underpin modern bourgeois legal systems.

The Critical Legal Studies movement (CLS) represents one strand of this intellectual tradition. Emerging in the United States in the 1970s, it sought to reveal the interest structures shaping social relations by critically examining traditional legal scholarship and legal practice, thereby promoting the possibility of a more just and coherent social order. CLS scholars argue that conventional legal science ignores the real processes underlying legal phenomena and tends to resist meaningful change. They also strongly criticized legal education, claiming that it functions as a process of socialization aimed at accepting and reproducing existing social relations and that, in its prevailing form, it contributes to the maintenance of hierarchical social structures. By the 1980s, CLS had fragmented and continued in related approaches such as critical race theory and, of relevance here, feminist legal theory (Szabadfalvi, 1998).

Feminist legal theory argues that the traditional legal system rests upon patriarchal power – an institutional manifestation of male supremacy and male dominance – and thus constitutes a central mechanism in the

oppression of women. Law and legal institutions historically developed on the assumption that men represent the normative baseline of society, while men's interests have been systematically privileged. One of the most influential feminist legal theorists, Catharine A. MacKinnon, famously argues that "the state, in feminist terms, is male," because men disproportionately participate in legislation, adjudication, and political decision-making and are socialized to regard themselves as the natural reference point of society. From this premise she concludes that law treats women as men treat them. Within existing legal systems this means not only that men hold power and rule, but also that they do so "in a male way" (MacKinnon, 1996).

Although Simone de Beauvoir is not usually classified as a feminist legal theorist, her work may be regarded as a precursor to the ideas developed by MacKinnon and other radical feminist scholars. Her 1949 work *The Second Sex* provided a comprehensive analysis of women's historical and social position. According to her widely debated thesis, women constitute a secondary sex relative to men, and nearly every domain of social and family organization – including language, religion, and everyday social practices – rests upon the assumption that the world is fundamentally male. From this perspective, law and the legal system likewise reflect male-centered norms. Some commentators later suggested that Beauvoir's work contributed to the way in which the second wave of feminism became associated, in certain public discourses, with the image of the "man-hating" woman who rejects family life – an interpretation that arguably misrepresents the broader scope of her social critique (Beauvoir, 1969; Joó, 2003).

Traditional legal scholarships frequently present themselves as gender neutral. Feminist legal scholarship, however, challenges this claim. In her work on feminist jurisprudence, Melissa Burchard advances a similar argument with respect to judicial decision-making. She maintains that the presumed "neutrality" and "impartiality" of adjudication already presuppose a male perspective, since complete objectivity is ultimately unattainable. Individual experiences and beliefs inevitably shape legal decision-making, and legislators as well as legal practitioners inevitably act in accordance with their own convictions. As a result, ideological bias may appear – even unintentionally – in legal reasoning and decision-making. If this argument is combined with the observation that women remain significantly under-represented in positions of power, it becomes plausible that the ostensibly "neutral" standpoint frequently reflects a male perspective. Burchard nevertheless emphasizes that awareness of one's own biases can mitigate their

effects and allow decision-makers to approach a “greater, though never perfect, objectivity” (Burchard, 2004).

Martha Minow, another prominent scholar of feminist legal theory, draws attention to a further danger: the risk of adopting a one-sided perspective. She cautions against treating any single “women’s standpoint” as universally representative. Despite the internal diversity of feminist movements, certain strands of feminist discourse have implicitly taken the experiences of the American, middle-class, white, Christian, heterosexual woman as their baseline, while paying insufficient attention to differences among women with respect to social position, religion, sexual orientation, physical and mental condition, and other characteristics. Such an approach may reproduce the very problem it seeks to challenge just as the male viewpoint can be treated as a universal norm, so too can a particular women’s perspective become artificially generalized, thereby marginalizing other standpoints and excluding the interests of many groups of women (Minow, 1988).

Despite their theoretical differences, the authors discussed above share the view that society – and consequently the legal system – tends to define women primarily in relation to men, rarely taking women themselves as the normative reference point, even in contexts where doing so would appear most appropriate. While MacKinnon, Beauvoir, and Burchard primarily interpret the existing legal order as a manifestation of male supremacy, Minow additionally highlights the risk that feminist legal theory itself may reproduce a homogenizing image of women as a single, uniform group – an approach that may ultimately exclude many women’s experiences.

Feminist legal theory remains closely connected to practical political and legal struggles. Both seek to dismantle institutionalized forms of male supremacy and male dominance, while simultaneously critiquing traditional legal scholarship to promote social change. At the same time, the field itself is highly diverse, and its proponents have not articulated a single, unified theoretical position.

The dominance perspective

Returning to the work of Catharine A. MacKinnon, the following section introduces what she terms the dominance perspective, as developed in her 1984 lecture *Difference and Dominance: On Sex Discrimination*. MacKinnon argues that a central legal doctrine concerning sex

discrimination is largely responsible for the fact that legal equality for women has achieved relatively little of substantive importance – little that would secure rights to what women need and what society has historically denied them: physical safety, the possibility of self-expression and individuation, minimal respect, and the opportunity for a productive life compatible with human dignity (MacKinnon, 2001). To explain this situation, MacKinnon discusses the doctrines of sameness and difference.

As noted above, within the sameness doctrine women are evaluated according to the extent to which they are like men. If legal norms are constructed based on empirical reality and women do not differ from men in terms of social status – because they are treated as equivalent – then women should be entitled to the same rights as men. Under this approach, gender roles should not be considered in the formulation of legal norms. The doctrine also implies a rejection of affirmative action policies, since it treats any form of differential treatment as discriminatory. In this sense, the sameness doctrine aims to eliminate distinctions from the legal system altogether. Under the difference doctrine, by contrast, women are evaluated according to the extent to which they differ from men.

MacKinnon argues that when the differing situations of women and men are interpreted through the categories of sameness and difference, a particular perspective has already been accepted. Employing these categories means assessing equality from a standpoint in which “man has become the measure of all things.” In other words, a male standpoint replaces what is presented as a neutral one. Although the sameness doctrine may appear to offer a more favorable framework for improving women’s disadvantaged position, both doctrines ultimately take the male norm as their point of reference and thus implicitly presuppose male supremacy.

The novelty of the dominance perspective¹¹ lies in its reconceptualization of gender inequality as a problem concerning the distribution of power and

11 The dominance perspective originally emerged in the context of discussions on racial discrimination in the United States, and its core idea can be more easily understood through this example. Racial discrimination alone does not provide a sufficient explanation for the social position of Black people. This is because discrimination, in itself, cannot be fully understood without reference to the underlying relations of power that produce and sustain it. The source of discrimination lies in the dominance and power of whites, which render such unequal treatment socially possible and structurally significant. If this line of reasoning is applied to relations

access to power. From this standpoint, labor market discrimination is only one manifestation of a broader structure of inequality. Phenomena such as women's poverty, prostitution, and violence against women – including sexual violence – represent characteristic dimensions of women's lived experiences that cannot be adequately understood within the conceptual framework of sameness and difference.

This is because such phenomena are experienced overwhelmingly by women; they form part of women lived realities and are intrinsic to the social experience of being a woman. Consequently, they cannot be adequately interpreted merely as comparative disadvantages vis-à-vis men. Rather, they constitute social problems that primarily affect women as a group. MacKinnon argues that politics plays a decisive role in women's social subordination, because political structures shape social organization and "approve every characteristic that distinguishes men from women" (MacKinnon, 2001).

Accordingly, MacKinnon maintains that the problem cannot be explained solely in terms of difference, since such an approach would reduce sex discrimination to sexism alone. If gender is instead understood not as "difference" but as inequality produced by socially constructed differentiation, attention shifts toward the systematic nature of male supremacy. From this perspective, systems of inequality may persist even in the absence of intentional discrimination. The dominance perspective therefore interprets women's disadvantage as "not a moral, but a political problem" (MacKinnon, 2001).

Conclusion

This article has examined the principal theoretical approaches used to explain labour market discrimination against women, drawing on insights from sociology, economics, social psychology, and feminist legal theory.

between the sexes, it may be argued that although women differ from men no more than men differ from women, their social positions nevertheless diverge because their access to power is unequal. In the context of gender relations, this inequality must therefore be understood with reference to male dominance (MacKinnon, 2001). From this perspective, gender inequality is examined primarily through the lens of women's socially subordinated position.

The analysis began by clarifying the conceptual distinction between biological sex and gender, the latter understood as a socially constructed system of roles, expectations, and power relations. Establishing this conceptual framework is essential, as labour market inequalities cannot be adequately understood without reference to the broader social processes through which gender roles and stereotypes are produced and reproduced.

The review of theoretical approaches demonstrated that discrimination against women operates at multiple levels of social organization. At the micro level, explanations such as human capital theory and the double-bind framework highlight the role of individual choices, career interruptions related to caregiving, and gendered expectations concerning leadership behavior. At the meso level, organizational practices and decision-making processes – often shaped by stereotypes and informational constraints – give rise to mechanisms such as taste-based and statistical discrimination. These mechanisms illustrate how biased expectations and perceived group characteristics may influence hiring, promotion, and wage-setting decisions even in the absence of explicit discriminatory intent.

At the macro level, broader social structures and cultural norms contribute to the persistence of gender inequality. Processes of gender socialization, the hidden curriculum in education, and the gendered division of labour reinforce stereotypes that shape both expectations and opportunities throughout the life course. The concept of diffuse status characteristics further demonstrates how gender functions as a general status marker, influencing perceptions of competence and authority even in contexts where it is unrelated to actual performance. These mechanisms help explain why women often enter the labour market from a structurally disadvantaged position and why the effects of discrimination may persist despite formal legal guarantees of equality.

The analysis of feminist legal theory situates these empirical observations within a broader critique of the legal system. Feminist scholars have argued that law, traditionally presented as neutral and universal, often reflects social structures that privilege male perspectives and interests. From this standpoint, legal norms and institutions cannot be understood independently of the power relations embedded in the societies that produce them. The critiques articulated by scholars such as MacKinnon, Beauvoir, Burchard, and Minow highlight both the structural character of gender inequality and the limitations of legal doctrines that assume a neutral or universal standpoint.

The dominance perspective developed by Catharine A. MacKinnon provide a particularly influential framework for reinterpreting gender discrimination. By shifting the analytical focus from difference to power, the dominance approach emphasizes that gender inequality is not merely a matter of comparative disadvantage but a manifestation of structural relations of power and subordination. From this perspective, labour market discrimination represents only one dimension of a broader system of inequality that shapes women's social position across multiple domains of life.

Taken together, the theoretical perspectives discussed in this article demonstrate that labour market discrimination against women cannot be reduced to isolated acts of prejudice or individual decision-making. Rather, it is embedded in a complex system of social norms, institutional practices, and power relations that reproduce gendered inequalities over time. Recognizing this complexity has important implications for legal and policy responses. Measures aimed solely at formal equality or the prohibition of explicit discrimination may be insufficient if they fail to address the structural conditions that sustain gendered hierarchies.

Consequently, efforts to promote gender equality in the labour market require a multidimensional approach that combines legal regulation, institutional reform, and broader social change. Understanding discrimination as a structural and political phenomenon – rather than merely a moral issue – may therefore contribute to the development of more effective strategies for addressing persistent gender inequalities.

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Deliberative pedagogy for the entire student body¹

FERENC HAMMER²

Abstract

In this chapter I offer a discussion of the roles deliberative student forums played in 2012–13 in the student movement in Hungary in general, and particularly in the Occupy BTK (Occupy the Humanities Faculty) events at Hungary's largest higher education institution, Eötvös Loránd University. Following a contextualizing section on contemporary Hungarian activism and the changing role of communication in political movements, I outline a set of formative functions of the forums that define the process as a powerful and unique form of pedagogy, as well as a political decision-making process. In my discussion I draw from research, participant interviews, and my own observations during some of these events to form a set of generalizable conclusions regarding the merits and limitations of institution-wide public forum processes. Deliberative forums, held at university lecture halls or elsewhere – especially when connected to student demonstrations – exemplify a genuine political learning process for young people. In this case, these forums often represented students' first

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political experiences, and these experiences effectively generated changes in Hungarian politics.

Student movements in Hungarian politics

Hungary has experienced major sociopolitical changes in the 2010s. The radical transformation of the country's constitutional system, institutional politics, and basic traits of its polity executed by a center-right coalition dominated by the Fidesz party under Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has been characterized by many observers as an unlikely combination of professional democratic politics and authoritarian power maneuvers.³ Fidesz rule has been characterized by manifestations of a majoritarian democracy, including a qualified majority in Parliament, state capture for the political and material interests of Fidesz and its supporters, and party-orchestrated intimidation of individuals or organizations critical of the regime. While in the international arena, the European Commission managed to force Fidesz to change some of its constitutional measures that conflicted with fundamental principles of the European Union, in domestic politics virtually nobody could stop Fidesz – not the weak and dispersed parliamentary opposition, the few remaining critical media outlets, or occasional public demonstrations. That is, until early 2013, when a major education policy package was taken back by Fidesz to be reworked following a series of forums, demonstrations, and Occupy-style public events organized by university students.

During 2011 and 2012, student initiatives were organized around a few significant causes, including the perceived dismantling of Hungary's constitutional framework, issues related to poverty and social inequality, and

3 Notable critics of the Fidesz-ruled politics have included organizations like Freedom House (2015), the European Commission for Democracy through Law (2011), and Reporters Without Borders (2014), which notes that “Hungary has undergone a significant erosion of civil liberties.” Other critics include Guriev and Treisman (2015: 3), who call Orbán's rule a case study of their “informational theory of dictatorship”; political scientist Fareed Zakaria (2014), who characterized Orbán's politics as “Putinism” following Orbán's 2014 declaration that he would build an “illiberal democracy” in Hungary; and U.S. Senator John McCain, who has called Orbán a “neo-fascist dictator” (BBC, 2014).

certain education-related issues. The structure of these initiatives turned out to be truly formative in affecting subsequent events and developments within the movement. (Note that the term “movement” is slightly ambitious, as these initiatives came from a loose network of cooperating student groups with a highly fluctuating cohort of participants. The initiatives lacked any institutional anchor, such as a home base, membership, action program, or elections.)

The movement was organized under the name of HaHa, an acronym of Hallgatói Hálózat (Student Network), although some actions were identified as initiatives of the Egyetemfoglalók (Occupy University) or LÉK. Participants in these initiatives originally came from major universities in Budapest, but student groups from universities in larger cities in the countryside joined some of the actions of HaHa, and a secondary school version of the movement, KiHa (Secondary School Student Network), was established in 2013. The decentralized nature of these student initiatives, their grassroots-style democratic decision-making methods, and the open-endedness of students’ tactics and strategies were basic characteristics of the movement. Most activity came from local cells at various universities, but sometimes the network launched actions on issues of national importance with the participation of network supporters and other groups. The network’s main communication tools were forums and workgroup discussions, social media for communication with supporters, and a closed Loomio (a collaborative decision-making software program) platform for decision-making.

A quick glance at a few key actions of the student groups in 2011–13 may reveal the issue foci and strategic contours of the movement. When government plans leaked in May 2011 about the prospective closing of Corvinus University, Hungary’s leading academic center in economics and social sciences, some of its students joined in collective action against this proposed closing and called on the government to stop engaging in education policy without professional consultation. It is noteworthy that the kick-off initiative of the network emphasized a deliberative goal, that is, proper professional and democratic consultation for political decisions. A strong emphasis on deliberation-related issues became the hallmark of the network’s subsequent activities.

At the beginning, activists within the network organized rallies with speeches; as the movement progressed, its strategy became more oriented toward collaborative and media-savvy actions. One of the first one of these

was an angry spoken-word group performance of students at an education policy government event in January 2012. This was followed in February by a rally that ended with an unplanned takeover of a lecture hall at the Law School of Eötvös Loránd University, where hundreds of students took part in a large debate. The network also participated in the public outcry that resulted when it was discovered that Hungary's president, Pál Schmitt, had plagiarized his doctoral thesis decades before – a scandal that led to his subsequent resignation.

The network's most influential document, titled "Six Points of HaHa," was penned and voted on at the end of 2012, following the announcement of a government education plan to introduce controversial changes in higher education.⁴ The most visible of the network's actions was a series of events connected to the Occupy BTK action in February–March 2013, with a deliberative process aimed at the whole university community at its core. The student movement's most important achievement was that the government had retreated from its original plan to decrease the publicly funded university places by about 80 percent. However, subsequently the government had introduced some of its intended policies in a piecemeal manner, it is fair to say that by and large the student movement had successfully protected the idea of free education at the undergraduate and graduate level.

It is worth noting that the organizing principles of this movement are in keeping with global changes in communication that favor grassroots efforts. In their influential article on political communication in the twentieth century, Blumler & Kavanagh (1999) note that despite increasing professionalism and ever higher-tech media, some older forms of political mobilization, such as street posters, rallies, and demonstrations, still play significant roles. In his analysis of the Occupy Wall Street movement, Gitlin (2012) underlines the importance of the flesh-and-blood experience, not only in organizing activity but also in establishing the movement's

4 The Six Points document made these demands, summarized slightly from a HaHa Facebook post from February 11, 2013 (facebook.com/ism.global): 1. Enact comprehensive reform of public and higher education; 2. Keep the limit on the number of students enrolled in a particular institution at least at the 2011 level; 3. Stop budget cuts and reinstate denied funds; 4. Cancel "student contracts" and do not limit movement of graduated students abroad; 5. Keep university autonomy intact; 6. Ensure that underprivileged families have a chance of enrolling their children in higher education.

agenda. This approach borrows Boggs's (1977) notion that no political goal can be achieved without conceptualizing and testing it in an actual group situation. It also takes advantage of the deliberative benefits of social media, including the creation of community and nonhierarchical organization forms (Agarwal et al., 2014; Garrett, 2006; Shirky, 2008; Segerberg & Bennett, 2011).

The student forums

The Student Network (HaHa) and Occupy University (Egyetemfoglalók) initiatives used a particular deliberative forum format that they borrowed from student activists who had occupied the philosophy faculty (department) in Zagreb, Croatia. They learned about the Zagreb example through a documentary film and through a visit from several activists from Zagreb. The forums in Zagreb as well as in Budapest used a format based on the principles of radical democracy, including giving power directly to the people without legitimizing external structures or hierarchies.

The student forums had four key features. First was identifying the important issues at stake – that is, creating the agenda for the forum. Second was deliberation on the issues, including weighing the various choices and dilemmas attached to each. Third, each deliberative session was concluded by a majority vote, which determined the resulting action. Fourth, working groups were created to attend to the nuts and bolts and practicalities related to the task that came out of the vote. This fairly simple and logical format was key to the initiative.

Forum features and ethos

The most important aspect of the forums in terms of the student movement was that they provided the basic frames of time, space, and structure. Here I have to reiterate that the student movement, especially in the beginning, lacked any institutional character or anchor; it was more of a Facebook-mediated swarm-like crowd of young people than a true organization. The purposefully indefinite nature of the student gatherings preserved their spontaneity and authenticity, but this organizational form (or rather, the lack of it) presented serious drawbacks – for example, in defining what the

stake was at any moment or what the crowd wanted. The instant sensational feeling of occupying a street, a lecture hall, or a bridge always contains the fear that the moment will vanish and that the collective, but somehow still aimless, effort will turn out to be futile. The forum experience brought remedies for many of these anxieties. As soon as the crowd entered into an occupied space and a voluntary impromptu moderator asked for votes on the basic issues at stake, a magical transformation occurred. The joint expression of will turned that location into a special place, sometimes into a birthplace, and the date of the voting became a reference point for the whole movement in defining its direction, aim, origin, and identity.

Another essential element of the forums' work was making agendas of all kinds, from setting broad strategies in negotiating with university leadership to arranging smaller issues, such as the proper order of issues to be discussed at the forum. The uncoordinated nature of the movement necessitated a formula that could effectively arrange the acts of the movement into a coherent process and, perhaps more important, that could establish legitimacy for the agenda.

Legitimacy is a key issue here. As could be observed from the tone of the comments at the forum, and as was highlighted by one of the student activists in an interview⁵ (Sz.T., personal interview, February 12, 2015) the driving force of the forums was the strong egalitarian ethos. This ethos was behind the choice of the radical democratic forum format, which gave all "executive powers" to the deliberating crowd and aimed to block the emergence of a vanguard or hierarchy within the movement. This firm – and frankly, sometimes slightly paranoid – disdain toward hierarchy resulted in some amusing scenes. For example, at one point the group of students who had become the main moderators of the deliberations agreed that when another well-known moderator spoke up as a forum participant, he or she would not be called on by name but rather identified anonymously (e.g., as the person in the black sweater or in the third row) to avoid creating movement "celebrities" (F.B., personal interview, February 12, 2015). In order to facilitate inclusiveness in moderating, some forums of smaller importance were assigned as practice opportunities for new volunteer moderators. Mediating informational imbalances and inequalities and

5 I conducted interviews with several student activists, identified in the chapter by initials to protect their identities: F.B. (born 1992), A.C. (born 1988), Zs.H. (born 1995), F.M. (born 1990), and Sz.T. (born 1991).

maintaining a plain style of talk were priorities of these forums, where comments loaded with technical jargon and clichés did not fare well.

Pedagogy was core to the student forums. When organizers sensed that the movement needed an update on certain issues, they invited experts who gave short presentations, thus making the forum a site of learning. This was an important opportunity for faculty engagement in the forum process because some faculty members, apart from participating in forums, could provide expertise on technical issues raised in the deliberations. Faculty engagement had not been an easy issue for teachers or for students. Because independence and authenticity were driving forces behind both the forums and the student movement, students tended to view any interaction with institutions of the adult world, even the university student government, with some suspicion.

Though fruitful cooperation between faculty and student forums occasionally took place, the fear of being co-opted was so strong that students often saw isolation as a safer option. This dilemma was partly resolved by the establishment in 2011 of an interuniversity group of concerned faculty members, Oktatói Hálózat (Teachers' Network), to channel faculty initiatives into an institutional form. If cooperation with faculty was a difficult task for the student movement, the relationship with opposition political parties, which had warmly welcomed the student demonstrations and taken steps to incorporate the student revolt into their agenda, was positively hostile. The student movement perceived the political establishment, including both government and opposition figures, as homogeneously responsible for the crisis in the education system. Oktatói Hálózat was an adult group to which students could relate, at least to some extent, because of their shared concerns about higher education.

In the group dynamics of the forums – which were three-, four-, or even five hour events – certain characteristics of the process became apparent. Spontaneous silent communication with hand signs was an important norm, because participants could express their opinion instantly without waiting for their slot to say something. These gatherings had become creative sources of expression and of the ability to generate rules through establishing, presenting, and maintaining a forum ethos. In this way students defined the forums as an important site of socialization, an experience that echoes White's (1994) idea of civil society as a disciplinary agent in the relationship between state and society. An intriguing duality could be observed in this feature of the forums: while students' disdain

toward hierarchy potentially jeopardized the effectiveness of the forum as an acting entity, the legitimacy produced by the lengthy dialectic that resulted built a strong foundation for the whole process.

Although the forums played numerous latent and manifest functions in the larger student movement, by far the most time was spent discussing issues that came up in the course of events. Some of these forums were closer to mass demonstrations or spectator events, with television crews and frequent chanting of sarcastic slogans aimed at government officials. Others were closer to academic roundtables with erudite reasoning in an intimate atmosphere. Forums included sessions of various styles, such as brainstorming and fact-finding discussions, agenda-setting discussions, deliberations for decision-making, and sessions for resolving practical questions of the group. As one student organizer noted, the forums also played a self-replicating role, as moderators often announced that participants should take the deliberative process back to their respective schools or communities (Sz.T., personal interview, February 12, 2015).

It is important to note that for outside observers or newcomers, these forums often appeared as slightly absurd public performances, with a bit of a chaotic character. The forums borrowed some of their rules and procedures from earlier Occupy events that took place elsewhere, such as a rule that participants must vote on everything, including the question of whether they should vote about whether voting was necessary for deciding practical questions. In addition, hand signals borrowed from the global Occupy movement let participants signal things like intention to speak, a direct response, a suggestion or comment, agreement or disagreement with the speaker, and desire for the speaker to wrap up. These signals gave everyone a chance to chime in during the proceedings. As Gergő Gy. Birtalan (2012), one of the early organizers of the movement in 2011–13, notes in an article about the Hungarian Occupy movement, the forums as decision-making mechanisms were far from majority-vote-driven; rather, they were conceived as efforts to find common ground. This feature emerged in part from the deliberate effort of forum organizers to create as consensus-based a political space as possible, but it also grew from the collective process that created a shared narrative frame for the issues as well as shared terms of conflict and compromise, thus creating strong narrative-cognitive foundations for deliberation.

Energizing the student movement

The contributions of the forums included more than giving the student movement time, space, processes, and actions. It may sound rather simplistic, but as one student noted, “average participants became quite excited by the sheer fact that they had been listened to by others” (Zs.H., personal interview, February 10, 2015). This helped attract students to the movement who otherwise might not have participated.

The forum experience – a spontaneous gathering of (mostly) young people, who disproportionally represent the agency of change – is no doubt an engaging spectacle and an attractive idea for many young people. The forums’ ability to involve new participants came largely from the opportunity to become engaged without words – through laughter, hand gestures, the sheer bodily experience. One student activist highlighted the role of emotions in drawing her to the process, coining the term *demokrácia-élmény* (democracy pleasure) – something she said she had never felt before, either at school gatherings or at public events (A.C., personal interview, February 12, 2015). This student was not alone in her feelings. Student forums managed to merge two seemingly divergent worlds: the world of politics and the world of cool. Though in political science the notion of “sexy politics” is somewhat underscrutinized, as an attentive observer and occasionally participant of rallies and demonstrations for democracy over the past five-plus years, I can attest that these street events achieve the most in terms of political aims when young people, sensing a hip factor, join the demonstration and, with their spontaneous, cheerful, and sarcastic energy, provide the event with a remarkable sense of force and vitality.

As much as forums were envisioned to make conflicts manifest and work as a political tool to reach certain ends, the forums occasionally functioned as sites of conflict resolution. One student organizer noted a case when a small forum was able to accommodate a meaningful exchange between ultra-right-wing activists and young social scientists, which would not have happened in any other context (A.C., personal interview, February 12, 2015). It was apparent in the atmosphere of the forum that while majority voting was a key instrument in decision-making, the aim of coming to a consensus was a stronger force than that of competition, a condition that precluded harsh and violent debates.

The forum machinery, with its focus on majority vote and consensus building, turned out to be an effective means of tackling hostile efforts to eliminate the forums themselves as part of the Occupy University process. At one forum, a group of soccer fans, who had played an important (if questionable) role in Hungarian politics in past years, rushed into the lecture hall with the intention of intimidating students into dissolving the forum. On another occasion, students critical of the Occupy initiative tried to take over a forum to push a vote to end the Occupy efforts. Both attempts were handled within the inclusive tone of the forum setting, the rules of which turned out to be effective in addressing such open conflicts.

Regardless of the sometimes rigid and sometimes chaotic procedures of the student forums, creativity and open-endedness came to be the defining features of the forums. In addition to sessions where students worked deliberately to brainstorm, all my interview subjects mentioned a “surprise factor” in the forums, when events could turn in unexpected directions. At one forum, for instance, hundreds of participating students decided to take a walk in downtown Budapest and ended up occupying a bridge. Another forum was halted by an announcement that helping hands were needed to carry the load of a bakery truck that had brought bread for the student activists as a sign of sympathy.

Conclusions and recommendations

The forum experience represented the student movement’s greatest strengths as well as its greatest weaknesses. Rather ironically, while a professional and academic consensus has emerged about the political significance of 2012–13 (and later 2015) student demonstrations – which were able to force the Hungarian government to retreat from certain questionable policies – many of the participants tend to remember the less successful aspects of the student movement. For the current Hungarian political leadership, it seems to be a matter of prestige not to negotiate with relevant parties or to rethink stated policies. In light of the power politics at play, it is truly remarkable that student movements could stop planned education policies twice since 2011. Nonetheless, this outcome was tempered by issues that students have taken to heart.

Interviews with student activists suggest that their slightly negative assessment stems from two features of the forum experience. As with all

human congregations, the student forums had a life cycle – a structure with an optimistic beginning full of fresh input and sensation, and an increasingly cumbersome and tiring end that somehow retrospectively reflects a sense of failure for the whole process. The second problematic aspect of the forum experience is connected to certain limitations of the forum format, particularly their open-endedness and inclusiveness, which sometimes clashed with the movement's political effectiveness and efficiency in reaching specific goals. Most interviewed student activists agreed that streamlining forum procedures, particularly in defining rules, would not have jeopardized the spirit or legitimacy of the forum experience. One student expressed skepticism regarding the possibility of sticking to grass-roots principles, believing that all political tools, no matter how democratic, are prone to legitimizing leadership efforts and interests (F.M., personal interview, February 11, 2015).

An assessment of the subsequent development of the movement itself and its participants shows a heterogeneous picture. Given the decentralized nature of the student initiative, it is pointless to assess what happened with its institutional framework, as even its makers thought of it as a temporary and tactical entity (Zs.H., personal interview, February 10, 2015). As for participants, one side of the movement has continued activism under different banners, while another group has chosen academia to pursue transformative goals in society. The legacy of the forums has lived on in other ways as well; there is no doubt that the 2014–15 anti-government demonstrations inherited important lessons from the student movement, especially in tactics vis-à-vis government spin and organizational principles (Jámbor, 2014).

A few recommendations can be drawn from the student forum experiences:

- Stake: Choose an issue that has significance in prospective participants' lives
- Experience: Seek organizers who have at least some experience with community action.
- Branding: Give a name to your event. Use this name in all subsequent communication.
- Kick-off: Plan your start carefully. As one activist said, "the biggest flash was when it all started" (F.M., personal interview, February 11, 2015).

- Space: Make the location of the meetings part of the identity of the initiative.
- Flexibility: Plan consciously to balance open-endedness with structure.
- Inclusiveness: Pay attention to newcomers. Give them preference at the forum.
- Deliberation: Balance discussion and decision-making.
- Power sharing: Apart from “lawmaking,” give small working groups independence.
- Documentation: Mark the time and other details of your initiatives. Make memories. Take photos and minutes.
- Nonverbal communication: Include nonverbal actions – marching, shouting, clapping, sign language – to generate energy and let participants express themselves freely.
- Scope: At some point invite a large group (and be prepared for surprises). Do a mass event. Experiment with the wisdom of the crowds.
- Visibility: Make mass action visible for the media. Wrap-up: Provide some closing at the end of the forum.
- Reflection: Make participants aware that this occasionally cumbersome feature of the forum is the cornerstone of legitimacy.
- Life cycle: Make participants aware that there is a life cycle for every public action.

In summary, the forums that university students organized in 2012–13 in Hungary can be assessed as a form of democratic participation and as a political tool to create a discursive community for making decisions, setting goals, and taking action. The forum as a creative space of agency gained significance because it was able to connect symbolic action with effective politics. The forum as a self-governing, inclusive, and open-ended political process played a crucial role in the democratic movements in the 2010s in Hungary. New and old ways of participation merged in these processes, often heavily mediated by social media, setting new paths for political action in contemporary public spheres.

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The camera as a social catalyst¹

SÁRA HARAGONICS²

Abstract

The methodology, practical aspects and social embeddedness of participatory filmmaking and specifically the catalyst method developed by the author are presented in this study through workshop processes in Hungary. While the catalyst method is based on participatory video methodology, it uses film primarily for interpersonal communication, and its main goal is the use of the camera as a group cohesion and inter-group catalyst. The method addresses representation and self-representation of participants, it is based on the principle of dialogue and aims at community building and participation.

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- 1 Based on Haragonics, S. (2023). The camera as a social catalyst. *Acta Universitatis Sapientiae, Film and Media Studies*, 23(1), 62–85. <https://doi.org/10.2478/ausfm-2023-0004>. The present article was originally published in Hungarian in the social science journal *Replika* (Haragonics, 2022) and has been revised for the English version. Both the Hungarian and the English version were produced within the framework of the four year long research project titled, The History and Current Practices of Hungarian Participatory Film Culture, with an Emphasis on the Self-representation of Vulnerable Minority Groups (2019–2023), no. 131868, supported by the Hungarian Scientific Research Fund of the National Research, Development and Innovation Office.
 - 2 Sári Haragonics has graduated from the University of Theatre and Film Arts, Budapest with an MA in documentary film directing. She is also an honors graduate in media production at the University of Bedfordshire in the UK. Her graduation film, *Coming face to face* has been screened at several festivals and won the ZOOM-IN competition at the Verzio International Documentary Festival in 2015. Her first feature-length documentary, *Her mothers* (co-directed with Asia Dér) premiered at Hot Docs International Documentary Film Festival in 2020 and won several awards around the world.

Introduction

In this study, I present the catalyst method, that I have developed in my doctoral research. The catalyst method catalyses inter-group and intra-group connections and is based on international and Hungarian theoretical work and practical experience. The method is based on participatory filmmaking, which has been used in international communities since the 1960s to give disadvantaged people the tool to speak for themselves.

In Hungary there have been only a few experiments with participatory video, though filmmaking has been used as a tool in many ways in the past few decades. I believe that creating a tradition for this methodology is important. This essay is the product of a reflective stage of my research, based mainly on my experience as a practical participatory video facilitator (group leader).³ The first part of the article introduces participatory video and its international and Hungarian tradition. Then I will present my own methodology, the catalyst method, highlighting specific exercises and illustrating the practical implementation of the methodology through two case studies. Finally, I will present the conclusions drawn from my own experiences.

Her second feature, Don't worry, Sari! has just started its festival round and won the audience award at Verzio International Human Rights Festival. Next to film directing, Sari is working actively as a participatory video facilitator. She has been holding workshops since 2015 for several different age groups, mainly across Hungary. She has written her Doctoral dissertation on how participatory video can affect our social relations – focusing on underprivileged children and youngsters. She is teaching Participatory Video at ELTE (Eötvös Loránd University) Media Department and documentary directing at ELTE Film Department.

- 3 See more about the motivation and elaboration of this method in the introduction to my PhD thesis, published in Hungarian on the Minor Media blog with the title, *A kamera mint csoportkohéziós és csoportközi katalizátor* [The Camera as a Group Cohesion and Intergroup Catalyst], <http://minormedia.hu/haragonics-sari/>. Last accessed 23. 10. 2022.

Overview of participatory social research as a principle and practice

Participatory filmmaking appeared in Hungary relatively late, in the past few decades. There is no extensive Hungarian tradition of participation as an artistic approach based on an emancipatory dialogue with minorities, although a handful of grassroots initiatives can be found, mainly in the field of theatre.⁴ In the international artistic canon, however, participatory theatre as an approach with philosophical underpinnings goes back much further. The starting point for participatory programs is similar to those of participatory action research. The philosophy of participatory action for social change is rooted in the critical pedagogy of Paulo Freire. For Freire, education is about making sense of the world and creating knowledge together. His philosophy of education, articulated in his book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), links pedagogy and social transformation. In the course of the pedagogical process, members of marginalized groups consequently learn to see themselves once again as human beings and citizens of full worth by analysing and understanding the social roots of their oppression and seeking solutions to overcome them. The essence of the pedagogy of liberation, as Freire saw it, was not the sensitization of the social majority, but rather the emancipation of oppressed groups through restoring the balance of the system of power between the majority and the marginalized into which the marginalized had been forced for centuries (Udvarhelyi & Dósa, 2019).

Although it may seem that Hungary was relatively late in recognizing the power of participation and the research and development opportunities it offers, in recent years there has been an increase in participatory theater, sociodrama, forum theater, participatory photography, participatory action research (and participatory filmmaking) have been implemented. In fact, several participatory experiments have been conducted in Hungary since the 1970s, but most of this research has remained unknown, as it was never carried out in an institutionalized setting. The first truly large-scale, well-documented, and thus preserved participatory theater experiment was the Új Néző (New Viewer) project (Új Néző 2010) in 2010, which was created as a co-production between the Krétakör Theater founded

4 Among others Kata Horváth and Márton Oblath (Parforum), Balázs Simon and Krisztián Simó (UtcaSzak), as well as several grassroots Roma theatre initiatives, etc.

by Árpád Schilling and the Káva Cultural Workshop (The Participatory Theater). In addition to theatrical experiments, we also encounter other artistic approaches, primarily participatory photography, which I will not discuss within the scope of this study.

A definition of participatory video

The international participatory video canon does not include a single consensual definition of participatory video, as the term is used in numerous ways and for many different processes. The reason for the diversity of definitions is clearly the fact that participatory filmmaking has taken many forms over the past decades, which are difficult to integrate into an organic whole while maintaining their diversity (Müllner, 2020). Therefore, I will quote the definition that I consider to be the most accurate: participatory video is “a collaborative approach to working with a group or community in shaping and creating their own film, in order to open spaces for learning and communication and to enable positive change and transformation” (PV-NET 2008, cited by Lunch & Lunch, 2006, p. 1).

The first use of the participatory video method was by researcher Donald Snowden and filmmaker Colin Low in the framework of the Challenge for Change programme of the National Film Board of Canada in 1967. They made 27 short films with members of a fishing community in the Canadian Fogo Islands, sharing the community’s problems related to poverty. By watching each other’s films, the fishermen realized that they were facing similar problems in their communities and that by acting together they could make a difference (Snowden, 1984). There are numerous international examples of minority and marginalized groups who have been able to communicate and represent their interests to political and economic decision-makers outside the community through the films produced in such film workshops, often bringing about positive change in local problems. The materials produced can be used for vertical (including downward and upward) communication with decision-makers and horizontal communication with other communities. One such example is the Rights to Healthcare programme in Nepal.⁵ At a workshop organized

5 Rights to Healthcare in Nepal: Oxfam My Rights, My Voice. 2014. <https://insightshare.org/videos/rights-to-healthcare>. Last accessed 23. 10. 2022.

by InsightShare⁶ in partnership with Oxfam, young activists produced three videos aimed at improving healthcare. The videos and community screenings reached out to local leaders, significantly strengthening local advocacy groups and providing a healthcare facility with funding for lights and solar panels.

The participatory video process enables a group or community to process traumatic experiences, face their problems, communicate them and find solutions, or strengthen relationships within the community, and can be a tool for positive social change. The method is implemented through informal practical workshops, focusing on the process of social transformation and audio-visual creation. In a workshop process, participants quickly learn to use the technical tools through games and exercises, and create video messages and films together. The results are shared with the wider community or even online. One of the main advantages of digital video as a medium is that the recordings can be instantly viewed, encouraging continuous reflection and self-reflection.

I have identified ten aspects that can help frame and interpret participatory video and analyse existing programs. These aspects are not universal and are based solely on my own previous practical experience and theoretical research.

Participatory filmmaking: 1) focuses on community and collaborative work, as emphasized by Freire in his critical pedagogy; 2) targets minority and marginalized groups, as in the case of InsightShare and other participatory film programs; 3) aims individual and group development, positive change, and empowerment – similar to experiential education and sociodrama; 4) Its goal is to create opportunities for self-expression/self-representation (raising awareness and presenting the image of the self/us through dialogue with others) – as in the project with the Navajo Indians; 5) it can play a role in communication with decision-makers, thereby bringing about progress in community representation

6 From the 1970s onwards, a number of filmmakers, anthropologists and social work professionals around the world began to work on participatory filmmaking. One of the oldest and most active of these is the British organisation InsightShare, founded in 1999 by brothers Chris and Nick Lunch. The organisation has run workshops in over 60 countries and trained local facilitators in countless communities to run the filming activities.

– as demonstrated by InsightShare and the Fogo process; 6) An important aspect is knowledge creation and sharing, whereby we interpret the world together and create together – something that Freire also emphasizes in his critical pedagogy. 7) An important part is the work/workshop process itself, which can be successful even without a final product – this is also an important element in most participatory film organizations. 8) beyond learning how to use the technology, the goal is not to transfer knowledge typical of film education – as I have experienced in my own workshops; 9) An essential part of the workshop process is the final screening, where participants receive immediate and (usually) positive feedback about themselves and the work they have invested; 10) Not only is the creation shared, but so is the authorship.

The camera as catalyst

Catalyst is a Greek word (from the word *catalysis*) meaning dissolution. Figuratively speaking, a person (factor or influence) who promotes a social process or change within a community by his or her presence, his or her communicated thoughts or actions. In participatory film workshops, the camera acts as a (communication) catalyst. Much can happen because the camera is present as a tool, and this presence generates change. The focus of the participatory film workshops I know of is to create opportunities for minority representation, where the majority of the society is only present as a target audience. Although there are some good practices abroad on how participatory filmmaking has been used to implement integration projects (i.e. bringing together two distant or opposing groups), these projects involve two groups working together in the same space from the very beginning of the workshop process. One such example is Adeline Cooke's *We Were Wives, Mothers, Daughters* (2019), a joint project by Papuan indigenous and Indonesian women to express their aspirations for independence from Papua Indonesia. In my doctoral research⁷, I have developed a methodology that uses film primarily as a means of communication between two geographically, socially or culturally distant groups, in which the encounter through

7 *The Camera as Group Cohesion and Intergroup Catalyst*. I also plan to produce a handbook of the methodology in the coming years.

the camera functions as a means of reducing stereotypes and breaking down social and spatial distance.

The catalyst method is based on participatory filming methodology. I have explored the method from the perspective that the camera can be used to reduce the social divides that dominate today's world, thereby promoting social inclusion at a local level, and speaking as much to groups from the social majority as to those from disadvantaged backgrounds, and the intersection of the two. My methodology follows the Freirean tradition, which emphasizes dialogue-based, partnership-based learning. The method addresses the representation and self-representation of participants through filmmaking, is based on dialogic guidelines and aims at community building and participation. The catalyst method as a community-based activity highlights the ways in which the moving image is used to (self-)represent certain minority groups, and the different ways in which minorities, often considered homogenous by the majority, express their own group identity through film. However, the articulation of group identity is important not only for minorities, but also for the self-definition of majority social groups. The mutual dialogue between the two can lead to the resolution of inter-group conflicts and prejudices and, through this, to a kind of local social integration.

In my experience so far, it has become clear that the problem of social fault lines is the area where it is most necessary to start a dialogue through film in Hungary today. The only question was whether to join the numerous existing Roma-non-Roma sociological or anthropological research and discourse, or to choose a different research direction. The situation of the Roma, the main target group of prejudice in Hungary, is not helped by the immense politicisation of social relations. This depoliticization and the loaded Hungarian public discourse were the main reasons why I wanted to avoid an ethnic focus in my research, and therefore I chose the urban-rural interface as the area of investigation, and in my projects I built bridges across social fault lines. In recent years, however, it has become clear to me that racism and anti-Gypsyism are inescapable in this relationship as well, both as representation and as institutionalized practice, and that the conflict in the local often brings ethnic aspects to the surface. So, although in Hungarian terms it is inescapable, the origin of my research is not the Roma/non-Roma distinction, but the creation of a methodology to bridge social gaps, to mediate between social groups. The focus of each case study is always different: sometimes it remains the urban-rural

distinction, sometimes it is transformed into a Roma-non-Roma paradigm, precisely because of the Roma students' identity definition (see more about this in one of the following subchapters, *The Szomolya-Budapest Case Study*).

In addition to Roma-non-Roma and urban-rural relations, the methodology can also be used to communicate with other groups, such as socially disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged communities, disabled and non-handicapped people, nations or nationalities in conflict, or even between employees and managers in a company.

The workshop process

Preparations

a) Definition of the age group

The catalyst method for breaking down intergroup stereotypes can be used with most groups above the age of six.⁸ However, based on my personal experience and on research by sociologist Luca Váradi, it is the high school age group (15–18 years) whose attitudes are still in the process of being formed, while they can already become aware of what is happening to them (Váradi, 2012).⁹ This is the age group whose medium of expression

8 Participatory video also works with younger children. While they are enthusiastic about making films together and it helps them express themselves, they are less aware of what is happening to them. See information about the Dombóvár workshop here: <https://abcug.hu/vacsora-szokasos-lesz-margarinos-kenyer-ketchuppal/>. Last accessed 02. 03. 2023.

9 Luca Váradi sums it up in an interview in 2019: “it is in adolescence that we decide how we will relate to people from different minorities, and peers and school play the biggest role in this [...] In the first year of secondary school, even children who previously had no problem with the Roma become anti-Gypsy, simply because they think that this is the price of belonging to the community [...] Our social identity develops by confronting questions about who we really are, what is important to us, what values we want to organise our identity around. How we relate to members of other groups is a very important part of that.” (Translated from Hungarian by the author. See original here: https://index.hu/belfold/2019/11/26/abcug_a_kortarsak_nyomasara_az_a_gyerek_is_ciganyellenes_lesz_akinek_semmi_baja_a_romakkal/. Last accessed 02. 03. 2023.)

and main communication channel is film, voice messages, video, music, and images. They can connect with each other more easily through audio-visual means and are more likely to participate enthusiastically in the workshop process.



Workshop in Budapest, 2020

Intra-group power dynamics are present in all age groups, but the identity formation of adolescents is likely to lead to fairly extreme cases. The more powerful ones try to dominate the workshop and assert their ideas, and the less leading types actually expect them to do so. As a facilitator (i.e. group leader), it is important to give space to those who prefer to keep a low profile. Standing behind the camera as a camera operator or in front of it as a cast member or interviewee is an experience that gives confidence and snaps the individual out of his or her rigidified role. Participatory filmmaking is partly about the adolescents' developing attitudes and, whenever possible, shifts in the power dynamic. Those who are more powerful or come from a social group publicly perceived to be of higher status (either through upbringing or peer influence) tend to think they have nothing to learn from members of the "lower" social class (Lunch & Lunch 2006, p. 58). In a workshop, participants constantly change roles, trying their hands alternately as camera operators, directors, lighting or sound technicians

or actors, so group dynamics and internal power relations are constantly changing. Seeing the “lower” ones involved in the filmmaking process also helps the “stronger” ones change their prejudices. Filmmaking is a task-oriented, creative, highly emotional process in which all crew (team) members are important and indispensable, which results in significant interdependence and requires a high level of trust. On a film set, a lot of decisions have to be made in a very short time, a lot of communication has to take place and a lot of tasks have to be carried out precisely in order to get the film right.

b) The field and the (self-)selection of the teenage participants

What is the basis for starting a workshop, where it happens and who participates? In Hungary at least, where this method is not widely known, one is rarely approached by a school, an after school program or an NGO interested in using this method. Alternatively, the organisation providing the service of participatory video or the catalyst method has the financial resources (typically grants) to implement a workshop, and it seeks out partner institutions open to having such a workshop.

One of the most critical issues at the beginning of such a process is the extent to which a given location, community and the participants themselves represent the majority or minority in the given neighbourhood, school, after-school program, village or town, etc. (e.g. job opportunities for young adults in southern Hungary, or the situation of Roma youth in eastern Hungary, etc.). The rather broad context of representation can help make such a workshop process more amenable to analysis, easier to assess, and thus perhaps more useful. Once we have the two locations where parallel sessions will be held (e.g. an urban-rural setup), the next task is to reach the participants. Programs are almost universally welcome in rural locations, so the local organisation can easily find 6-8 enthusiastic students. Problems that may arise here include the parents’ mistrust or the fact that teens need to work or intern on weekends. Heavy workload may be a problem for youth with a better social background (e.g. attending an elite high school in the capital or in the countryside): while filmmaking may be appealing, they may find it hard to commit to weekends. However, commitment to a workshop is an essential condition for joining. It is worth starting with more young people in case there are drop-outs. Personal contacts are also helpful in the recruitment phase. It’s worth going to classes, meeting mem-

bers of the target group and finding a dedicated teacher or local leader who knows the children and can help to engage them. One of the main developers of participatory video, the British organisation InsightShare, has a practice of using 10-20 people in a group session, with 2-3 facilitators. However, in my personal experience so far, working with fewer participants and more facilitators (mainly because of the small group work) seems to be much more effective. We usually work with 6-14 participants and 3-4 facilitators.

c) The role of facilitators (group leaders)

Before starting a participatory video workshop process, facilitators should have an adequate knowledge of the background of the prospective participants' social groups and their sensitivities. A lack of this knowledge and unfulfilled or unreasonable promises can lead to disappointment and may even harm vulnerable groups. The method is not just about putting a camera in the group members' hands, but also about being aware of the expected outcome of a workshop process

Workshop structure

The catalyst workshop structure is not fixed. As each group comes together, the workshop can and should take different forms. The sequence of exercises and games can be varied. The number and length of sessions can vary as well. In my experience, meaningful sessions require at least 3 hours to give young participants a chance to get a feel for group work. The ideal length is 5-6 hours, with a few shorter breaks and a one-hour lunch break.

Participatory video and catalyst exercises

In participatory video and catalyst workshops alike, the key principle is the transfer of empirical (i.e. practice-based) knowledge and tacit (i.e. skill-based) knowledge. In the InsightShare method, the camera is handed over to the participants as soon as the workshop process begins. As Chris Lunch says in his 2013 TedX presentation: "we need to let go of control because we know that this is not a video camera. This is a people magnet, pulling

people together to join in, to get involved... But it's not just about making videos. It's about getting people together, to plan together, to unite, to take action locally, to make changes that they want to see."¹⁰

The methodology therefore does not include any teaching of classic film theory or film history. The workshop process involves discussions of image making (e.g. types of camera shots), editing (e.g. parallel editing, single-take filming) and other film concepts, as well as some film history, but always in the context of practice, in discussions about their own work and video assignments. The methodological appendix to the study describes some of the exercises that shape the basic structure of a workshop, including both existing participatory video exercises developed by InsightShare and exercises developed specifically for the catalyst method. They use the camera to help participants develop the skills needed to work constructively in groups: to become sensitive to how they can collaborate on different tasks, to communicate clearly and to listen to each other. Although many of these exercises may seem simple, they include subtle yet crucial elements ensuring that the exercises generate confidence rather than anxiety in the participants. Young people often find it difficult to express themselves verbally. Verbal expression is easier for them when they are put in an interview situation (and the other children become a crew rather than just an audience), when they are alone with the camera, or when they are put in a fictional role and have to act something out.

After each exercise, it is necessary to allow time for reflection and analysis. Besides self-reflection (how I see myself and how others see me), there is also a technical reason for looking back: we are trying to help young people learn modes of image creation and visual expression. This tacit (implicit) knowledge is acquired surprisingly quickly by this age group and applied consciously or unconsciously. In addition to group work and group tasks, the workshops also focus on individual tasks and development.

The framing of a workshop has similarities with a training or group therapy session. One such element is the group contract, written collectively at the beginning of the group work and which commits us to the time we will spend together, thus helping to set the framework. The opening and closing circles help with arrival and tuning in to each other and with closing.

10 Chris Lunch: This is not a Video Camera. TedX. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5n-VsI2nzzEs>. Last accessed 23. 10. 2022.

Case studies

I am presenting two case studies to illustrate the catalyst methodology, the types of tasks, and the challenges, difficulties and results. One is a longer workshop process, which was, however, interrupted half-way through by the coronavirus, and the other is a catalyst process implemented during an intensive one-week camp.



Group photo on the first joint occasion of the Szomolya-Budapest catalyst workshop.

The Szomolya–Budapest case study

In 2020, as part of my doctoral research, I conducted a catalyst workshop in collaboration with trainers from the Green Spider Media Workshop in a small village in northern Hungary and in Budapest.

The project was funded by the OSI Grassroots grant awarded in 2019, and I was not only the professional leader, but also the project coordinator for the purposes of the grant. Our focus was the urban-rural divide, and we were looking for partners in rural areas and in Budapest. We started working with an elite secondary school in Budapest and a local association in the countryside. In addition to the professional learning opportunities, the aim was to sensitize both groups to each other, and this was emphasized

during the recruitment process, exclusively in relation to the urban- rural relationship. In line with the Freire's critical pedagogy, we did not seek to sensitize the social majority, but rather to build a bridge between the social majority and minority, which could also help break down the hierarchical relationship between the two. Most of the Budapest children were from middle-class families and came from its larger metropolitan area. The situation of Szomolya, on the other hand, is very specific situation within the Hungarian context, as the Roma/ non-Roma distinction is crucial there.

According to Kovai (2017, p. 14): "when it comes to the topic of the Roma, the villages and small towns of northern Hungary are particularly significant... On the one hand, this is where there is a concentration of all the problems and tensions related to this topic in recent decades: poverty, decades of unemployment, demographic changes, the disintegration of the village as an integral living space, the hierarchical nature of the Roma-Hungarian distinction, the intertwining of ethnic and class positions, and the advance of far-right political forces. On the other hand, the meanings generated in these social arenas have a strong influence on the development of Roma themes in public discourse, such as the association of Roma with existential anxieties, loss of space, lack of a sense of security, and, in general, the tendency to discuss social problems and issues of public concern through Roma themes." Szomolya is located close to a fairly large city. The city embraces the non-stigmatized white lower or middle class, turning social rivalry into inter-ethnic rivalry. Ethnicity is created through social contact, as one of its most important features is the systematic distinction between the categories of us and them (Eriksen, 2008, p. 37).

We had meetings with the participants every two weeks during the workshop. The first sessions were used to build confidence and learn the basics of camera work and filming. The participants filmed themselves and the other community they imagined: they did exercises in which they could send a message to the other group, present themselves and imagine how the young people in the other group could live and be. The group in Budapest was reserved and quiet at first, but by the end of the second session they were more relaxed. In contrast, those from Szomolya were very loud and talkative, and it was often difficult to facilitate the exercises.

In the first session, we focused on the basics and on group identity; the young participants made two types of self-representational short film, one of which was a so-called mannequin challenge, asking them to enact

a typical everyday situation in space as if they were frozen in time. The people from Pest selected the moment of a maths class, and the people from Szomolya selected the moment when they arrive at the Szomaro House (the community space of the local Szomaro Association) and say hello to each other. The Pest residents chose music written by one of their teachers, while the Szomolya residents chose Ábrahám's song *#romagyar*, which is about the Roma–Hungarian conflict and focuses on the importance of accepting each other. It was clear from the first couple of sessions that the teens from Szomolya are extremely concerned about Roma-Hungarian coexistence, and almost every exercise touched on this topic in some way. In the second introductory film, they were given more freedom to make an interview-based film, a creative mini-film, a situational fiction film and a film that included "Roma versus Hungarian" videos made by the Szomolya youth earlier.

As a final task, we chose portrait dubbing. The young people were asked to come up with a personal sentence about themselves (e.g. here are some sentences of Budapest teens: "I like to spend my holidays at Lake Balaton." "Since I have dreadlocks, people stare at me and I can't blend into the crowd... Anyway, it gave me confidence." Examples of sentences of Szomolya teens: "What I like about myself is that God has given me the knowledge that I can shear." "I really, really love my kind." "What I like about myself is that I usually help others a lot.")

On the second occasion, after the opening round, warm-up, tripod competition and stop-motion exercises, we prepared a video comics task. In the exercise, they first had to draw four pictures (this exercise reinforces their visual thinking, the limits or possibilities of film in relation to the image) and then shoot them as stills. Then they had to describe in four still images what a day in the life of another group might be like. The video of the Budapest people's image of the other included the stereotypical image of a quiet village morning with a dog barking, a cat meowing and a rooster crowing, and then the young people warming up and talking around a campfire. Another important element was the notion of "everybody knows everybody" in small villages: young people strut around in groups and say hello to everybody. The people from Szomolya filmed a very specific school situation: a school learning situation, where students help each other and smoke and talk during the break. In the afternoon, the teams screened each other's self-representational short films. The Budapest team was quite shocked when they watched the video of the Szomolya team for the first

time and realized that Roma identity is such a fundamental issue for them and a primary expression of their self-representation. We talked at length about why being Roma is the most defining identity in the lives of many rural Roma young people, and why their own Hungarianness is not the primary self-defining definition for them in Budapest.

The Szomolya teens were much more critical of the Budapest teens; based on the videos, they were afraid the Budapest teens may not be cool enough and may be prejudiced against them. (“When they start talking in Roma style, we’ll talk to them” – a young man said when viewing the videos. “I have Hungarian friends, but I also have friends who won’t shake my hand because I’m Roma. Man, if they’re gonna be like that...”) The Szomolya teens began their first session with more prejudice and excitement, while the Budapest teens were more curious, but maybe also a bit afraid. They found the Szomolya teens very loud and vehement.

The first joint event was held in Szomolya in March 2020. As a warm-up, we played a few ice-breakers, some spatial sociometry exercises¹¹ and a tripod competition in mixed teams. There were a lot of video etudes, mostly done in pairs, fostering a dialogue between them and jumpstarting the process of getting to know each other. In the exercise called *Dubbing in Pairs*, pairs of students from Szomolya and Budapest had to invent one-sentence slang statements that characterize them and say them in a posed shot. The voice of a Szomolya teen was then dubbed by a Budapest student and vice versa. This exercise shows the children how interchangeable the roles are, but also helps them learn about each other’s culture and customs implicitly. They learn the Budapest teens’ slang, e.g. “You make my eyes bleed” (in the original, “Kíégek rajtad,” meaning literally I’m burning out on you), “It’s all crap” (“Gatya az egész,” literally “It’s all pants”), “I’m really tired, I’m gonna skip this program” (“Nagyon kivagyok, offolom

11 Such exercises demand that you stand in one of two groups, based on various criteria. For example, people who like coffee vs. energy drinks; Kola or Fanta, going on foot or riding a bike, using Instagram or Facebook, playing football or billiards, being in Hungary or abroad, etc. The groupings clearly show the differences between individuals or even groups, but also the similarities. It is important to point out at the outset that despite coming from such different backgrounds, with different opportunities, temperaments and social circumstances, they share many of the same likes, aspirations and visions for the future.

ezt a programot”]. Examples of slang from Szomolya: “Last night was awesome” [“Kegyetlen volt a tegnap este,” literally “Last night was cruel”), etc. On the afternoon of the joint session, we made a single-take video clip to Manuel’s *Like in a Movie* [Mint egy filmben], which again served as a great team-builder. We formed three mixed groups and each group worked together on their own 20 seconds of choreography and lip sync. The whole process took a long time and was a kind of game of patience, where despite blaming each other (why did you mess up again, now we’re waiting out here in the cold) the initially difficult connection was helped by the joint film, resulting in a finished video clip fit to post in two hours.

Due to the outbreak of the coronavirus and the quarantine situation, we had to postpone the final sessions from the spring semester to the autumn one. This break of more than six months really stalled and set back the workshop process, the development of the children’s trust in each other, the deepening of the trust they had in us, and their confidence and independence in working with technical tools. The last two separate sessions were held in September 2020. Unfortunately, several of the Budapest participants were in quarantine, so only three of them were able to attend this time. In Szomolya, the sessions were attended by all but one teen (who was working).

The disconnection from teamwork was noticeable in both places, but especially in Szomolya. We did simple exercises with the primary goal of getting back into the groove of filming and intergroup communication. The first exercise was an individually made self-promotion film. The people from Pest were very enthusiastic, active and creative in their exercises. In Szomolya, however, there was more resistance, with several people withdrawing from the tasks. The only exercise that succeeded in getting them enthusiastic was a video message to the people of Pest, telling them why they were looking forward to the joint event and what they would like to do in Budapest. We shot this film in Szomolya first and the next day we showed it to the participants in Pest, who responded.

The rise in COVID cases forced us to make another decision: the joint Budapest event and the closing camp were merged into a joint two-day camp in Budapest. As several students fell ill or were quarantined, only two students from Szomolya and two from Pest could participate in the final camp, which was held in late September. As their first task in the session, the young participants were to find a place or a feeling that reflects what Budapest means to them. They worked in two mixed groups. The one-minute, single-take “I like Budapest” films were more about a memory

or a favourite place (e.g. having coffee in Váci Street) for the people from Pest, while the people from Szomolya expressed a wish (a footballer in the stadium).

We opened the second day with the *Future Vision TV Studio* exercise. We swapped roles, with everyone taking on the roles of reporter, interviewer, camera operator and sound engineer. The future is always an exciting topic for teenagers, wherever they live. During the exercise, the young people imagined that ten years later (in 2029) they would be invited to a TV interview and would tell us about themselves: where they live, what they do, whether they have a family, etc.

This would reveal what each teenager wants and the distancing from the present allows them to express their vision of the future more boldly, however unrealistic it might seem. It is very important that one would not get such liberated and honest answers in an ordinary discussion group as one does in this imaginary TV studio situation.

Most of the videos were edited by January 2021 and a small number of them, for which the participants gave their permission, were published online.¹² Due to the COVID situation, we did not have the opportunity to have the final screenings and the evaluation session at all, so the workshop process felt unfinished to me. Even though this was the result of external circumstances, I am disappointed. I had naive ideas of what could be achieved by filming and bringing the two groups together, but much less could be actually achieved at the cost of much greater hardship. Although the virus and quarantine situation were extraordinary obstacles this time, this type of work requires one to be prepared for the workshop having a different outcome from that predicted in the preliminary plans. We may have to face attrition, loss of motivation, uncompleted tasks, changing circumstances and countless other things, so we must become resilient (i.e. flexibly resistant) and let go of the obsessive insistence on producing a presentable final product, and rather focus on the importance of the workshop process (as do most participatory video organisations abroad).

12 See: Green Spider Vimeo channel: <https://vimeo.com/greenspider>. Last accessed 21. 12. 2022.

The Tomor–Dunaszekcső case study (summer camp)

A year and a half after the Szomolya sessions wrapped up, a summer camp was held with the support of the Minor Media/Culture Research Centre at the Department of Media and Communication, ELTE Faculty of Arts, Budapest, funded by a Hungarian Scientific Research Fund grant for research on participatory film culture. The camp employed the catalyst methodology and numerous participatory video exercises.

The concept was to hold two parallel youth camps in Tomor (eastern Hungary) and Dunaszekcső (southern Hungary). Participants in Tomor would be Roma teens (aged 10–20) living in local and surrounding villages, and those in Dunaszekcső would be non-Roma middle-class teens (aged 10–16) living in surrounding towns. The programmes and tasks of the two camps were identical, the children made films for each other, shot based on each other's footage, and they met and collaborated creatively at the end of the camp. There had been prior film sessions in both locations, so filming and group work were not entirely unfamiliar to most of the participants. Each camp had 16 young participants and 5 film facilitators, who led the sessions. I was part of the Tomor team, so my experience is based mainly on my experiences and impressions there.



Group photo on the last day of the Tomor–Dunaszekcső catalyst workshop

For the first three days of the six-day camp, the teens worked separately, each group in their own village. On the fourth day, the Tomor team of participants and facilitators travelled to Dunaszekcső, where we worked

in creative collaboration involving both groups. In addition to the film exercises, we had an opening circle, a closing circle and various team-building, ice-breaking and energizing exercises every day, and we also wrote a group contract.

The first exercise was an interview circle, then we shot a single-take video clip, aware at the time that we would be screening it for the other team, so it would also function as a first introduction video. The Tomor participants chose the song *The Gypsy Kid Was Caught by the Police* (*Megfogták a cigánygyereket a rendőrök*) whereas in Dunaszekcső the soundtrack was the song *Freak out*. The filming, which was great fun in both places, helped the group dynamics, but it also started an intergroup rivalry.



First day exercise: the interview circle in Tomor.

The finished clips were uploaded to the shared drive the same night so that the other team could watch them the next day. The young people then sent each other a message on video “postcards.” They were asked to make a film (single take, up to two minutes) to send as a postcard to the other village: they could describe their environment, their village or themselves. In both places, they worked in two groups. The films made in Tomor included a village presentation video shot while riding a bike and a “field circus” film

shot among straw bales. In Dunaszekcső, one film shows the children telling personal memories and historical facts about the Danube, while the other shows the playground, based on semi-factual, semi-fictional information. It was important that this exercise did not constrain the children to either fiction or documentary film, so they were free to choose the genre (including hybrid) that suited them.

The following morning, the two teams watched each other's single-take video clips and postcard films, and had a chance to make a response film in which they could react to what was left out. If they were inspired by something in the other team's film, they could carry it forward or incorporate it into a new piece. In Tomor, the response film was inspired mainly by the fact that "they called us Tomorians, we should also say hello, Dunaszekcsőites" (Iza, one of the participants) and showcased their own community centre, Romama, which had been left out of the other two videos. The people of Dunaszekcső were inspired by the field circus and responded with a circus film.

So communication started. The single-take films were more about self-representation and a game bolstering group cohesion, while the postcards were a more direct message, no longer just about the creators, but also about the recipients. This was further deepened by the response films. This is the point where we got to the first collaboratively developed exercise: the "generation films". The participants split into four small groups in each location. Each of the eight groups had the task of producing up to fifteen minutes of documentary footage on the theme of generations. The documentary raw material shot by Group 1 in Tomor was followed up by Group 1 in Dunaszekcső the next day, who added a fiction supplement. It worked the same way with all the other groups. This is how the films could be mutually inspired collaborations even before the groups actually met. Much of the documentary material consisted of interviews or village views. The fictional additions included re-enactments, mock interviews, chamber dramas, video clips and other illustrative materials. The teens participated in the editing of the films at the end of the camp.

The moment of meeting arrived after this exercise. We and the Tomor participants spent half a day travelling to Dunaszekcső. The teams were both scared and very excited to meet each other. The people of Dunaszekcső welcomed us with signs and a concert, which lightened the mood. The meeting of the two groups resulted in a very large group. Forty-five people have a harder time working together, listening to each other and paying

attention to each other, so we tried to limit working in this large group to the group contract and a few icebreakers. The first joint film exercise was the making of a short film titled *Eight Objects*. The teens worked in four mixed groups. They were asked in advance to bring an object or photograph that was important to them and had a story to it. The groups of eight were to make a film including all eight objects. Through brainstorming and filming, they shared a story about themselves through their personal objects, which helped them to get to know each other.

Crafting a coherent story from the objects and then filming it was also a great challenge and creative work, requiring openness, cooperation and flexibility. While varying in style, all of the films turned out to be very exciting works. The final task was a collective single-take video clip, which ended up being shot in six groups in six (interconnected) takes rather than one. Choosing the song went without a hitch; Ham Ko Ham's *My Bike Was Stolen* (*Ellopták a biciklim*) was picked because both groups knew and liked it.



Final screening at Dunaszekcső

Starting with separate exercises (single-take clips, postcard films and response films), through the generation cinematic etudes (not made together yet, but composed of shared raw material) to the films made in mixed groups out of personal objects and photographs show a clear arc and

development through which both the participants and the footage they shot began to interact. The culmination of this process was a joint single-take clip where all 32 children were in a single film. The primary outcome of the Tomor-Dunaszekcső workshop process was a shift in position and the instigation of tolerance, acceptance and learning something new. We saw that the teens could begin to connect through the exercises. Shared memories and acquaintances were formed, friendships began to sprout. Even if these may not endure, they can still be a life-changing experience for many.

Conclusion: Critical reflection

One significant conclusion from the case studies was that the catalyst method is a radical intervention, as these encounters would not happen on their own. The oppressed are isolated by the Hungarian social milieu, the Roma have very limited opportunities for breaking out of this, which is the result of the majority's (conscious or unconscious) segregationist policies. However, the catalyst method still attempts to dislocate participants from this – perhaps seemingly safe, but often hopeless – situation. This can often be both frightening and painful for them: being confronted with opportunities that others have but they perhaps don't. I cannot say for sure, but the risks for middle-class youth are perhaps smaller. They are not in danger of seeing a life that they may never be able to live, due to their circumstances. Yet how can we make these artificially built but well-intentioned bridges work effectively despite these obstacles? What are realistic goals? How can you get members of two different groups to interact in a fractured society? The catalyst method aims at the kind of dislocation that Antonio Gramsci talks about (Dósa, 2018b). The key to the liberation of the oppressed is the ability to experience from time to time, even if only for an hour, what living in freedom would be like. Learning can be such an experience. In doing so, participants can experience a life situation or even a quality of life that many have never experienced before, and it is an uplifting experience for them. It broadens their scope, or at least the image of life and the world they can imagine for themselves. And perhaps more importantly, this is what may enable many of them to recognize and eventually shed the manifestations of internalized oppression, which is an essential step towards liberation (Dósa, 2018a).

Over the last three years of research, I have found that filmmaking is an excellent tool for learning, self-awareness and expressing one's images of the other, and can be liberating for individuals, while at the same time fostering connection, learning and accepting ourselves and others, building team cohesion and strengthening cooperative skills. The workshops have also taught us to adopt the resilience necessary for the success of projects in similar fields or those aiming to break down social hierarchies. I also gained hands on experience of differences between long-term workshops lasting months and a week-long intensive camp. The advantage of long-term workshops is their continued presence in the village and the community, bringing colour to the often uneventful days of the year. The disadvantage is that the less frequent sessions (once every 2–3 or 4 weeks) are more likely to lead to attrition, with participants finding a job during the process, than in a week-long camp. Participants make more preparations for a one-week camp, and their approach to it is more planned. During the intensive one-week camp, you can progress at a completely different pace, everything is much more concentrated, which is partly good, but also severely limits the time to absorb experiences and things learned and to process new experiences and acquaintances. Being continuously present in the field can also be useful if one can keep the team together and there is no attrition.¹³

Although there was no evaluation questionnaire or evaluation film exercise at the end of these two workshops, which is one of their shortcomings, there was very useful feedback from participants in previous sessions on what they got out of the process. At the end of a previous Catalyst workshop process, for instance, students stressed that learning to use technical equipment was useful and made them more confident; they appreciated the chance to meet people they would not have met otherwise, whom they wanted to get to know even better, by visiting their homes, schools, etc.; and the fact that they learned so much not only about filmmaking but also socially was an important experience for all of them.

13 Currently, we are working with Márton Oblath in Siklósodony, where young people from Bodony are conducting civil society research using film as a tool in the framework of the *YouCount* project. We meet monthly and all seven participants are very motivated. Here participatory film is seen as a tool for a larger programme with long-term, concrete goals. Perhaps that is why it has a better chance of working? Is that why the participants are more motivated?

Besides the feedback and evaluation process, another important area to focus on in future workshops is defining the goal. What is the goal we are working towards, what do we want to achieve with the process or with the films we make? I tend not to identify a specific goal beyond the basic objectives of the catalyst method (sensitising the two groups to each other, reducing prejudice, learning self-expression, familiarizing the unfamiliar and thereby accepting each other more). Yet, identifying specific goals may be helpful (integration in school, achieve a higher rate of further education in a community, helping with finding jobs, etc.). I have been concerned with the formulation of these goals, and it is something I focus on in my research.

Based on the experiences of these two (and previous) workshop processes, the method seems to be able to generate change mainly at the individual (personal) level, at least for now, while wider social impact cannot be realized yet. The latter would require disseminating the films, organising discussions, carrying out a more in-depth (longer-term) work process in a region, and sharing the films in a systematic way.

I believe that the experiments in dialogic filmmaking we are collaborating on with several colleagues will one day make a difference not only at the micro, but also at the macro level.

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Gender provocation made by Marcel Duchamp: The case of the reversed Fountain from 1917¹

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Abstract

This essay examines the gender aspects in Marcel Duchamp's conceptual oeuvre, which have long been partially or completely neglected in the Duchamp literature. The analysis focuses on the well-known ready-made, called *Fountain* (1917/64), which became the symbolic object of the very beginning of the conceptual art paradigm. My hypothesis is that Duchamp's conceptual work, mixing up the logic of circular arguments with humor and irony, can be interpreted as an "avant-la-lettre" gender provocation, confronting interpreters not only with a gender task – understanding and defining our social gender roles, tasks and desires facing the already existing possibilities given in our social surroundings – but also with an over-gender task that goes beyond the understanding of our biological endowments and given social gender roles and positions. Hence, on the one hand, this early gender provocation, carried out by the *Fountain* of Marcel Duchamp performing ironic aesthetic value judgments – modelling the structure of logical self-contradictions – encourages gender awareness; on the other hand, – by setting up premises leading to senseless conclusions – it creates a gender trap.

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My argument is that the interpretation of this gender trap, modelled by the *Fountain* at the beginning of the 20th century – in the lack of an over-gender awareness – can result in reductions, denying the complexity of our human existential and co-existential roles and neglecting the over-gender roles and positions of human beings as autonomous and yet co-existentially related individuals.

Keywords

Conceptual art paradigm, readymade, gender provocation, gender awareness, over-gender awareness.

The birth of the conceptual art paradigm

The French-born Marcel Duchamp (1887–1968) is considered to be a subversive person, who introduced a new paradigm in the big narrative of western art history at the beginning of the 20th century. This new paradigm called conceptual art became within a few decades a new measure of performance for artists conveying intellectual contents in their artistic productions and questioning the traditional status of the art object as unique, material, and collectible. In the conceptual art paradigm, a work of art, which in the traditional sense, inherited in the big narrative of western art history, refers primarily to itself and then to the world, from here on, it starts to refer primarily to the world, and then to itself. In this new paradigm, an artwork becomes relatively functional, submitted to the idea, just like a non-attractive sign or a seemingly transparent verbal statement. Therefore, the vehicle of conceptual art can be anything, from everyday objects to photographs and texts, because the idea transmitted by the object becomes more important than the medium itself. The classical conceptual artist substitutes the creation of a beautiful art object for the visual transmission of “a great idea.”

Although conceptual art is often compared to philosophy, it is rather a new field of cultural production, situated halfway between philosophy and visual poetry. Indeed, poetry and, especially, visual poetry was an important source of inspiration for Duchamp. When reading the visual poems of the late 19th-century French literature by Stéphane Mallarmé

and Guillaume Apollinaire, the anti-representational poems, novels, and short stories by Raymond Roussel, the tautological texts by Alfred Jarry, the speculative etymologies by Jean Pierre Brisset, he said that those writers and poets would be the most appropriate to his “ideal library.”

As for philosophy, Duchamp was not an expert in philosophy, but he seemed to be very interested in some popular theories and speculations of his age. One of these was that of Gaston de Pawlowski, the author of a science fiction novel (*Journey to the Land of the Fourth Dimension/Voyage au pays de la quatrième dimension*) first published in 1911 and then in 1923, implanting the thoughts of the Einsteinian physics. He liked to refer to the popular thoughts of the logical empiricist philosophers of the Vienna Circle, arguing that “everything is tautology except for the black coffee” where the senses can gain certainty about the existence of things (Duchamp, 1977, pp. 209–210). On the basis of this theory, Duchamp developed his own language theory, which he called “pictorial nominalism,” emphasizing the “plastic existence of words,” based on “plastic meanings” and used for expressing “plastic truths” (Duchamp, 1999, p. 25).

However, if the primary task of philosophy is to understand the existence and modes of operation of things and phenomena in the world, then works of art – creating tautologies or opening different fields of meanings and playing those fields against each other – are not a traditional task of philosophy. It is rather a poetic function of communication or, as Duchamp said in an interview, it can become a source of humour as well (Duchamp, 1962, p. 83). But if humor and irony have something to do with understanding the world, our relation to the world, and to ourselves, then visual poetics and visual reflection can be connected to cultural fields conceptualizing the world. Conceptual artworks do not conceptualize the world in the way philosophy and literature do – instead, they establish a new field of expression based on the interdependence of rational and intuitive modes of cognition, verbal and visual forms of utterance, conscious and non-conscious ways of expression. This new field, called conceptual art, became a new paradigm in western art history from the 1920s onwards. As Joseph Kosuth, the founder and ideologist of the conceptual art movement stated: “All art (after Duchamp) is conceptual (in nature) because art only exists conceptually” (Kosuth, 1969, pp. 915–917).

Readymade–(re)made as an ironic aesthetic value judgement

The prototypical object of conceptual art is the readymade, which is not “made ready” by the conceptual artist in a material sense, but—as an objet trouvé—it is found by him, and it is conceptually remade or reconceptualized by him. The term “readymade” first used by Marcel Duchamp, seems to refer to a three-dimensional industrial object made by a machine based on the plans of an unknown engineer or industrial designer. But in this context, a simple industrial objet trouvé becomes the vehicle of meanings, thus revealing the intellectual dimensions of art – called the fourth dimension by Duchamp – and at the same time it shows, how “meaning-making” can be a personal and personalizing gesture on the one hand, and on the other, it ironically reveals how “meaning-fabrication” can become a ridiculously pointless, and never-ending story – the latter is more readily the lesson of his Opus Magnum, *The Large Glass* realized between 1915–23. The object chosen, selected, and appropriated by the conceptual artist is a personalizing gesture. Choosing only one of the million similar objects from the conveyor belt of the awakening consumer society means on the one hand, the affirmation of the choosing self, on the other hand, a reflection on a crucial change in the object culture, which was based on handicraft until this period, and from now on, it becomes subject to mechanical mass production.

Interestingly, the spread of mass production and photographic reproduction took place at nearly the same time, raising some similarly troubling questions in several artists and thinkers. At the beginning of the 20th century, and especially in the 1920s and 1930s, this problem was also thematized by some, particularly sensitive and responsive artists such as the Hungarian László Moholy-Nagy, photographer, painter, and master teacher at the Bauhaus School, and by the German Walter Benjamin, philosopher of art and literary critic. Moholy-Nagy created photographic pictures with the exclusion of the camera – called photograms – and thus returned the missing immediacy and personification of the mechanical reproductions to the creative process, the problem that Walter Benjamin complained about in his well-known essay, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (Benjamin, 1935).

Marcel Duchamp, contemporary of Benjamin and Moholy-Nagy, with the personalizing gestures of everyday objects, like a urinary bought in a sanitary ware shop in New York at the beginning of the 20th century

and exhibited later as an artwork, also seemed to respond to the problems formulated by Benjamin's 'mechanical reproduction' essay. He did it with an ironic attitude, thereby the readymade can be conceived as an ironic aesthetic value judgment.

Before elaborating this idea more in detail, I consider it necessary to review the most typical interpretations of the readymade and some important statements and definitions of its reception history.

The numerous attempts to define Duchamp's readymades have revolved around three main concepts. Below we seek to present these through the ideas of three prestigious interpreters: Octavio Paz, Thierry de Duve, and Arthur C. Danto.

One approach—which is, among others, the starting point for Danto—is defining a readymade as a thing or object which has gone through a metamorphosis. In this sense, a readymade which turned from a “mere real object” into a work of art performed a miracle of transforming a simple, everyday object of commonplace existence into a real work of art. As he states in the preface of his book, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*: “(...) as a matter of art-historical precedent, who first performed the subtle miracle of transforming, into works of art, objects, from the *Lebenswelt* of commonplace existence: a grooming comb, a bottle rack, a bicycle wheel, a urinal” (Danto, 1981, p. 6).

Another definition suggests that readymades are not to be interpreted in themselves but as signs or references behind which one may suggest the artist's gesture or intention. According to Octavio Paz, for instance, readymades (in plural) are signs of questioning and negating artworks (Paz, 1978, p. 20).

A third approach represented by Thierry de Duve states that the readymade is neither an object nor a group of objects, nor the artist's gesture or intention but a statement (*énoncé*) attached to any object: “this is art” (Duve, 1989, pp. 7–65).

Beside interpreting readymade as an object, a sign, or a statement, a recurring question remains for the three cited authors—and interpreters in general—whether readymades are works of art.

According to Paz, readymades are neither art nor anti-art but something indifferent, as their interest is not plastic but rather critical and philosophical (Paz, 1990, p. 20).

Thierry de Duve thinks a readymade, in the traditional sense of the word (according to the former paradigm of art), is not a work of art but

an artifact of a piece of artwork, an artificial work of art on a second level. It is not simply art, nor art for art, but art about art, or in a French term, “art á propos de l’art” (Duve. 1989, p. 15). However, from the ‘80s and ‘90s on – as pointed out also by de Duve – it has been evident to almost all interpreters that readymades belong to the art field.

Danto, in whose art philosophy indiscernibility is a central question, i.e., whether one can differentiate between objects which look identical (meaning which one is a work of art and which one is not), comes to the conclusion that an object can only be seen as a work of art in the context of interpretation. The interpretation is the lever – states Danto – that takes an object of the real world up to the art world, where it may take an unexpected guise. Readymades, which he calls commonplaces, were, in this sense, originally no artworks, but with the time elapsed, in the context of interpretation, they became artworks. The act of artistic identification, which elevates the mere thing into the Realm of Art, creates in Danto’s views also an ontological difference between common objects and works of art (Danto, 1997, p. 53).

All three concepts – whether they interpret readymades as an individual or collective objects – suggest that one of their essential characteristics is precisely the ontological uncertainty that keeps readymades on the borderline of art and non-art, thus making it possible and even necessary to reflect on art as a changing concept.

The relation between the context of interpretation and the judgment of whether readymades are works of art is also indicated by their cosecutive-ness. In 1978 Octavio Paz sees the relation between artwork and anti-artwork as a two-way, back-and-forth movement, a movement between statement and negation, and emphasizes the inherent uncertainty (Paz, 1990). However, subsequent studies by Danto and de Duve indicate that the situation changed somewhat in the ‘80s and ‘90s. From then on readymades seem to be less attracted to the pole of non-art than that of art. In other words, the movement has taken a direction: readymades have been interpreted more and more as works of art or works of art reflecting on art.

To be able to interpret readymades as works of art, as mentioned by de Duve, the paradigm shift within the medium of art was unquestionably also necessary (Duve, 1989, p. 11). Thus, it became possible to consider something a work of art, which would not have been considered a work of art a hundred years ago.

So, the movement is two-fold and parallel. While the interpretive field depending on up-to-date art concepts and definitions gradually accepts readymades, the interpretive field itself and the meaning of readymade are also changing. For the artistic field surpassing the artwork – as emphasized by Bourdieu who introduced the term field – is itself a product of constant historical and social changes, as, according to him, artistic autonomy and taste cannot be considered as separate from socio-cultural determinants.

At each moment in time, in any field of struggle whatsoever (the whole social field, field of power, field of cultural production, literary field, etc.), agents and institutions engaged in the game are simultaneously contemporaries and temporally discordant. The *field of the present* is merely another name for the field of struggle (as shown by the fact that an author of the past is present to the exact extent that he is still at stake). Contemporaneity as presence in the same present only exists in practice in the struggle that synchronizes discordant times or, rather, agents and institutions separated by time and in relation to time. (Bourdieu, 1996, p. 158)

Duchamp's readymades, which became "artworks" in the soil fertilized by avant-garde movements, hence having started out with a delay, from the context of modern art, really owe their success story to this very change. Readymades managed to be interpreted as artworks in a context of art and art theory (the '80s and '90s) when theories and ideas on the modern episteme had been accepted. That is when the interpretive field was ready to interpret Duchamp's readymades not only as a provocation despite their uninteresting visual appearance.

In this context well soaked in theory, it was no surprise that a so-called missing object (for the first version was lost) no longer existing in its original form, Duchamp's urinal entitled *Fountain* (1917), managed to become one of the most controversial modern (and later postmodern or contemporary) works of art.

On the other hand, the "subtle miracle" performed by the readymades and the "transfiguration" mentioned by Danto (Danto, 1981, p. 6), do not seem to be so mystical and incomprehensible as one may suggest based on the expressions above. The process of readymades becoming artworks and being prepared and interpreted as works of art takes place in rather calculated and identifiable moves, made partly by Duchamp and partly

by “players” of the interpretive field (interpreters, critics, art dealers, and audience).

In other words, the readymade becoming a delayed work of art can be considered a long process, which does not start with exhibiting the object, but it does not end there either. It starts with Duchamp’s careful preparatory work and continues with the perception history following the exhibition of the object. And it goes on until the canonization as work (or works) of art.

Below we seek to go through this process in a time frame of about half a century by touching upon the main stages of Duchamp’s reception in terms of readymades and also highlighting the ideas on which the canonization of Duchamp’s readymade – completed by the end of the 20th century – was built. Then we will return to the ontological dilemmas raised by readymades and seek to outline from the perspective of the ideas above what readymades really are.

The shift in the approach concerning readymade can be summarised along the following boundary points:

1. From the early 1910s to the early 1960s: Duchamp is an artist personality known and worshipped by his friends and acquaintances (e.g., Apollinaire, Breton, H-P. Roché); his readymades and all other activities only serve to support his own excellence. A prime example for that is Breton calling Duchamp “one of the most intelligent and hence, (to many) the most disturbing people of the 20th century“ (Breton, 1966, p. 355). However, during this period only a few people beyond the personal circle know Duchamp and even fewer know the readymades.
2. The 1960s and ’70s. In the milieu defining the theoretical inquiry of the era, the main focus is – with only a few exceptions – on the masterpiece *The Large Glass*, or more precisely on finding the meaning of the Glass. There is still not much talk about readymades. This period launches an intensive series of interpretation and reception among artists and theorists alike that, despite its temporary extremities, paved the way for the construction of a complex image of Duchamp. A lot of interpretations came to light that later became dominant (J. Clair, O. Paz, J.-F. Lyotard, etc.). Although it was still to be determined whether Duchamp was an artist or anti-artist, sooner or later, he was going to be canonized as one of the most significant participants of the 20th-century art world, comparable in importance to Picasso.

3. Since the late 1970s and mainly from the '80s and '90s researchers have laid more and more emphasis on the significance of readymades in art theory. The time elapsed has enabled some art historians with the necessary theoretical competence (such as Thierry de Duve) to see Duchamp as the creator of a new artistic paradigm as somebody who represents thinking about art and its co-concepts. The Duchamp oeuvre canonized this way becomes a basic reference for art theory (A. C. Danto, Jean-Luc Nancy, P. Bourdieu) and theory of art history (H. Belting, G. Didi-Huberman) discussions about the nature and social position of 20th-century art and its offspring, the so-called contemporary art.

In my view, one of the most interesting features of readymades is that they give us an account of a relation to the world that mattered to him as an ironic subject. In this respect, the objects embody the intellectual prints of the artist – as explained in detail in the relevant chapters of my book on Duchamp (Házás, 2009, pp. 102–121.) They can also be considered parts of an oeuvre concept or parts of a narrative in which the objects with the notes attached to them and the comments about them outline a certain world view. This world view is based on the ironic – or as Duchamp calls it – the “affirmative ironic” relation, in which not only the duality of negation and affirmation is present (as in irony in general) but also the defeat of affirmation over negation.

However, as in the history of western aesthetics and rhetoric, the irony was considered a linguistic formation and/or a linguistic-rhetorical manifestation, the fact that Duchamp – following the footsteps of Socrates, Nietzsche, and Kierkegaard (Lyotard 1977, pp. 49–50) – conveyed irony with objects can be regarded as an innovation in itself. It is what Breton saw in Duchamp when he called him “one of the most intelligent people in the early 20th century” in *The Anthology of Black Humour* (Breton, 1966, p. 355).

To express irony, it is necessary to have the characteristically Duchampian titles full of ambiguity and puns, creating a sense of split, duality, and temporality so typical for irony (Man, 1996, pp. 187–228). On the other hand, it was also necessary to have the great narrative of western art history according to which the ironic statement could be worded.

Based on the above-mentioned, we can say that in this system readymades can function as statements – as de Duve revealed (Duve, 1984).

However, as they are ironic statements stating something about works of art and art within the artistic field, the introduction of readymades as a genre can be interpreted as ironic aesthetic value judgments about art and works of art depriving the statement of its very clarity, and thus of its judging nature. Based on all this, it is not surprising at all that readymades achieved considerable theoretical success in the realm of modern and postmodern art philosophy, which do not necessarily prefer obvious answers, and especially in contemporary art and art theory.

What is a “gender trap” for and how to avoid it?

When we look at Duchamp’s more important works, it is not at all far-fetched to state that one of the central ideas in his oeuvre is man-woman relation, entering into its details, its variations and its differentiated problematization. By that, we do not only mean the obvious prints depicting genitals such as *Female Fig Leaf* (*Feuille de vigne femelle*, 1950) shaping female genitals and breasts, the breast-shaped statuette *Please Touch* (*Prière de Toucher*, 1947), or the phallus entitled *Dart Object* (*Objet-Dard*, 1951). The topic of the sexes also comes up in other works of his, such as early paintings and drawings, or his masterpiece *The Large Glass* (1915–23), in L.H.O.O.Q. (1919), a Mona Lisa with a mustache, or in the readymade labeled *The Air of Paris* (*L’aire de Paris*, 1919). It surfaces even in his various conceptual photos, such as J. Wasser’s photo of the chess performance made at a 1963 exhibition where a clothed Duchamp played chess with an anonymous naked woman with *The Large Glass* in the background, or in his Cine-Sketch: *Adam and Eve* in which Duchamp appears as Adam.

And last but not least, let us include the central subject of the present study, which is probably the most commented object of the 20th-century art theory. It is an everyday object, “original” dating of which in 1917 was lost, and which Duchamp replaced with a seemingly identical object in 1964: the urinal turned upside down, entitled *Fountain*, which we will scrutinize below from the perspective of the contemporary discussion revolving around social and biological gender roles and positions.

However, for a long time, the reception history of readymades either completely ignored gender-related questions or they were only marginally represented. But for a few exceptions authors did not deal with gender issues, or if they did, they relied on popular cultural schemes often neg-

lecting the unique, Duchampian interpretation. A typical example for that is André Breton's simplifying and – without any doubt markedly male-centered – reading, which launched a long series of interpretations. Breton judges Duchamp's apparent masterpiece, *The Large Glass* as a mechanistic, cynical interpretation of the phenomenon of love (Breton, 1969). In the range of interpretations on the relation of Duchamp and gender, those of Arturo Swartz (Schwarz, 1997) and Octavio Paz (Paz, 1990) are less simplifying; however, they totally ignore the dialogue between the works and the spirit of the era. The profound studies by Jean Clair and Georges Didi-Huberman (Didi-Huberman, 1997) on research about the spirit of the late 19th and early 20th centuries and the gender issue from a culture-historical perspective, however, analyze the works thematizing the male-female issue but exclude the feminist movements themselves and their impact on the spirit of the age from their point of view, thus, considering gender relation a timeless, eternal and constant issue, which Duchamp on the other hand, examined apparently from the perspective of here and now (or there and then).

The questions were first examined thematically by Amelia Jones in her book *Postmodernism and the En-Gendering of Marcel Duchamp* published in 1994. Besides analyzing the works professedly as a feminist art historian, she scrutinized Duchamp's author-function and stated that Duchamp rebelling against "the phallus of artistic authority" became, paradoxically, a kind of a "father figure" for the American postmodern authors (artists, critics, and art historians) protesting against the masculinist ideologies of the Greenbergian modernism (Jones, 1994). The fact that starting with the '60s and '70s Duchamp became a substitutive "father figure" for art interpreters could be explained by Gizella Horváth's notion of vacancy aesthetics. She introduces the term in her book as a comprehensive theoretical principle of modern art which in her view as well starts with the story of Duchamp's urinal (Horváth, 2016, p. 17). According to Horvath's theory, derived from the lack of the Kantian notion of beauty, vacancy is the foundation of the modern paradigm, as it is a constitutive element of modern works of art (Horváth, 2016, pp. 19–20).

The urinal which Duchamp bought in a sanitary ware shop at the dawn of consumer society, in the early 20th century in New York, labeled it with the name of the shopkeeper (R. Mutt), and the year (1917) and then sent it to an exhibition where Duchamp himself was one of the jurors. However, as the members of the jury did not accept the urinal as an exhibit, he went

on trying. He asked his friend, Alfred Steiglitz, the famous photographer, to take a photo of the object. Steiglitz's photo of the urinal was published in the avantgarde New York journal *The Blind Man*, which was edited by Duchamp and his friends. The journal published it as "the exhibit" declined at the Exhibition of Independent Artists.

All this took place at the time of the suffragette movements when civil rights movements demanding equal rights for women were thriving. There was a mushrooming for women's organization forums and the news – especially in women's newspapers – featured heroic stories about "the first woman to..." on an everyday basis (Albistur and Armogathe, 1977, pp. 33–401).

In a sense, *Fountain* was also such a vacancy-work, where vacancy is not only a capacity but also a trap. Like many other readymades, *Fountain* also draws attention to apparent contradictions and the resulting trap situations. Such a trap situation is one of the central topics in the increasingly popular gender philosophies of today: the issue of the relationship between biological and social gender. The issue, which has often been simplified and politicized since the beginning of the twenty-first century, has been circulating in public discourse as a "gender ideology", subordinated to a battle of values between different lifestyles.

How our biological and social gender roles relate to each other, and how individual identity constructs can relate to role constructs in society – were the questions that Duchamp found highly intriguing in a culture-historical era when differentiation of gender roles and role patterns had already begun but the theories underlying the understanding of the social phenomenon had not yet been born. It means that well before Simone de Beauvoir's influential book, *The Second Sex*, was published in 1949, and before the apotheosis of its frequently quoted and even more frequently commented sentence: "One is not born, but rather becomes a woman" (Beauvoir, 1949, Tome 2, p. 13) Duchamp had provoked his audience into gender consciousness before the social field of gender philosophies emerged and the description of such a concept was introduced.

On this basis, from a perspective of nearly a hundred years, we can say that many of Duchamp's works were avant-la-lettre gender provocation, as they did not only direct attention to one of the most rapidly changing areas of the western culture but also pointed out the contradictions underlying the changes.

For readymades conceived in the 1910s and '20s, around the creation of *Large Glass*, are also objects highlighting the dynamics of permanence and

changes. The first readymade, for instance, *The Bicycle Wheel* attached on a stand upside down from 1913 (whose original was also lost), on the one hand, conveyed ideas of movement, changes, and *pantha rhei* by Heraclitus, and on the other hand, it also conveyed the human desire to freeze and fix change; all this in its own contradiction.

Fountain, the urinal, taken from its use and turned sideways, can be considered a prime example of a male object. A urinal is designed and made for men only because women cannot use it without inconvenience. It is an object connected to the biological level of a man's existence. Seemingly, it has nothing to do with gender roles. However, as Pierre Bourdieu states in his book *Masculine Domination* introducing the term paradox of doxa, these two levels are very hard to separate. Accordingly, masculinity, as a relation, is constituted paradoxically in society, the worldview that ranks the sexes institutes the phallus, which is constituted as the symbol of masculinity, and constructs from their biological differences genders as two hierarchized social essences:

For the paradox is that it is the visible differences between the female body and the male body which, being perceived and constructed according to the practical schemes of the androcentric worldview, become the most perfectly indisputable guarantee of meanings and values that are in harmony with the principles of that worldview: it is not the phallus (or its absence) which is the basis of that worldview, rather it is that world-view which, being organized according to the division into relational genders, male and female, can institute the phallus, constituted as the symbol of virility, of the specifically male point of honour (nif), and the difference between biological bodies as objective foundations of the difference between the sexes, in the sense of genders constructed as two hierarchized social essences. Far from the necessities of biological reproduction determining the symbolic organization of the sexual division of labour and, ultimately, of the whole natural and social order, it is an arbitrary construction of the male and female body, of its uses and functions, especially in biological reproduction, which gives an apparently natural foundation to the androcentric view of the division of sexual labour and the sexual division of labour and so of the whole cosmos. The particular strength of the masculine sociodicy comes from the fact that it combines and condenses two operations: it legitimates a relationship of domination

by embedding it in a biological nature that is itself a naturalized social construction. (Bourdieu, 2001, pp. 22–23.)

And he does that on the one hand, regarding other men, and on the other hand, regarding the other sex (here women). The difference in viewpoints – as Duchamp also emphasized in his notes written about “changing viewpoints” (Duchamp, 1994, pp. 191–192) – largely defines the attitudes and interpretations.

The object entitled *Fountain* does not state or negate anything apart from itself, it merely separates, highlights, deprives or makes things incomplete and turns things around. With its contradiction, it provokes questions. Can we separate our biological and social gender roles from social norms and stereotypical role patterns? And can we separate our biological and social roles that belong to our own gender? And if we can, do we do all that compared to whom or what? Who or what is the other one that we relate ourselves to? Is our biological and social gender identity a part of our identity construct? How similar and how different are we as women and men? What is the origin of our similarities and differences, and how do they relate to each other? How do we see each other and ourselves in this relation? To what extent is this relationship a part of our individual and cultural identity?

In this sense, the interpretation of Duchamp’s works can really be considered an opportunity or even a challenge or a philosophical riddle, which, according to the logic of Zen-Buddhist koans, does not provide an answer to the question. One can only find an answer to these riddles in one’s own life, going down the road of self-knowledge and world-knowledge based on one’s own experience, overcoming one’s own traps. And by answering one’s own questions one can ideally form an own inner balance also adapting to one’s own changes.

A probably necessary but not always sufficient condition towards that is one’s own awareness of one’s biological and social gender roles and their affirmation on a social level. Reflecting on Duchamp’s early gender provocations, one could say that there is something here that one should not avoid, something that is beyond one’s awareness-raising processes about gender roles.

Something that is getting harder and harder to avoid, as reflected by the narratives of popular culture and the increasing number of theses on gender theories. Perhaps that something is none other than the riddle also suggested by the readymade *Fountain*:

What is it that is beyond our similarities but within our differences?

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Global formats and local politics in contemporary Eastern European television series¹

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Abstract

In the last decade, there has been an emerging scholarly and public interest in the Eastern European region's geopolitical and cultural status, followed by a significant trend of locally developed but globally distributed Eastern European quality television series. Knowledge production in and about former socialist countries implies the structural effects of broader geopolitical hierarchies. I intend to show the relationship between transnational aesthetic formats, regional political ideologies, and post-socialist cultural hierarchies by analyzing media texts such as the Czech series *The Sleepers* (*Bez vědomí*, HBO, 2019) and Hungarian *The Informant* (*A besúgó*, HBO Max, 2022).

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Introduction

Relying on comparative narrative- and textual analysis, this article argues that contemporary Eastern European serial products are utilizing a transnational, Westernized image of socialism and following the trends of global social nostalgia to address contemporary tendencies of political authoritarianism. These products use socialism as an allegory to implement social criticism towards right-wing populist regimes and alarming issues such as white nationalism, surveillance capitalism, and social control. They illustrate television's capacity to create public debates about political ideologies, collective memory, and amnesia, and its role in structuring "otherness". These series merge the classic spy culture of the Cold War era with networks of capitalist surveillance technologies and highlight patterns in which Cold War aesthetic and generic themes have reproduced in contemporary culture. The spy genre is particularly well-equipped to depict both the fears and hopes of people living under socialism, especially during periods of political change. However, the article avoids engaging with the personal, lived experience of surveillance, focusing instead on institutional mechanisms, and contemporary socio-political processes. Instead of focusing on the historical context, the article shifts attention to the current implications by the spy genre, particularly within its socialist setting. With an interdisciplinary approach, some argue that former geopolitical hierarchies have profoundly shaped the outcomes of Eastern Europe's transition processes. This dynamic is underpinned by shared projections of subordination and narratives of identity, marked by a hierarchical and precarious political representation:

These analyses offer new ways to understand political and economic processes in cultural contexts and draw attention to subtle modalities of cultural colonialism, anomalies of platform imperialism, entanglements of local media policies and service industries, measures of unequal cultural power, differences of heritage media in transnational versus national popular images, and asymmetrical geopolitical relations that are always present in audiovisual content production. In these accounts on the screen industries in Eastern and Central Europe – and post-colonial Eastern European studies in general – there is an understanding that the Global North dominates not only discourses and infrastructures, but also social imaginations of

cultural production, storytelling, and media policies. (Hermann & Strausz, 2024)

In her 2013 research paper *Televised Remembering*, Ann Grey argues that television is first and foremost the best at advertising and disseminating hybrid genres that seek to commemorate what is considered to be an important event in a nation's past. "Television, then, plays an important role in representing the past for its viewers, and in doing so is a major agent in the production of national and social memory; thus, developing methods for investigating and analysing this phenomenon is an important activity for those interested in the significance of memory in contemporary societies." (Grey in Keightley & Pickering, 2013, p. 79) HBO's many series on late socialism shape cultural memory by recreating historical events that resonate with today's political landscape and remain close enough in time for many viewers to remember personally. In the Czech HBO series *Burning Bush* (2012), for example, which dramatizes the suppression of the Prague Spring in 1968 and the symbolic suicide of Jan Palach, real archival footage is used in one episode to enhance the story's authenticity. A montage of Palach's funeral briefly shifts the viewer out of the fictional world, asserting that the events depicted are not just 'stories', but history. Citing literary scholar Andreas Huyssen, Ann Grey points out that television can create a link between the past and the present:

Huyssen draws our attention to the voracious nature of forms of representation in trawling the past for evocative and powerful content which, in the age of multiple channels and platforms, has become a valuable commodity. Huyssen also notes changes in the function of history in producing historical memory in that the boundary between past and present is much more malleable than before. (Grey in Keightley & Pickering 2013, p. 80)

This is also the underlying premise of the series I analyze, Czech series *The Sleepers* (2019) and Hungarian *The Informant* (2022), set in the 1980s, during the twilight years of socialism, and each offers a unique perspective on the formative events shaping Eastern Europe's transition – or rather, the lack of them. It's important to make general observations in an article on screen culture in Eastern Europe, because regional discourses often lack the insight that their own limited knowledge production, and their reduced

involvement in global science policy and scientific circles, stems partly from a failure to integrate various intellectual and cultural perspectives. In the case of *The Informant*, this becomes especially clear.

A transnational production by a global streaming platform triggered an intense public debate about political history and cultural memory. Government-aligned newspapers, independent intellectuals, and former members of the democratic opposition all criticized the show as if it were a historical document of late socialism in Hungary, rather than a globally marketed and distributed spy thriller created by a team, many of whom weren't even alive during the era it portrays. This reaction suggests a broader issue: if the 1980s were not such a blind spot in Hungary's cultural memory, partly due to how Fidesz, the current ruling party has appropriated memory politics, the series might have been received in a more nuanced and appropriate way by critics, audiences, and the wider public discourse.

In the following, I will offer some theoretical frameworks within which one can interpret and investigate these series, including geopolitical hierarchies, knowledge production, and the murky relationship between populism, illiberalism, and cultural production.

Geopolitical hierarchies and knowledge production

The knowledge production in and about Eastern Europe has been influenced by geopolitical relations long before the Cold War and its hierarchic three-world structure (with the Soviet bloc being termed "the second world," a terminology disseminated mostly by US scholars and politicians). The conflicts between superpowers placed the region in the middle welfare zones, areas marked by fluctuating control and devastation, in both world wars, enabling metaphors like Timothy Snyder's "Bloodlands" in the titular book (2010). For a long time, scholarship viewed the Cold War as a conflict of national and economic interests. Only in the last decade has it become apparent that it was just as much about cultural and ideological beliefs. Cold War cultural scenes have significantly influenced Media and Cultural Studies, as demonstrated by field-transforming volumes such as Evans (2016), Imre (2016), and Mihelj and Huxtable (2018). These works investigate the culturally permeable Iron Curtain, similarities in broadcast media landscapes, and patterns of ideology and their relations to aesthetic formats. They also explore transnational television flows, traveling forms,

policy influences, shared institutions, and common technologies. The subordinate relationship of Eastern Europe compared to the West remains intact, driven by mutual projections and narratives of self-definition, and characterized by a hierarchic and unstable politics of representation. On one hand, “the West” continues to view Eastern Europe as its subaltern. On the other hand, Eastern Europeans, not burdened by the idea of colonization and “white guilt,” often incorporate racist and white supremacist ideas into their cultural identities and political beliefs. These ideologies are promoted by far-right populist leaders who exploit the failure of capitalist industrialization, the inequalities created by neoliberal economic structures, anti-immigration sentiments, and an unstable European Union. These dynamics reveal the ongoing impact of Cold War legacies on contemporary cultural and political identities in Eastern Europe.

The interest in Eastern Europe’s geopolitical and cultural status has coincided with a rise in locally developed yet globally distributed quality television series on SVoD platforms like Netflix and HBO from the early 2010s. These series initiate public and academic debates on post-socialist nostalgia, moral responsibility, and the impact of historic authenticity. After the success of other pay cable streamers, HBO shifted its business strategy in Europe, opening numerous offices across Western Europe to address transnational challenges, albeit with a significant delay (Szczepanik, 2020, p. 244). HBO swiftly adapted its proven format to European productions, turning locally developed quality television series into exclusive content that sits at the pinnacle of popular culture.

These series, though targeted at cosmopolitan international audiences, use local themes and settings to make sense of the region’s turbulent past and present. Many contemporary shows delve into populism, metaphors of surveillance, and social insecurity, themes that resonate with viewers and reflect panoptic and post-panoptic tendencies in society, showcasing a proliferation of Cold War frameworks (Imre, 2022; Hermann, 2022). State socialist and Cold War themes, surveillance, spy culture, and nationalism are intertwined, forming a cultural map that defines the region through a specific set of representations. Socialist-themed thriller series like *The Sleepers* (HBO Czech Republic, 2019) and *The Informant* (HBO Hungary, 2022) introduce the dissident culture and the political resistance movements of the era, creating a malleable bond between state socialism, failures in the democratic process during the transition period, and current authoritarian systems. What seemed to be the advent of democracy and

freedom in 1989 was in fact due to the economic and societal collapse of the Soviet empire on the one hand and political bargains on the other. It is important to point out that, although both *The Sleepers* and *The Informant* suggest that the regime changes in Eastern Europe were in many cases top-down rather than bottom-up, the Hungarian and Czech situations are not entirely similar then or now. Socialism had many common experiences, but it was substantially different in each country, and there were also great discrepancies between, for example, European and non-European socialist countries. Hungarian and Czechoslovak socialism also differed in periodization: while Hungary entered the era of Kádár consolidation after the repression of the 1956 revolution, Czechoslovakia entered a much more severe period of what is ironically called 'normalization' after years of Alexander Dubček's human-faced socialism and the crushing of the Prague Spring of 1968 by the KGST troops. While no one can be an expert on the socialist and post-socialist history of all countries, it is clear that the authoritarian and illiberal aspirations in the Czech Republic, the political regime that is primarily characterized by the name of Andrej Babiš, have been less successful than in Hungary. The illiberal Orbán regime has now entered its 16th year and there is considerable uncertainty as to whether Viktor Orbán and his regime can be unseated through (democratic) elections. If we look at the differences between the cultural traditions of the two countries, the most striking thing is that the Czechoslovak cultural field was much more dominated by so-called midcult works than the Hungarian. Czechoslovak socialist television had successful productions in the region, and even in the Western world at the time, such as *Hospital on Outskirts* (*Nemocnice na kraji města*, 1978-1981) and *Thirty Cases of Major Zeman* (*30 případů majora Zemana*, 1975-1980). This is significant for the two series under analysis because *The Sleepers* (and *Burning Bush* for that matter) presents a more nuanced view of the entanglement of socialist and contemporary societies at dramaturgical and narrative levels. While both series show that the characters, who seem to belong to the democratic, rebellious opposition, are also driven by deals or blackmail situations with the socialist or Soviet political leadership, *The Informant* presents this in a more one-dimensional way, especially the bully-like, misogynist student leader Zsolt Száva, who many Hungarian viewers and even critics associated with the young Viktor Orbán. What both series claim in the same way, however, is that the regime change of 1989 – at least for a while – brought only formal transformation, the essence of the political bargain remained the same. As historian Tibor

Valuch notes in his book *A jelenkori magyar társadalom* (“Contemporary Hungarian Society”):

If the external, world political circumstances had not changed to the extent that they did, there would have been a great chance of the system slowly being consumed by the politics of small needs, small compromises, small changes. It is clear that Hungarian society of the time would have been incapable of forcing such a radical change by relying on its own strength alone. (Valuch, 2015, p. 19)

Precarity, populism, and the 1989 debate

In this same journal, the relationship between populism and contemporary Eastern European screen cultures has already been investigated in various articles. Some applied a specific perspective, theories of surveillance and digital surveillance, and the concept of panopticon and post-panopticon to make sense of a certain wave of Eastern European television series that criticize current authoritarian systems in the disguise of a state socialist (or, in the case of Netflix Poland’s 1983, even a dystopian, contemporary communist) setting. Overlaps between populism and popular media are important to consider because themes of surveillance and social insecurity, and the reloaded symbolism of a bipolar, Cold War world structure resonate with viewers. It is worth considering the ever-shifting definitions of populism, a notion that resists easy categorization. Rather than a political ideology or a coherent belief system, populism functions more as a rhetorical style or political strategy.

Political theorist Isaiah Berlin famously referred to the “Cinderella complex” of populism. “There exists a shoe – the word ‘populism’ – for which somewhere there must exist a foot. There are all kinds of feet which nearly fit, but we must not be trapped by these nearly fitting feet.” (Berlin 1967) It refers to a set of political behaviors that frames messages that resonate with a wide range of people. Isaiah Berlin’s metaphor of “finding a foot to fit the shoe” seems especially apt for defining illiberalism today, as it has become one of the most popular labels for those political formations to which populism was previously applied. These share essentially the same characteristics, such as anti-elitism, rejection of the core values of liberal democracies, the suppression of civil society, and the constant

instrumentalization of political propaganda. The conceptual ambiguities surrounding these terms are evident in academic discourse, including my use of both “populist” and “illiberal” throughout this article. Rather than treating them as standalone concepts, I aim to explore their interconnect-edness and shared repertoire of political behaviours. I find the interpretation in Sabina Mihelj and Václav Štětka’s recently published book, *The Illiberal Public Sphere: Media in Polarized Societies*, particularly useful. They define illiberalism (similarly to populism) as a kind of repertoire: a pattern of behaviors, political actions, and attitudes aimed at maximizing power and eliminating political opponents.

Now I will focus on how right-wing populism and illiberalism affect the industrial landscape, transnationalism as a strategy, and the hierarchies of content production. The dynamics of fear of being excluded, the desire to catch up, and the reality of being marginalized are constantly present in the film and media cultures of Eastern Europe during and after the transition period. Many contemporary Eastern European series depict the decline and failure of the transition period, even if they take place in a state socialist setting. The two series I discuss further in this article, *The Sleepers* and *The Informant* are both set in the mid-to-late 1980s, the former is in 1989 and the latter is in 1985, four years before the fall of the Iron Curtain. I argue that the contemporary series reinscribes the subsequent failure of the transition in the representation of late socialism from the present. The series shows how the democratic opposition became as much part of opaque political bargains as party leaders of the ancient regime, state socialism.

Contemporary authoritarian systems do not always differ significantly from the political practices of late socialism. In Hungary, a network of subordinate-feudal employee relationships, informal power structures, a flourishing grey economy, the political occupation of the judiciary and higher education, and the absence of a truly free press have together created a climate strikingly similar to that of late socialism. While independent media outlets technically exist, in practice they are marginalized: the state, as the largest advertiser, withholds funds from them and pressures other potential advertisers through political discrimination. Since last year, the government has employed a body called the “Sovereignty Protection Office” to surveil and harass independent journalists and outlets. As a result, these media platforms function only at the discretion of the state. The most significant consequence of this environment is the widespread

interdependence, self-censorship, and political disengagement it fosters. Much like in the late socialist era, society performs an illusion of political detachment, yet this very withdrawal allows political forces to subtly influence everyday decisions and erode personal and collective sovereignty. To quote Tibor Valuch again:

After the development and consolidation of a democratic political framework, a subordinate attitude persisted in the social consciousness, which hindered the consolidation of democratic attitudes and behavior, and the development of civic/civil autonomy and a culture of behavior and conduct. Education and everyday culture lack the opportunity to acquire democratic forms of behavior and civic skills. The role of socialization is very important: a person who grows up in a depoliticized, politically indifferent, anti-solidarity environment, who focuses only on himself and his family, who fears politics, fears power, and considers his own personal autonomy to be limited, unwittingly transmits the values associated with it, and thus passes on values that hinder the development of modern social relations. (Valuch, 2015, pp. 168–169.)

This similarity makes them particularly effective as allegories in the series I examine and in other Eastern European works that use state socialist settings to formulate social and political criticism. The conceptual challenges of populism and illiberalism naturally emerge here as well. These ideologies are typically defined not by what they stand for, but by what they oppose. In other words, they are characterized less by their principles than by their rejection of liberal democratic norms, mimicking them, notoriously, only in the facades of institutions. The transition of former socialist countries to capitalist democracy has typically been associated with some kind of comeback, even normalizing (Holmes-Krastev, 2018, pp. 120–122). In other words, the transition period did not dismantle but reinforced the former hierarchical geopolitical relations by imposing the verbs of return, imitation, and copying in the relations between the former Eastern bloc and Western Europe. One strand of research on this issue describes the relative failure of regime changes in 1989 (Ghodsee & Orenstein, 2021; Laczó & Lisjak Gabrijelčič, 2010). The losers of the political bargains of regime change were the millions – perhaps tens of millions – of people collectively described by Kristen Ghodsee and Mitchell Orenstein

as ‘thrown away people’ (see Ghodsee-Orenstein, 2021; Hermann, 2022b). These were primarily working-class groups, socialized in the world of socialism, who received no support during the transition in understanding the functioning of democratic institutional systems or the capitalist market economy. Struggling to adapt to this new reality, these groups became alienated, which, according to several bodies of research, contributed to the ease with which the judiciary or independent media could be dismantled in former socialist countries, most notably in illiberal Hungary (see further Kovács et al., 2021). Disenfranchised and left behind, these “thrown away people” have since become both the base and the prime target of new illiberal and populist regimes, exploited for their resentment toward the promises of a system that never included them. The political legacy of regime change in Eastern Europe, along with its cultural memory, collective narratives, and both macro- and micro-historical accounts, continues to raise questions, both within the region and beyond. Theories and interpretations span a wide spectrum. In public discourse, popular culture, and even contemporary literature, regime change has been depicted as a triumphant success, a non-event, a failed transition, a societal collapse, or even as a conspiracy-laden fabrication. Amid this ideological and terminological confusion, Hungary’s regime change stands out as a uniquely problematized moment: a historical event and an ongoing process. All of the above narratives apply to it in some form. And yet, as of early 2025, this pivotal moment remains a cultural blind spot. Its generational experiences are deeply contradictory; its representations rely on fiction and myth.

While showcasing several differences mentioned above, the two series I analyze in this article, *The Sleepers* (2019) and *The Informant* operate on the assumption that the historical turns of the 1980s have significantly shaped today’s political landscape, and even suggest parallels between past and present. The memories of a region, a nation, and a shared history are presented as a palimpsest, with layers that cannot be disentangled. They are also alike in rethinking the genre of espionage drama through a hybrid generic repertoire, revealing layers of historical events by extending the characteristics of the genre. *The Sleepers* and *The Informant* take a fresh approach to the Cold War spy genre, offering a specific, mediated interpretation of late socialist history. While the two works share many similarities, they differ in how they integrate the spy narrative into their stories, ultimately offering distinct explanations for the current geopolitical state and social hierarchies of Eastern Europe.

The Informant: Between transnationalism and authenticity

For decades, it has been a fundamental premise of interdisciplinary research on cinematic and media content that analysis of production, industrial, and consumption strategies reveals the inherently political nature of the medium and its embeddedness in power structures and dominant institutions. This is particularly relevant after the changes in production and distribution of the last decade when the proliferation of streaming services and the dissemination of digital content have fundamentally transformed attitudes towards consumption both on the producing and the audience side. Crisis of confidence, surveillance scandals linked to digital technologies, democratic deficit, the rise of populist nationalism, and a global pandemic have created a social landscape of uncertainty and anxiety. Its flagship genres are dystopias, spy stories – that became increasingly popular for the first time after the end of the Cold War – alternative history series, and mixed-genre fiction, which make different forms of social control the main conflict between narrative and dramaturgical levels.

The neoliberal authoritarian regimes of Eastern Europe and the social nostalgia, often grounded in misconceptions, that accompanied them, have created the most severe cultural crisis of the post-socialist period. Eastern European quality series of the last decade (starting with Czech HBO's 2012 *Burning Bush*) responded quickly to how right-wing populist regimes exploit the pluralistic media-technological milieu to occupy cultural and political meanings at all discursive levels:

Television shows like Czech series *Burning Bush* (HBO, 2013) and *The Sleepers* (HBO, 2019), *Hungarian Golden Life* (HBO, 2015-2018) and *The Informant* (HBO, 2022), *Tuff Money* (HBO, 2020) and *Hacker-ville* (TNT Germany-HBO, 2018) from Romania or 1983 itself are usually centered around stereotypes reproducing social imaginaries and cultural (-urban) myths of the region such as administrative chaos and repressed cultural memory. (Hermann, 2022)

An important node in Eastern European studies is the lack of a regional minimum in memory politics. In my opinion, the series produced in Eastern Europe and (also) set in the region are trying to fill this discursive gap. They take over other public service functions that are lacking in the area. This void, however, cannot be filled either by narrativizing the myths

of regime change or by rewriting the restorative justice of the socialist past back into the narrative, since serial contents hold the ability to function as a source of memory politics and influence society's relationship to history and collective identity, but cannot fully recreate it. Many narrative and discursive elements of fictional world-building refer to the socialist past, to dubious financial flows, to systemic changes that in retrospect seem to have failed, and to the process called the "dual colonization" of Eastern Europe and to which I already referred. They did not solve the problem of coming to terms with the Soviet legacy or bring the expected results of Western-style democratization and liberalization processes around 1989.

In the following, I argue that HBO Hungary's 2022 coming-of-age espionage series *The Informant* – taking place in 1985 Hungary – is not an authentic representation of historical events, nor is it merely a nostalgic portrayal of the past. It rather adopts the aesthetic concepts of transnational quality television and global social nostalgia to formulate criticism of the often-times mythical narratives associated retrospectively with the transition period. Like many contemporary socialist period pieces, it incorporates the lessons of the present back into the scenery of state socialism. Yet what distinguishes it from other such content is that it not only allegorizes local problems behind global aesthetic approaches but makes them elements of the contemporary social space. *The Informant* exploits a hybrid generic repertoire to represent an imagined but identifiable depiction of late socialist Hungary. The protagonist is a college student named Gergő Demeter (played by Gergő Váradi), who has recently moved from the countryside to the capital to study economics. On the train on his way to Budapest, he is blackmailed by state police into spying on the members of the democratic opposition in his dormitory, mainly on its charismatic leader Zsolt Száva (played by Márton Patkós). Thereby, *The Informant* immediately positions itself as part of the socialist tradition of subtle, non-flagrant agents. Since Western espionage dramas were officially unavailable in the Eastern bloc, socialist television industries invented their version of spy-like socialist heroes, the most popular of these was the iconic Soviet espionage drama *Seventeen Moments of Spring* (dir. Tatyana Lioznova, 1972). Geri is eventually becoming a double agent as he tries to mislead his handler Imre Kiss, a middle-aged policeman (played by Szabolcs Thuróczy).

There have been a number of relevant, focused studies published on *The Informant* in the last three years, so it is very difficult to highlight aspects

that have not yet been addressed in these articles (Hermann, 2023; Kalmár, 2023; Hermann & Strausz, 2024).

Transnationalism (along with the theoretically similar, yet characteristically distinctive concept of multiple globalizations) is an acutely popular umbrella term in social sciences. Global political and cultural processes, technological diversity, and various forms of migration, as well as the temporal and geopolitical extension of the postcolonial condition, make it an increasingly important notion in the analysis of contemporary social experience. The decolonization of political and cultural hierarchies, scholarship, terminology, and social taxonomy is an important factor in the decolonization of social science and cultural production in Eastern Europe. As the definition suggests, the concept is not new, but post-colonial discourses, neoliberal capitalist media economies, the permanence of trans-media, and the political rise of news nationalisms make it more important than in previous decades. Coming more closely to television studies, transnationalism is a characteristic of the mass media, which results from both the way it operates and the structure of its broadcasting formats. In essence, any international exchange can be called transnational. The language of television has become a model of global understanding and a source of cultural memory. The aforementioned variants of spies and secret agents were elements of transnational culture, as were the cultural imports and exports within the Eastern bloc, Western programming on Hungarian television, or the American films that circulated on bootlegged video cassettes in the 1980s. *The Informant* is connected to two aspects of the phenomena. It meets HBO's criteria for quality series that will make this content edible for a global, cosmopolitan audience (see further: Imre, 2018). According to scholarship, one of the main problems related to transnationalism is that the global viewer is not fully aware of possible historical slips. The series (like many other similarly mannered content) creates an imagined and commercial Kádár-era, in which a synthesis of three decades of the dictator's name is presented to global consumers. The other aspect is that it presents version of Cold War-era transnational media consumption, which also creates a metanarrative related to transnationalism based on classical narrative concepts. An important scene in the series is when the students try to watch a bootlegged version of the global blockbuster, *Rambo*. However, they notice that the video cassette contains another movie, *Scarface* (dir. Brian de Palma, 1983). The latter is most prominent in the character of a student called Máté (played by Ádám Varga) who sells Western consumer goods,

smuggled into the country by his boat captain father, from porn magazines to Marlboro cigarettes, in exchange for favors or money. In the character of Máté, there is the corrupt, seemingly apolitical, Eastern European trafficker, who turns the ambiguous rules of the game to his advantage. The depiction of the semi-legal development of the secondary economy of socialist central planning reiterates the subordinate position of the region. One of the main criticisms of the series by historians and experts concerns the fact that in the 1980s, state security no longer functioned as it is depicted in the series, for example, in the fall of 1985, recruiting the main character in the dining car of a train would have been completely unimaginable. The series does not present itself as a documentary but is competing for viewers as part of a transnational portfolio of a global network. The transnational characteristic means that it is bound to be an exoticized socialist extravaganza, as the ideal viewer watches spy thrillers for excitement and entertainment, not to become an expert on Hungarian state socialism. The production orientation of transnationalism requires certain standards, which could overcome the critique of authenticity. It hasn't been helping that the portrayal of the political, social, and cultural aspects of the Eastern European transition period has been constantly changing since 1989. These representations are not only generically and aesthetically, but also politically overdetermined. They draw attention to the political involvement of the illiberal state in supporting the arts and bring out the historical anomalies of the 1989 transitions in the region. In contrast with global networks like HBO, the National Film Institute Hungary has monopolized the structures and sources of state funding for audiovisual content. They only contribute if the production checks the boxes of governmental approval, which contains one-sided political portrayals, narratives of right-wing memory politics, and simplification of historical events. The latter is ironic since illiberal, right-wing political regimes are favoring historical genres to illustrate the glory of their national pasts. In this mnemonic vacuum, popular cultural products play an important role.

The series presents, fictionalizes, and reframes historical events and group identities, but it does not necessarily reinterpret them. It operates within a transnational and transgenerational framework, raising the central question of fiction's responsibility in the politics of memory and in shaping our relationship to the past. *The Informant* entered political and cultural memory debates not only because it allegorizes local issues through global aesthetic forms, but also because it makes those issues feel urgent within

real social contexts. Its operation within the space between local and global narratives has produced effects that are difficult to contain, and not without consequence. In this context, the terms responsibility and involvement may be more appropriate than authenticity, which remains the domain of historiography. The series arrived at a moment when memory politics, particularly surrounding the 1980s and the transition to democracy, are under intense scrutiny. This is why the show has provoked widespread criticism, cutting across political affiliations. What these critiques share is a deep mistrust of the series' credibility and its role in representing this contested past:

Criticisms of authenticity exclude the necessities of linking to global television culture (spectacle, dramatization of dictatorship) and speak of the series as a standard narrative of national self-awareness (...). One of the most important criticisms of *The Informant* (mainly by historians) concerns the fact that in the 1980s state security no longer functioned in the way depicted in the series (...). The transnational character of the series forces it to make itself a spectacle, since the ideal viewer watches spy thrillers for excitement and entertainment, not to become an expert on state socialism in Hungary. (Hermann, 2023, pp. 66–67)

While historians and former members of the democratic opposition criticized the series for its ahistorical portrayal of events and context,³ pro-government media associated with the ruling Fidesz party – which itself having originated in the 1980s as part of the democratic opposition, much like the student group portrayed in the series – responded in a different way. These outlets focused their critique on what they perceived as a personal attack as they claimed to recognize Prime Minister Viktor Orbán in the character of Zsolt Száva: a charismatic, objectifying, and aggressive student leader.⁴ In the very first episode, Száva is revealed to

3 See e.g.: Fodor Gábor úgy változtatja a nézetet, ahogy a Fidesz. Interjú Hodosán Rózával. URL: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jV-78nLe8jU> (last opened: 25. 04. 2025.)

4 See e.g.: A besúgó: hazugság a hazugságról. URL: <https://www.origo.hu/itthon/2022/07/regen-marxon-csungtek-ma-az-hbon-a-kommunista-kadergyerek-interju-mezo-gaborral> (last opened: 25. 04. 2025.)

be a self-styled savior who, despite his opposition to the socialist regime, tolerates no dissent and leads his team with the same authoritarian tactics he claims to resist. This contradiction between ideological opposition and undemocratic behavior is underscored throughout the series, through diegetic narrative developments and non-diegetic cinematic elements such as music, framing, and tone. The series was premiered in April 2022, two days before the Hungarian general parliamentary elections, the significance of which is highlighted by György Kalmár in his study *A besúgó és az államszocialista múlt újrahasznosítása* (*The Informant and the Recycling of the Socialist Past*): “The fact that the series, which deals with the state socialist past, its memory and our contemporary relations to it, was synchronized with a very important event in Hungarian history, only further underlines the cultural and memory-political significance of *The Informant*.” (Kalmár, 2023, p. 74) Kalmár sees the dual standing of the series and the contradictions in its perception in the fact that, on the one hand, the reflexions of the socialist past are implicitly or explicitly revived in Hungarian public life, and on the other hand, the series, besides stylizing late socialism into a marketable retro-product, points out the parallels between the current political system and the Kádár era (Kalmár, 2023, p. 77).

The very first episode includes Zsolt Száva’s monologue about how Hungarians are poor at democracy, the country is dependent on paternal figures and leaders to follow, and is run by old tyrants turned young revolutionaries. This monologue is later repeated in episode 5 of the series, a diegetic-narrative element that reinforces the viewers’ interpretation that the series allegorizes socialism and is really about the present. György Kalmár makes the same point in his previously cited essay: “The parallels between the two political systems are already apparent in the first part, when the central figure of the anti-regime movement, Száva, criticises the late Kádár era in words that are impossible not to hear in the criticism of the government by the current opposition.” (Kalmár, 2023, pp. 77–78) This is further reinforced by the main title, the most important paratext of the series, which is based on the song *Mocskos idők* (“*Filthy times*”) by the Hungarian underground band Európa Kiadó. The chorus (“Filthy times you should love / the future is here and it will never end / Filthy times hiding in the corner / Filthy times, let’s start all over again.”) implies a view of history that the mythical events of the regime change have been erased, that the future tense, constantly rewritten as the present, is about as amoral as the socialist past it was meant to overcome.

The Sleepers: Powerless people

HBO's original programming not only explores the concept of transnationalism but also midcult culture, debates over quality television, platform imperialism, and cultural colonization. As I and others have previously discussed, the early 2010s series produced in HBO's Eastern European headquarters, set during the socialist era, have coincided with the rise of illiberalism and authoritarian tendencies in Eastern Europe (Imre, 2019; Hermann, 2022; Hermann & Strausz, 2025, forthcoming). It's tempting to argue that these series, by depicting past authoritarian regimes, implicitly critique current political trends of the 2010s. However, the reality is more nuanced; in series like *The Sleepers* and *The Informant*, reviews and interpretations have placed a strong emphasis on contemporary, critical readings, revealing layers that go beyond simple historical allegory.

These quality television programs perform three major functions: creating a transnational, commercial image of Eastern Europe, simultaneously popularizing and subtly colonizing the region. Second, they fulfil a public service role by articulating social critiques, particularly of contemporary populist, far-right, and increasingly pro-Russian tendencies, an aspect that will be especially relevant in discussing *The Sleepers*, a series released in 2019, on the 30th anniversary of the Velvet Revolution in Prague and the systemic changes in Eastern Europe in general. Finally, they act as vehicles of cultural memory, shaping public perceptions of historical events and influencing how history is understood today. In one of the few dedicated studies on *The Sleepers*, Czech scholar Irena Řehořová argues that media constructs its interpretation of the events of 1989 in Prague and Eastern Europe, becoming a formative force in cultural memory. Drawing on Bondebjerg's influential 2020 study, she notes that historical dramas uniquely "bring the past to life", allowing viewers to experience and imagine history through a blend of knowledge, identification, and emotion: 'Compared to other mediations of memory, historical dramas are appraised for their ability to make the past come alive, to make us experience and imagine the past in a way that involves both knowledge, identification and emotions'. (Bondebjerg, 2020, p. 13; Řehořová, 2022, p. 216).

Irena Řehořová convincingly demonstrates, through textual and paratextual analysis, that the Espionage series, set during the 1989 transition, can be connected, as the producers intended, with contemporary political trends concerning populism, the spread of fake news and disinformation, and

social insecurity. Like *The Informant*, the series aims not only to resonate with Czech audiences but also to convey universal messages through its transnational distribution, as well as its unique aesthetic and narrative choices.

The Sleepers does not only represent an interpretation of the contexts of the regime changes of 1989, which Řehořová compares in her cited article to Hayden White's categorization of historiography which she describes as an active architect of cultural memory. The other main theme of the series is the continuing Soviet, and later Russian, presence in Eastern Europe. The male protagonist in the series, London émigré Viktor Skala, first became a double agent for the British and Soviet secret services. After 12 years in exile in London, he returns to Prague with his wife Marie, a violinist, and then mysteriously disappears. The series follows Marie's investigation as she first searches for her husband, but soon becomes involved in much grander power plays and conspiracies. These power plays have implications not only for the outcome of a series of events but also for democratic transformation. The original title of the series – *Bez vědomí* – as Řehořová, a Czech native, describes it in detail, implies both that something is happening without one's knowledge and that one is unconscious (as Marie is after the accident during which her husband Viktor disappears):

Bez vědomí can be understood in multiple ways. It can mean that something is happening without the knowledge of someone or it can designate the state of unconsciousness (*bezvědomí*), which links the title specifically to Marie and her condition after the car accident. (...) There are some processes taking place that at least part of society has no idea about. It is not clear though, if it is because people cannot know, or rather do not want to know. The unfolding of the story maintains this ambiguity of interpretations and does not provide a clear answer. (Řehořová, 2022, p. 219, emphases in the original text)

As in most spy thrillers, the central characters in the series are the agents. The term "agent" implies representing the self and acting on behalf of someone else, embodying a duality that the series (as well as *The Informant*) leverages to create figures of secrecy, obscurity, and concealment. This ambiguity reflects a core aspect of Eastern European spy stories, where fate, corruption, loyalty, and identity are often layered.

The male protagonist of *The Sleepers*, Viktor, after the events of November 1989, becomes a high-ranking politician, and it is then the viewer understands that he is no longer a double agent, but works exclusively for the KGB. Even if he does not willingly represent Soviet, then Russian interests in his own country, and by extension in Eastern Europe, the series' historical perspective is that Russian influence in the region is still prevalent after the democratic transition. The political context at the time of the series' premiere in 2019 adds a layer of relevance to its exploration of espionage and imperialism. Russian President Vladimir Putin – a former KGB agent – had already signaled his intentions to rebuild a Soviet-like sphere of influence, foreshadowing the ambitions that would culminate in the 2022 invasion of Ukraine. This development has underscored how the future of the European and global political order increasingly hinges on alliances and attitudes toward Russia's increasingly fascist and authoritarian regime and its leader. In her article on *The Sleepers*, Řehořová points out that the series tells us that the illiberal, far-right, authoritarian leaders of Eastern Europe, such as former Czech President Miloš Zeman, the re-emerging Andrei Babiš, or the Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, are under Russian influence. The series also stresses that the fall of socialism and communism does not mean the end of the Russian influence in the region – It is aptly expressed in a dialogue between the two British agents when Gerald says about the coming changes: "Nothing is going to change. Cause we weren't actually fighting communism." To Susanne's question "What then?", he replies: "Russia. And Russia will stay." (Řehořová, 2022, p. 221)

Since the outbreak of war, Russian influence in the region has become an even more serious problem, affecting traditional economics and rhetoric as well as the spread of 21st-century digital deception, surveillance, and propaganda. In a volume chapter From Big Brother to Big Data Anikó Imre convincingly argues for examining the overlaps between Cold War-era and contemporary popular media, particularly in how both eras grapple with themes of surveillance and ideological control. Like many contributions in the book *Remapping Cold War Media* (Lovejoy & Pajala, 2022), her analysis calls for a re-evaluation of the Western-centric, triumphalist narrative of Cold War history. The article reveals the layers of Cold War narratives that are embedded in US and international productions both on the small and the big screen and demonstrates the synergy between traditional, visible agents of discipline and more discreet forms of ownership and surveillance. What is even more important, however, is that it also cites former KGB

agent Vladimir Putin’s “reliance on socialist television in boosting Russian imperial nationalism” (283) as something that binds together the politics of everyday life and the politics of the state as an almost uncanny forecast of the war that since had come to Europe when Russia invaded Ukraine (see further Hermann 2024).

The Sleepers and *The Informant* argue, through their portrayal of entrenched political and intelligence networks, that regime changes in Eastern Europe may appear to have failed in many respects due to the persistence of old power structures.

In the post-1989 period, Eastern Europe has remained as the murky and inscrutable web of power struggles and clandestine bargains as it was during the Cold War when the region served as a strategic chessboard for global powers. This chessboard metaphor feels newly relevant today, as the binary world order of the Cold War era resurfaces in both popular culture and international politics, reflecting a renewed geopolitical hierarchy and ideological divide: ‘Instead of portraying 1989 as the decline of Russia’s control over Central East Europe, the series brings continuity to the historical development. And this continuity makes a strong political argument. If Russia succeeded in maintaining hidden political influence in Czechoslovakia even during the reformation era, it is quite possible it still pulls a string in current Czech politics. (...) It is clear that even though the political regime has changed, the eavesdropping is still going on.’ (Řehořová 2022, p. 224, emphasis in the original text.)

As I am writing this, Russia’s aggression and war against Ukraine seem to have no end, and Donald Trump, whose authoritarian tendencies have long been a concern to many, just reclaimed the most powerful political position in the world for the second time. This era is characterized by revisited bipartisan conflicts, imperial efforts, and the recurring threat of a nuclear war. The end of the Cold War – with the symbolic fall of the Berlin Wall, the most iconic media event to date – promised the Eastern region’s return to Europe. Instead, an even deeper division, political illiberalism, growing inequalities, and neoliberal authoritarianism have taken hold. A populist revolution whisked away the dreams of a liberal one and escalated into a war that threatens the future of the continent, and possibly, the global world order.

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Ethnic representation in two prison radios in Hungary¹

GYÖRGY KERÉNYI²

Despite the fact that a larger number of Roma people are present in Hungary's prisons, the Roma topic or to be a Roma is not a dominant theme or defining factor in the interactions within. In radio broadcasting, which is a formal situation of prison life, as well as in the media texts themselves, ethnic categorization is thus less allowed.

Media texts, as formal and distinguished speech situations, always highlight the general human experience in contrast to the particularity of ethnicity. The radio hosts do not want to define themselves (or their audience) ethnically in their programs. Possible reasons include:

- The proximity of radio broadcasting to the institutional-formal level.
- They consider ethnic identity less valuable.
- The environment is not ethnically charged, there is significant mixing, and ethnic identity is not so defining.
- “It does not fit into the media”; here, the general, elevated “human” is expected.

Since the autumn of 2014, I have been regularly volunteering (as a member of an NGO, the Adj Hangot/Give a Voice! Association) on a weekly basis in two prisons in Hungary, assisting inmates in launching and continuously

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- 1 Based on the text of a presentation that was delivered at the media anthropology conference of the Roma Image Workshop of the Department of Media and Communication at ELTE in September 2016 and it was published in Hungarian in the volume containing the conference presentations (*Saját kép – ellenkép*, ELTE Média és Kommunikáció Tanszék, 2017, edited by András Müllner).
 - 2 Throughout his thirty-year journalism career, György Kerényi founded or participated in the launch of seven media outlets: including pirate, Roma, and two prison radios, as well as mainstream newspapers. He was the editor-in-chief of the public service Kossuth Radio, Hungary's number one news-talk station, and worked for three years at the Hungarian service of Slovak public media, Pátria Radio.

producing programs for their own radios (the Váci men's prison's Rács FM, which began broadcasting in December 2014, and the women's prison's Hessz FM in Gyorskocsi street, which started in June 2016).³

Background and context

Prison broadcasting started in England, where over 100 institutions have radios operated by inmates. Prison radio serves as a reintegration opportunity for both the program makers and the inmate listeners.

In Hungary, the correctional service (Bv) selects the participants in radio broadcasting, and every program must be presented to a Bv representative before broadcasting. (Broadcasting means that the program is transmitted from a computer and plays on one of the channels of the televisions in the cells.) This definitely shapes the media content.

In Vác, based on the Bv's decision, only offenders against women and children cannot be radio hosts, while in Budapest (Gyorskocsi street), those convicted of violent acts also cannot be radio hosts.

The team consists of about 10 radio hosts in Vác and 6 in Gyorskocsi – members change due to release, transfers, or disciplinary exclusions. Over the two years I have been visiting the prisons, I have had regular contact with about 20–25 inmates.

In the women's prison, we have one Roma radio host, while usually around a quarter of the team in Vác is Roma. Most male radio hosts come from criminal backgrounds, while the women are generally one-time offenders.

I do not ask the radio hosts why they are incarcerated; most of them tend to share this information after a while. As a mentor, I strive to show no expectations other than those related to the programs – the standard of the radio ethics code is simply that crime and violence should not be portrayed

3 When this writing (presentation) was created in September 2016, the two prison radios in Hungary were still operational. A few months later, in 2017, the National Command of the Prison Service prohibited all reintegration work carried out by civilians and civil organizations in prisons (except for that conducted by churches and the formal public education). After that, we, the radio mentors, were also not allowed to enter. The prison radios continued to operate for a short time without external mentoring, and then they ceased to exist.

positively in the programs, and the perspectives and interests of the victims must always be respected.

Having worked with Roma for 20 years, and having written and filmed about them (I was one of the founders of the Roma Press Center, edited the *Amaro Drom Roma* monthly for 5 years, and under my leadership, Hungary's first Roma radio, *Rádió C*, was established in 2000), I have many mutual acquaintances "out there" with almost all Roma program makers. The former *Rádió C*, the first Roma radio, is highly respected among the Roma community and provides acceptance – thus, I can talk to them informally more easily. In return, Hungarians (I refer to non-Roma with this term used by Roma) look at me a bit strangely.

Our communication is fundamentally professional and revolves around radio broadcasting – but we also have another conversational context in Vác: smoking together in private or small groups by the corridor window. In the women's prison, such opportunities do not exist; we are always together in the room, sometimes go to an empty cell to conduct an interview – this makes our conversations less intimate.

The depth of this presentation is shaped by the fact that I am not in the prison for research or journalistic purposes. Although there was a strong temptation to document my experiences from time to time, I have always refrained from doing so: the Bv can allow research and publication, but that is not what we requested permission for, and I do not want to breach the deal. Our goal is for a prison radio to operate in every correctional institution in Hungary – and this is only possible with the help of the Bv. Therefore, there is no systematic, structured data collection behind my narrative – at the same time, the fact that I have been working with Roma for 20 years may help in interpreting the experiences.

In my presentation, I heavily rely on Fiáth Titanilla's (the former prison psychologist at the Kozma street prison in Budapest) "Prison Book" and her handwritten doctoral dissertation (Fiáth, 2012; Fiáth, 2016).

Communication situations and themes

In prison, there is a continuous misrepresentation between inmates and towards outsiders. Naturally, these are also forms of communication that can be interpreted, but they are often misleading.

Communication, both inside and outside, occurs with a purpose; the expression of the communicating self is a part of it, the designation of one's place within the community and the situation, and the optimization of the gains achievable through communication. To interpret prison communication, it is important to consider that while standing up for oneself and expressing one's truth is valued in prison, spontaneous self-presentation and introspection are seen as signs of weakness (especially in men's prisons). Therefore, misrepresentations can be interpreted less through their explicit content and often through their absences.

Who are they speaking to when they communicate with me, an external mentor of prison radio? Although we do not count as Bv personnel, and we consistently signal this to them, we are still seen as being in a more direct relationship with authority than any chosen individual among them. At the same time, our regular presence, being there twice a week, eventually lends us credibility – even though our work without material interests (or religious backgrounds) seems strange to them.

What topics do they certainly discuss differently with us than they do with each other? The commission of a crime is not, but life after prison is typically one of these topics. They generally present criminal acts as unique, non-characteristic deeds rather than as a lifestyle. Older inmates often speak vividly about their past criminal lives, while recent offenses do not appear as logical consequences of a lifestyle. The older inmates used to be “cool,” as their last offense is portrayed as a random or unique mistake, even though it is likely that their positions inside require that their last period outside also be that of a “cool” criminal in their conversations.

We came from a normative world reflected in their court sentences (even if we do not directly represent this), so they tend to avoid discussing the rejected topic of violent crime, yet they are more willing to talk about drug use – perhaps because it can illustrate an unfortunate, unintended entry into the system (although they have never claimed to be innocent while incarcerated). A typical phrase that has almost become a prison motif is: “I did it for someone else.” This usually involves a sick, needy relative as the motive for the crime.

Another common topic is the continuous lamenting about judgments and legal processes in prison – hence we avoid legal content in our programs. Complaint against the Bv and the justice system is a daily occurrence in prisons, recounted without emotion: it seems this is almost expected behavior inside – they have many such cases initiated by them, even if a

portion of them is likely not true. As is known, based on the decision of the Strasbourg Human Rights Court, the Hungarian state must now pay approximately 3 million HUF in compensation for the cramped conditions of the cells to around 600 convicted individuals. The Strasbourg money appears in our conversations as the (only) possibility for a fresh start – even among those who have not yet initiated a lawsuit for this reason.

The mentors' belonging to the official world is shown by the fact that no one directly talks to me about where else could he/she continue his/her life after prison, but where he/she left off. We are outsiders, with the uncertainty hanging over us about what we might pass on to the authorities. Furthermore, through the occasional praises from the Bv for their radio work, they gain access to benefits, more opportunities for shopping in the prison store, more phone calls (even in the pre-mobile phone era: now everyone has a Bv mobile phone on which they can call their designated contacts only), and more outings at the end of their sentences. However, the reprimands work against the benefits, potentially even against the reduction of their sentences. Thus, it is not expected that someone would say they will commit crimes outside as well, just that they will be more skillful this time. The external normative world clearly condemns recidivism, so it is often stated that they will continue differently. (Although they do not assert this; they only say it if I ask.) "I have changed; I see things differently," is often heard, but concrete plans for breaking out only come from those living in the prison's religious quarters. Therefore, they do not force the "I have turned to the right path" narrative on me; we are not considered part of the external normative system that much.

In summary, due to our mixed trust relationship, their communication on the topic of crime seems to reflect a forced adaptation to an expected norm: they do not lie, so they tend to avoid it. Nevertheless, topics related to crime come up more easily than those related to Roma identity. Despite the visible majority of Roma being inside (experts estimate the Roma ratio in the prison population at about 50–60%, although this varies by prison: in Vác, for example, I believe there are more of them), discussions about Roma and related matters are less present in conversations with us or among themselves. (In their everyday situations, they are certainly more explicit, but we do not see those.) At the same time, Roma identity is not a secret; they discuss outside acquaintances, Roma music, and customs with me, but they almost never bring up the topic themselves. They sometimes speak

“Roma-like” with each other, but this is also characteristic outside, and the term “brother” is not reserved only for Roma in prison.

Roles, statuses, and program-making situations

In men’s prisons, traditional masculine values are preferred: toughness and emotional detachment. Values such as self-control, stability, autonomy, power, strength, as well as being well-informed and initiated, are also important (Fiáth, 2014). The status of inmates is defined by the deprivation of power and the compulsion to obey – accordingly, the primary means of adaptation and resistance is the confrontation and violence-based inmate code, which centers on autonomy and self-direction (Fiáth, 2014). Ethnicity is not a significant element in this context. The construction of masculinity is much more important: masculinity is redefined through criminality, rule-breaking, and the oppression of the weaker, as the opportunities for demonstrating civilian masculinity (e.g., heterosexual relationships, supporting a family, etc.) are lacking. The expected basic rules of communication and behavior thus include “emotional detachment”, “toughness”, “Mind your own business!”, “Do not share your secrets with others, as they may misuse the information!”, and “Never betray your fellow inmates!”

The most condemned role is that of the “vamzer” (informer or snitch). After their release, several inmate radio hosts mentioned that inmates tended to see radio hosts as vamzers – moreover, in Vác, the educational officer often took on an intense and emphasized controlling role during their radio activities. Although informing is the most condemned behavior in the prison code and the internal value system, many still engage in it for personal gain. Several such cases have been linked to radio work.

Fiáth emphasizes that authority is not solely constructed through masculinity and its acceptance by others; criminal activity, intelligence, social capital, and financial status also play a significant role. Prisons are prototypical arenas of power inequalities (Fiáth, 2014), but dominant and subordinate positions are not set in stone. A significant portion of inmates works. After a while, we had the opportunity at both locations for 1-2 of the radio hosts to become “full-time” radio hosts, meaning they would engage with the radio not just during our biweekly visits, but for eight hours daily, which the Bv recognizes as work and pays them the usual wage (approximately 14-15 thousand HUF per month/about 50 EUR). We, as mentors, attempted to

initiate democratic self-management within the radio teams, such as having them elect an editorial committee. Although the selection of full-time radio hosts was the Bv's competence, we did not prevent them from choosing one among themselves to recommend to the Bv. In one instance, the Bv choose someone other for being a the full-time host than the who voted by the radio members – likely because the inmates selected a Roma. Since the full-time hosts spent their eight hours in the library alongside the Bv's librarians (they were not Roma), the Bv probably did not allow a Roma among them to prevent potential conflicts. Of course, it cannot be ruled out that the person elected by the radio hosts was considered somewhat problematic by the Prison Service (Bv), and they wanted to prevent any potential conflicts as a result.

However, in the cells, Roma and Hungarians continuously mix. The statuses within the prison could be rewritten by radio broadcasting: we experienced that those with evidently lower statuses gained recognition within the radio team after it became clear, for example, that they handled technology well. However, the status of the “cool guys” could not be undermined by radio broadcasting.

While studies indicate that ethnicity has become exclusive in the prison code in America, this is not the case in Hungary. We experienced this during broadcasting as well. I hardly heard group characterizations, meaning descriptions of one's own or another group, from Roma, and not much from Hungarians either. What I did hear from the latter often portrayed Roma negatively – but not as intensely as “outside”.

According to Fiáth, the delineation of ethnic boundaries (since Roma is a constructed concept, a relational system that appears in relationships) is quite fluid – the same descriptors can apply to both groups (e.g., stingy vs. wasteful). The differentiation between Oláh (vlach) Roma⁴ and Hungarian Roma, therefore, the authenticity or projection of negative stereotypes affecting Roma onto the other group, was also not apparent to me. More important was locality: for example, the well-known characteristics of the Borsod region, known for their toughness and, in other contexts, their lack of refinement.

4 This ethnic group of Roma in Hungary speaks the Romani language and maintains its ethnic traditions more strongly, while the “Hungarian Gypsies” who arrived in Hungary centuries ago have long had Hungarian as their mother tongue.

There was even a Hungarian radio host who sometimes portrayed himself within this group – naturally in the dimension of toughness.

A significant portion of the prison population is very uneducated and uncultured, which is coupled with the aggressiveness of the prison world. Therefore – and of course because education and intelligence are also valued – the inmate radio hosts uniformly label a large portion of their peers as *orcs*, very primitive people. The term “orc” does not inherently have an ethnic connotation, but my Hungarian interlocutors naturally refer to them as Roma when we talk without Roma present. When both Hungarians and Roma are among us, both can refer to others as “orc”. Moreover, when I am solo with Roma program makers, they also use the term “orc”.

Hungarians let their Roma program-making companions out “from behind the fences”, even recognizing that there are non-orc Roma besides their Roma radio colleagues. It seems that the most significant ethnic stigma for Roma in prison is primitiveness. At the same time, it can be observed that communications are denser among those of the same ethnicity.

Ultimately, over the past two years (I must emphasize again: not during targeted conversations), ethnicity did not appear to me as significant in prison; however, I do not know the communication of inmates outside of radio situations. For example, I very rarely heard the phrase “we, Roma.” Ethnicity can sharpen in certain situations – but it seems that prison and criminality are not such situations. Of course, this also requires that one of the strongest Roma stereotypes, the criminal, logically cannot “survive” in prison: it would be strange to hear this from Hungarian criminals. At the same time, Fiáth Titanilla also indicates that in conflicts, inmates do not refer to one another as Roma or Hungarians, and that there is a significant interchange between the groups. The avoidance of referring to others negatively as Roma could also be caused by the fact that showcasing tensions within the group is dangerous: it could lead to exclusion from radio broadcasting. Therefore, they only display any tensions, not just ethnic ones, when they feel that their benefits are at risk if they do not visibly declare their outsider status.

Programs and media situations

Compared to the everyday communication with us, the representation of Roma identity in media texts and programs in the prison radios is even less explicit. Despite the fact that I, as an “authoritative outside media professional,” continuously legitimize the media presence of the Roma, it is often I who bring up the topic. During the planning/training phase in Vác, although 3 out of 10 program makers were Roma, there was no discussion about starting any program labeled as Roma. Over time, I began suggesting the launch of a Roma program, and while they did not reject the idea, it ultimately never came to fruition.

In Gyorskocsi street prison in Budapest, one Roma radio host, who struggles with reading (currently she attends upper grades of primary school in prison), spontaneously proposed the idea for a music program called Romamix – and she has been running it ever since. She is very proud to show it to inmates and even guards who visit the room during its production. The other members of the female radio team are generally considered educated at the prison level, with several having higher education’s degrees among them (compared to only one among the boys). V. who makes the Romamix program often feels a bit embarrassed about her difficulty in reading aloud, and we have not yet managed to encourage her to create another program, as those require a lot of writing and reading.

Although she creates a Roma program by title, in her connecting texts and greetings, V. never mentions the word “Roma” (nor does she greet with “Hello, my sisters”). She does not label herself or her audience this way. (Of course, this may not necessarily be due to the lower status of Roma; it could also be an attempt to cater to an ethnically mixed audience.)

With me, she does refer to being Roma, but I am unsure if this discourse is not something I am imposing, even though she enjoys discussing it with me. However, this always culminates in searching for familiar connections and never delves into any ethnic topics. She appreciates being able to play with Roma stereotypes with me, and I often bring it up, trying to parody stereotypes while encouraging her to push back with Hungarian stereotypes. However, I must avoid the camaraderie that I could establish in the men’s prison, where I could engage more deeply, as in Gyorskocsi prison I am a man among women – something they often vocalize.

Although V. knows and loves the so-called authentic Oláh Roma music, she uses it very little. The *mulatós* (popular party) music is a culturally

neutral popular language that is legitimate everywhere but is strongly associated with Roma performers. (At the same time, in more educated prison circles, as outside, *mulatós* is synonymous with lack of refinement.) It seems that just as the Roma's almost exclusive recognition was historically provided by the so-called restaurant Roma music, now the *mulatós* music has taken on that role. I have not yet managed to incorporate Hungarian Roma music (the so-called restaurant Roma music) into the program – V. rejects it with a grimace as an Oláh (vlach) Roma.

During our radio activities in Vác, the refugee crisis peaked in Hungary. A common experience was that anti-refugee sentiments did not recognize ethnic boundaries; the Roma were not any more understanding towards refugees.

Homosexuality, although understandably not uncommon in prisons, is a trait seen as a synonym for weakness and is hidden among men. In Vác, once two (also Roma) program makers interviewed a (transported, thus not local prisoner) raped man. The interview caused quite a stir among the radio hosts, and it was fascinating to listen to how the two hosts transitioned from barely concealed disdain to the empathy the victim deserved during the interview process, and how they voiced this empathy in closing the interview while addressing the listeners.

It is also interesting to note how important they consider expressing general human and moral teachings in their media texts. This can appear in any program – perhaps indicating their connection to the "norm-following" majority.

Summary

Despite the fact that a larger number of Roma people are present in prisons, the Roma topic or to be a Roma is not a dominant theme or defining factor in the interactions within. In the cells, on an informal level, their presence is certainly more pronounced than in radio broadcasting, but if it were dominant, it would seep more into radio programming as well. In radio broadcasting, which is a formal situation of prison life, as well as in the media texts themselves, ethnic categorization is thus less allowed. In this respect, it resembles the outside world: the emphasis on the ethnic dimension among Roma in Hungary is not particularly strong, even if discrimination or awareness of human/civil rights makes it more pronounced.

Based on my experience, even among Oláh Roma, who attribute significant importance to their ethnic culture in their identity, the emphasis is rather on their community with Hungarians, and the two identities coexist. Therefore, ethnic identity is not so important, nor is it in the context of crime.

In prisons, the shared fate of being incarcerated seems to be stronger than ethnic separation. Media texts, as formal and distinguished speech situations, always highlight the general human experience in contrast to the particularity of ethnicity. Even during my frequent visits to the prison, I could not delve into the positive realms of ethnic identity, as it is tied to social situations: togetherness, celebrations. The prison situation is, after all, the worst life circumstance: revealing ethnic identity in this context – even if approached systematically and with prepared scientific intent – is very difficult. The prison is a total institution where nothing can be examined independently, and thus the experience of Roma identity cannot be either. The demonstration of Roma identity is also strongly situational anyway, just as it is “outside.”

The most important observation is that radio hosts do not want to define themselves (or their audience) ethnically in their programs. Possible reasons include:

- The proximity of radio broadcasting to the institutional-formal level.
- They consider ethnic identity less valuable.
- The environment is not ethnically charged, there is significant mixing, and ethnic identity is not so defining.
- “It does not fit into the media”; here, the general, elevated “human” is expected.

A more general conclusion may be drawn that the appearance of ethnicity, burdened with strong negative stigmas, is weakened when interactions between the two groups are dense; when the two ethnicities form an ingroup: meaning they see their shared life situations and common interests; and when strong ethnic classification is not “permitted.”

The classrooms in Vác are located on the same corridor as the library where we made the radio programs. The *orcs*, as they come out into the hallway during breaks from elementary school classes, are almost all Roma. This better illustrates the social situation of Roma than the fact that they are a majority in prisons.

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Remake Bodony: Visual participatory action research and tiny publics¹

MÁRTON OBLATH²

Abstract

Remake Bodony is a documentary film, which was collaboratively developed by the inhabitants of Siklósbodony, Hungary in 2017. The article presents an account of the film production process as an organic continuation of two prior participatory visual arts workshops using photovoice and community mural painting. The reconstruction adopts a methodological lens and interprets these participatory activities as three stages of a visual participatory action research project. Three analytic dimensions are introduced: methodological configuration, “tiny publics” (Fine, 2012), and the participants’ emerging research questions – to produce an account of the collective thought process occurring in the course of filmmaking.

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- 2 Márton Oblath is a lecturer at the Department of Media and Communication, Eötvös Loránd University (Budapest). Since 2010, he has been active in founding civil society organizations, managing arts-based participatory research projects, and publishing methodological reflections on these initiatives. He currently teaches social theory and arts-based research at the department, where he is also a member of the Minor Media/Culture Research Institute. The list of his publications is available: <https://m2.mmt.hu/gui2/?type=authors&mode=browse&sel=10021348> This article focuses on the role and meaning of the public sphere in arts-based participatory research. A collaborative reflection on the same study from a methodological perspective is forthcoming in *American Behavioral Scientist* in 2026.

Keywords

Visual research methods; photovoice; social documentary; participatory action research; participatory film

Remake Bodony is a piece of social documentary, which was collaboratively developed by the inhabitants of Siklósbodony, a small settlement in southern Hungary, social researchers, and various groups of visual artists in early 2017. The process was framed by a community arts based participatory action research project entitled *FuturePix*, launched as an open-ended initiative with the aim of exploring new social imaginaries about the future and opportunities for collective local action that may enhance community development and counteract the gradual loss of public institutions in the village over the preceding two decades. In 2021, five years after the completion of the film, local adults set up a sustainable vegetable garden, a complex project that heavily relied on the routine of cooperation with various external advisors and a collective effort to get integrated into a social innovation network of agriculture specialists. This permaculture project could not have been launched without the preceding two years of various participatory theatre and socio-drama workshops involving various generations of local society and identifying educational mobility, quality food production, and cooperation as core social issues of community level politics. This community drama and theatre-based process could have not been launched, in turn, without the preceding visual arts process. The production, showcasing and circulation of the social documentary helped the community develop a sense of publicity, which enabled them to evaluate the connection between what they do and how they would be seen, and consciously relate their collective action and the public image of the village.

In the present reconstruction, I attempt to form a methodological account of a series of production workshops. I will begin by offering a historical-critical interpretation of the idea of arts based participatory action research and identifying the function of visual methods in it. Next, I will touch on the analytic concepts of local configuration, tiny publics (i.e. small communities, according to Fine, 2012), and emerging questions, which guide my reconstruction of the multistage and multilayered process in question. Based on these, I will provide an account of the stages with distinct local configurations, publics, and emerging participatory research questions through which

I offer a balanced ethnographic insight into “what was actually happening” during the image-making process from a research perspective.

The participatory image as a research tool

In the context of social research, the category of “participatory” tends to follow an imaginary rooted in participatory observation and is often associated either with the engagement of the researcher in the lifeworld observed, or, through a diametrical shift, with the emancipatory participation of lay people in the scientific research process (Clark et al., 2009; Syed M. et al., 2010; Vaughn et al., 2020). The concept of “creativity” has contributed to an instrumentalization of artistic activities in relation to social research by rendering them either as useful tools for informing social research (Kara, 2020) or improving the accessibility of research statements by making research results comprehensible and useful through non-verbal dissemination. From the perspective of the history of action research, however, what needs to be emphasized are the strong interdependence of action, knowledge, and artistic activities and their strategic connection to the democratization of social research.

The epistemic base of action research (AC), as defined by Lewin (1946), lies in the action-reflection-(re)planning-(new) action cycle through which knowledge is generated and validated as knowledge of/in practice. Latin-American versions of action research have adjusted this model by recognizing that causal links between the narrow local action and the broader social environment should also be covered while accounting for the success and failure of any planned action. This research tradition has applied the category of participation to active engagement in group work and the group’s involvement in social movements. However, artistic activities are not added to the model as pure forms of doing/knowing (see Dewey 1980 [1934]), but rather as related to the growing social consciousness of the knowledge-generating self as an independent epistemic constituent within the participatory action research cycle. Critical self-consciousness, however, can only elevate research cycles to higher epistemic levels if it is anchored in social identity firmly anchored, in turn, in lived experiences. Enumerating the methods of data collection and analysis in participatory action research, Orlando Fals-Borda relates validity claims in PAR to yet unarticulated social experiences rather than to the dialectics of social structure and:

“[PAR methodology stems for] qualitative rather than quantitative analysis, without losing sight of the importance of explanatory scientific schemas of cause-and-effect. In this realm, participatory researchers have faced the dilemmas of employing affective logic involving the heart versus dialectical logic with cold-headed laboratory analysis. As a rule, we have followed Pascal’s dictum, “The heart has its reasons which the reason does not at all perceive” (Fals-Borda, 1987, p. 338). All artistic activities within PAR seek some sort of affective knowledge rooted in lived experience in order to validate research insights. Visual methods are primarily specified through their capacity for bringing insight into previously unheard ideas, as they capture tacit knowledge or address the unconscious registers of knowledge (Courtney, 1987). This is the reason why a sense of belonging has become a dominant topic in research through photographic methods, and Müllner (2022, p. 81) recalls in detail how the psychoanalytic and socio-political conceptualization of displacement in the Fogo Island initiative proved to be definitive for further participatory video projects. Images, due to their immediate comprehensibility but also inherently polysemic character, can easily boost open discussions. For this reason, visual methods are usually applied in combination with verbalization; in fact, they can be considered a necessarily “multimethod method” (Leavy, 2009, p. 227). As participatory images are accompanied by discourse, they also become highly inclusive: amateur images in a civic gathering easily receive various kinds of meaningful feedback, which not only offer the artist personal recognition, but also legitimize a mode of collaborative thinking, which may transcend social and educational hierarchies in a group.

Based on the understanding of visual participatory action research outlined above, I will now present the three stages of the FuturePix project in Siklósbodony. The first two stages, photovoice (Wang, 2006) and the subsequent community painting workshops, were both managed as introductory phases to the collaborative filmmaking workshops. To grasp the actual connection of these stages and to reconstruct how the participants’ thoughts evolved from phase to phase, I will focus on the same three analytic aspects in each of the stages.

1. Local configuration is how I will refer to the combination of social environment and the artistic genre (working formats) that set up the aesthetic space in which research acts are realized and meanings emerge. All creative exercises proposed by researchers formulate implicit research questions by focusing the participants’ attention to specific experiences

and offer some “grammar” for articulation. Image-making practices usually favour representation over performance: by unpacking experiences of failure and success through the lens of the attached emotions of fear, desire, anger, and joy, and by helping to display individual combinations of categorical social identities. To this extent, the proposed artistic conventions decide what is and is not articulable in the field. However, due to the local temporal order, social ties, and various interests, proposed activities may not meet the needs and fit the taste of invited participants. Involvement in or withdrawal from a creative exercise is thus the main tool by which participants can express the acceptance or refusal of research questions. By focusing on local configurations, we can trace the details of how initial expectations are confirmed through engagement in contributing roles or refuted by disrupting the proposed conventions. Modification of exercises with respect to the perceived local configuration tells what new questions have been proposed or put forward by the participants through inventing more comfortable and more exciting exercises.

2. The output of artistic activities can be evaluated as public articulations of social experiences. Examining the role of the public in artistic activities, I follow the small group approach proposed by Garry Fine (2004; 2010; 2012), who intends to capture how people in local settings come together, invent new places which function as arenas for displaying modes of action: “the local is a stage for action and creates a lens by which participants typify groups or gatherings, establishing boundaries” (Fine, 2004, p. 344). The idea of tiny publics relies on intersubjective visibility (instead of discourse) which enhances imagining communities through performed actions. Following Brighenti (2010) we can add that tiny publics as places are no less structured in terms of power (certainly guided by affordances, possibilities of action), but a plurality of scopic regimes can be incited, making visible actions variable and imagined local communities inherently contested. Therefore, tiny public “refers not to the fact of community but to the question of community. One cannot be the public, one can only be in public: the public, in other words, is ‘bridging’ rather than ‘bonding.’ Let us recall that for Tarde (1901) the public is defined by synchronicity of attention” (Brighenti, 2010, p. 117).

3. Tiny publics can be traced as a group-level institution, but also as the public place of arranged events, where research participants display their artwork, engage in new encounters, and they formulate new questions about actions and community in response to provocative feedback. While

participatory action research has been struggling to avoid including research questions by the academic researcher, arts-based research projects have always been more interested in letting issues and topics emerge rather than formulating questions (Leavy, 2017; Greenwood, 2019). In this case, I follow the latter and trace how research questions rooted in social experiences emerge as a result of the local configuration of artistic collaboration and the ever-newer tiny publics in which participants become visible through their photos, paintings, and documentary.

Photovoice

Photovoice, the first form of work employed, was intended to map the local issues and problems of concern the partial solution of which could give the participants an experience of communal success. Rooted in the critical pedagogical practice of the 1970s, photo-voice is a process that transforms the somatic process of experience into a shared social-critical knowledge through photography. Participants take photographs of key concepts in their lives and then explore possibilities for transforming their environment through a discussion based on the photographs. In the words of Augusto Boal, who is referring to Paolo Freire's instructions, "We are going to ask you some questions. For this purpose, we will speak in Spanish. And you must answer us. But you cannot speak in Spanish: you must speak in 'photography.' We ask you things in Spanish, which is a language. You answer us in photography, which is also a language" (Boal 2008, p. 98). According to the increasingly solidified conventions, articulated by Caroline Wang in the 1990s, the "answers" crystallizing around the images can be interpreted as a list of social problems, which enables not only the participants but also decision-makers to understand everyday experiences, thereby transforming them into public policy issues that need to be solved (see: Wang, 2006).

As an introduction, we opened a Family Photo Studio in the attic of the community centre on Roma Day in early summer. Families and groups of friends could have carefully lit and attractive group photos taken. After successful recruitment, we began work with a group of adults (18–40 years old) and a group of young people (10–16 years old), each with 8–10 members. By the third session, however, interest had waned, so we continued work with a youth group of 15 (14–20-year-olds). We had expected attrition, as

the space created with the Family Photo Studio was a low-threshold one, suitable primarily for getting acquainted and making contacts, while we knew full well that taking, downloading and discussing the pictures would be a time-consuming process that may exceed the patience of some. In addition, weekend planning was difficult for many of the adults (friends and relatives would arrive unannounced from neighbouring villages or they had to leave suddenly), and if someone dropped out of the process once, they would not return to the next meeting).

We drew on our previous experience with the members of the ÉjjelNap-pal7ker group in Budapest (Oblath & Csoszó 2017; Oblath et al., 2022) when planning the summer workshop to be held once a week: we planned to foster group cohesion through sessions focused on acquiring photographic skills (composition, framing) involving through a lot of walking and movement, then use a weak fictional framework (i.e. being the editorial staff of a paper) to identify key local concepts to be photographed by the participants, and then have individuals select the photos they consider the most important, hold collective discussions about the selected photos according to the SHOWeD convention and create the photovoice would constitute a current inventory of the most important local social issues according to the young people of Bodony.

However, the editorial framing game introduced in the third workshop proved to be too complicated, documentary and slow for the young participants. The individual photo series – done with the working title, *My Resources*, were made, but once the images were downloaded and selected in the afternoon, we did not have a chance to create a collective voice for the resource images. While the images were being downloaded and we were working individually with each participant as facilitators, the others got hold of one of the “big” (i.e. professional) cameras and created a game of dress-up improvisation for themselves, based on a creative use of the compositional tools they had practised. The series focused on two objects found in the mayor’s office, which had been left open: a crate of red peppers (grown by public workers on municipal land) and a flag of the European Union. Scrolling through the pictures on the camera, which we retrieved in a carnival atmosphere that completely subverted the program as originally planned, we were offered several narratives for the series: “The Union descended on our peppers”; the boy who draped the flag over himself as a cape is “a superhero who saves the peppers from the Union.” In the following session, we returned to the movement exercises: we offered the game

of driving two groups of blindfolded youths to the edge of the village, and asking them to walk back with their blindfolds off and take a series of pictures under the working title, Finding Siklósbodony. However, instead of returning with a photo series, each group made a horror film after discovering the video functions of the camera. One depicts starving people wandering in a void after global extinction, while the other shows migrants searching for the village, having just arrived in Hungary.

A moderated joint discussion of the situation revealed that the young participants thought editorial offices dealt with national political issues that were distant and comical for them, and they did not want to bring their own lives into this world. The group did not want to make their photo essay about the Bodony peppers or their videos public; instead, they would have preferred to create carefully staged and lit professional photographs that would portray them as individuals and appear as professional images on social media.

This is how the series with the working title FuturePix was born. After exercises in (studio) lighting and portraiture, the young people independently imagined, composed and went through a long process of fine-tuning the details as they collectively set up images of themselves in ten years' time, in their future environment. These social portraits of the future typically show the participants at work, identifying with their imagined occupation (baker, rock musician, photographer, food blogger, and hairdresser). So we began to call it the Dream Jobs series. These individual portraits were already meaningful to their creators in the context of their previous images of resources. The image pairs created typically represented the resource-future dimension as a relationship between "familiarity" and the "dream job," and participants also articulated this relationship textually in the process of individually creating captions. The image pair was supplemented by a variety of tableaus and untitled experimental images taken during the semester's photo exercises, which formed a sort of decorative pattern. While all participants were happy to share the resulting individual portfolios with the public, they still maintained that their collectively and casually created photo essays had no place in this context despite the facilitators' repeated suggestions to consider it.

The description of the working process shows – even without any thorough analysis of the individual portfolios – that our participatory research proposal, which sought to identify social problems and public policy issues from the perspective of young people, was subverted by the participants

and adapted to their own needs. Instead of the “issue images” based on life experiences, the images created were carefully illuminated portraits showing individual dreams/successes, and these would show up in the Facebook profiles of almost everyone after the workshop ended. At this stage, the creators’ main concern was selecting a future social role (occupation) that they could personally identify with and that would allow them to distinguish themselves from the others through the elaboration of the details.

We collectively published the portfolios on two occasions, in two different ways. At the first exhibition, during a professional day on the methodology of community development at the University of Pécs, the participants were given a section of a wall where they presented their portfolios as their own vision. [Fig. 1.] Their photos taken during the exercises were shown on two “common” sections, including their portraits of each other with the EU flag, which were removed from the original context described earlier. The local cable network was invited to the event, and any artist willing to do be interviewed by the crew could do so in front of their own portfolios. [Fig. 2.] The reporters, sensing the shyness of the young people, agreed to trial runs, so anyone could have their statements recorded again, even several times. In these biographic performances, the participants discussed their creative process and life goals before the public of the county, and their talent and the seriousness of their dreams were demonstrated by their portfolios shown as backgrounds and cut-aways. Their self-interpretations in response to the interviewer’s questions would touch on the contrast between home/childhood and profession/adulthood, and when discussing the topic of career choice, they articulated the dilemma that it could be “something enforced by reality” or “a hobby dreamed up for the future.” Two weeks later, in the coverage of the professional days in the Pécsi Kör (Pécs Circle) magazine, the material was broadcast as good practice in community development. As a result of an editorial decision, the emphasis was put on the methodological specificities of photovoice, and the few seconds about photovoice include one of the creators’ interpretation that life experiences are complex, so certain things are easier to tell in pictures. The report’s cut-away images include amateur “family” photos of young people having fun, effectively framed and dramatically lit works attesting to the creators’ aesthetic competence, as well as the decontextualized portraits of subversive play with the EU flag, represented within the report as a sign of identification with Europe.

The second presentation took place in the framework of a social art festival organized at Trafó, a centre for contemporary theatre in Budapest. The SajátSzínház (OwnTheater) event focused on a question relevant to all participatory art programs in Roma communities of different situations in Hungary between 2014 and 2017, namely the question posed by the participating communities to the middle class in Budapest: what are the institutions that are missing and that hold us captive? In the framework of the festival, the Siklósbodony group and we created an interactive stage exhibition, including copies of the works of the community painting (see below) alongside pieces of the individual photo portfolios. Tables were set up on the stage, the young people covered them with postcard-sized reproductions, and the audience was free to collect interesting pictures in a folder and dictate the imagined title of their folder to the artists sitting on bar stools and behind notebooks at the edge of the stage. Audience members chatted with the young people, occasionally changing their titles, which would appear continuously on the huge screen set up on the stage. [Fig. 3.] The conception of the exhibition was guaranteed to give the young people positive feedback on their artistic work, on the interesting quality and importance of their dreams depicted, thus bolstering their self-esteem. The internal evaluative discussions (and subsequent biographical developments) show that the second exhibition did not modify the self-reflective dimensions formulated during the first exhibition, but kept the possibility of reconciling individually formulated dreams and possibilities as a research theme in the participants' minds.

Community mural painting

Muralism, the Latin-American movement painting that had created alternative public spheres for political contestation, has only survived sporadically (Kunzle, 1995). The Ecuadorian and Nicaraguan community painting creative groups founded in the 1990s were meant to replace it in some fashion; while evoking the guerrilla painting of the past, their practices were institutionalised primarily as good practices of an increasingly participatory international development. Being incorporated into the globalised repertoire of international (community) development, the new murals created in Nicaragua typically no longer use harsh political references (no longer include symbols against “Capital” or “America” or

messages extolling the results of popular literacy programs). The NGOs organizing the creative process and reception impose a strict dramaturgy through which local publics are created. The murals are created with the involvement of local community members, and the surfaces display the community resources available to community members and the dreams and development goals commensurate with them. The complex community development processes aim to counteract “learned helplessness,” the primary obstacle to development, by making community members realize and remember their potential: “[in this approach] communities are viewed as resource-rich sites that, once working together to identify and magnify these resources, can cooperate to strengthen their community, either alone or in partnership with external agencies” (Benjamin et al., 2021, p. 2). The role of young people in this creative process follows the logic of Y-PAR:

[youth] creatively identify assets that adult members of the community often overlook (Benjamin et al., 2021, p. 4).

Kriszta Katona, leader of the Mural Morál group in Pécs, learned the methodology of the Nicaraguan FunArte group in Estenil in 2007–2008. Over the next ten years, she went on to paint tableaux enumerating local resources and dreams on the walls of more than twenty municipalities and public institutions in Baranya County, following the community development goals described above, but also experimenting with innovative forms of work (Katona, 2019; 2020). The mural and photovoice workshops ran in parallel. Our original aim with the former was to identify local cultural, social and material resources; however, as the photovoice became increasingly individualized, we became more open to admitting formulations of collective visions for the future in the mural workshop.

We did not build a closed group in this workshop, which was held biweekly for six months. As participants were free to skip sessions and return when time allowed, we managed to avoid cutting generational and trans-local ties. Gradually, a group of regular participants was formed, consisting of 14 adolescents from Siklósbodony, but parents, grandparents, and friends and relatives from four neighbouring villages could join in on an ad hoc basis. We will see that this open group provided local legitimacy for the display of local resources and dreams, but we also perceived deficits of ecological validity, i.e. which groups of participants no longer had a stake in the process at some point.

The first pedagogical layer of the workshop series gradually introduced the forms of self-expression of automatic painting in individual, pair and group setups and thereby allowed the participants to develop a routine of expressing and reflecting their experiences and gave them the sense of security required for collective creation. This process ended with body mapping, an exercise that represented social identity in a painted life-size body outline. In partial overlap with the process of creating a self-expressive routine, exercises also gave participants the formal and technical skills needed to compose a mural. From comic strips depicting individual daily life and community life events through graffiti and poster painting, we worked our way to the collective creation of a model of an ideal village. Exercises were built on each other in this process as well, and learning increasingly complex technical skills also entailed the accumulation of insights into the community. Finally, these insights were converted into an inventory of resources to be acquired and goals to be achieved during the collective design of a mural for a location chosen collectively in consultation with the municipality and participants.

The work process was pedagogically complex and ethnographically very dense; I will only examine here how the issues that engaged the participants were identified through the forms of work offered and the “small publics” organized.

The works were presented to the public in three stages. We invited parents, relatives and teachers and NGO staff from the surrounding municipalities to the first presentation, a Professional Day held in the cultural centre of a nearby town. The heterogeneous audience gathered in the liminal space outside the village not only admired the finished works, which were a testimony to individual efforts, but also viewed the painting covering the wall of the cultural centre and discussed how the workshop would accomplish the final work and praised the participants’ performance in terms of the anticipated greatness of the result. In addition to the positive feedback for the young people, the viewers we imagined (the adult residents of the village) could also consider their potential involvement in the process. At this public event, the creators’ only question was which parts of their efforts would be acknowledged by their environment and to what degree. Nevertheless, the dramaturgy of the Professional Day turned the responses into a dialogue between the two groups of receivers: the appreciative phrases that could be expressed in the “strange space” were modelled for the adult residents of the village by the teachers and the NGO staff as “strangers,” phrases with

which the parents inevitably acknowledged and affirmed the young people as program participants.

The second and third presentation of the results of the process was linked to the photovoice presentations, where audience interest was mainly focused on the young people who created the works. In other words, the participants had to think about their fantasies for the collective future not primarily through the audience reactions (through responding to them), but through the negotiations during the preparation of the exhibition and the selection of the works. As the initiators of the program, we designated the formulation of positive fantasies about the future of the village as the primary objective, and in this respect identifying questions were relevant to the participants can be interpreted as a research result. The first theme of the large stencil and tempera posters was the future beach (swimming pool), exploiting the water sources available in the village, and the fun of young people enjoying ice cream and swimming in the imagined facility. The second poster focused on the call for improvements to transport infrastructure: "Let's act! No more waiting!" proclaims a group of girls waiting for the long-distance bus in the rain. The third poster also shows the joy of unity and collective action, celebrating the community care of public spaces with the slogan "The future belongs to Császárfal!" [Fig. 4.] After the posters, a collectively made model of the dream village, built from playdough, cardboard and recycled materials, was populated by institutions that the young participants thought the village would need in the next decade and a half: a doctor's office, a school, a kindergarten, a shop, a movie theatre, an (afternoon) bus service, a fishing lake (with a boat). The adults who became actively involved in the selection and arrangement of the works (and later in the design of the final mural) were shocked to realize that the institutions "invented" by the young people had actually existed in the village, which had been gradually, "almost imperceptibly" losing its mostly publicly funded institutions and community spaces over the previous two decades. When the current resources were enumerated, "the power of working together" and the general relative advantages of village life (over urban life: "clean air," "quiet," "closeness to nature") seemed to be the resources easiest to pinpoint, so these were used in the eventual design of the mural. However, during the preparation for the second exhibition (held at the University of Pécs), the participants were less concerned with the question what the village wants to become than the question "What do we want to how of ourselves and to whom?" Two fundamental dilemmas emerged. For the

adults, the question was “How much should we push this?” i.e. what is the legitimacy of asking the villagers about their common future at the bottom of a several-decade-long process of losing institutions? At the same time, the adolescents’ dilemma was whether the relative advantages (water, air, silence, nature) identified as village resources were an attractive enough alternative to moving to the city, still an available option for them. On the horizon of the sociology of the Hungarian village, the formulation of these dilemmas can be interpreted as follows: the community development game of identifying individual and collective resources and goals reveals the logical questions of the systematically excluded groups of the post-socialist state running local development programmes: Can the community development discourse of empowerment be understood in the social space of a small Hungarian village surrounded by privatized land, gradually losing its public institutions, but at the same time not functioning as a suburb, if the offer of new forms of identification is not accompanied by new material, network and expert resources.

However, the pragmatic question arising on the horizon of arts-based participatory action research is if the participants are uninterested in political self-organisation, but face the collective trauma of the loss of institutions or are not thinking in terms of an organic rural-urban relationship, but rather perceive the choice of a rural vs. urban life path as a zero sum existential decision, what kinds of publics can they enter as a collective, where their collective insights can grow to further and further contexts (possibilities of action).

These ideas shaped the frameworks of the second and third presentations. On the Professional Day of Community Developers at the University of Pécs, our main objective was keeping the focus of the panel discussions on the results of the photographers’ work, their future opportunities, and creating new useful social contacts for them. In these terms, the key question was what opportunities and supplementary channels of mobility were available to local young people to compensate for their school careers. The group entrusted the presentation and interpretation of the results of community painting to the workshop leaders, Krisztina Katona and Eszter László. The exhibition was a methodological demonstration organised in university space, and the local television report also focused on the community painting workshop. In the report, the program organisers offered a detailed explanation of the logic of community development and the methodological development of community painting, while the

participants' statement that was broadcast emphasised the importance of attachment to place and organic future creation with reference to the poster "The future belongs to Császárfal!"

The creation of publics in the complex photographic and muralistic creative process offered an opportunity to pose and redefine participatory research questions. The continuously expanding sphere of locally relevant questions that emerge in the public sphere and through public reflection can be characterized as the cognitive interest in art-based participatory action research. Media representations do not contradict and erase these collectively experienced questions anchored in local experiences; rather, they function as a provocation within the reflective process much like other types of feedback. Based on our shared considerations regarding the organisation of the exhibition and the editorial considerations by the cable station, the TV report presents the media framing of community development methodology, the organic future, the importance of non-verbal self-expression and the identification with the European Union, which comes across as the recognition of the professional work of NGOs and the balanced significance of a rural idyll and Europe, at least when read from the perspective of the national public in 2017. However, this frame was too rigid for the next presentation of the community painting workshop; while it serves the purpose of supporting the brand of the village and its young people, it erases dilemmas about the future. This frame provoked a new desire of self-expression in the participants that leaves more room for their uncertainties about the local future. After watching the TV report together, the participants decided that they would like to have small postcards of the large paintings for the exhibition in Trafó, visitors could choose from these and, if they so wished, they could ask the artists what the given experience or dream was about. The accompanying folder mentioned earlier (in which visitors could compile their own collections) was accompanied by a text that simultaneously emphasised the importance of the loss of institutions, the relativity of the category of the "poorest village" and the diversity of dreams.

The dilemmas articulated in the group-level public, the media representation of empowering community development and the interactive exhibition that explored the tensions between the two allowed the creative group to return to their mural project in the summer of 2017. The expanded concept gives a more prominent role to the dream jobs expressed in the photo workshop, as well as to life situations that are simultaneously arranged as branches of a tree and as (once) possible events of a time spiral linking

past and future. The carefully designed painting was created on the walls of a disused gas cylinder exchange in the geometric centre of the one-street village during a three-day community creative process. [Fig. 5.] The subsequent complex use of the mural over the years has fulfilled three distinct functions. In keeping with the use encoded in community painting methodology, it reminds villagers of the shared values, goals and resources they have identified and the thought process that led to their identification. A distinctive hospitality ritual has also developed: visiting journalists and NGO activists coming to the village on exchange visits view the gas exchange plant. The local “tour guide” who accompanies the visitors is usually not the only one telling the story of the process, as the villagers passing by tend to add their own, and visitors have the opportunity to ask further questions in this context of collective self-representation, for instance about daily life, conditions, achievements and new difficulties in the village. The wall of the gas exchange plant, as a participatory spectacle, has also become a public counterpoint to the church and the World War I memorial at the entrance to the village from the direction of Pécs. A website collecting works of art in public space in Hungary² lists it as Children’s Dreams. A few tourists come every year, and they usually have the courage to ask the first villager who passes by what it is. Reportedly, no one has ever replied that they didn’t know, shrugged their shoulders or been embarrassed.

Collaborative filmmaking

The photovoice and community painting workshops laid the groundwork for the community’s documentary about itself. The team invited to shoot the film included Martin Boross and his theatre company StereoAkt, whose previous work includes site-specific theatre, filming film etudes with large groups, and experimental documentary theatre with amateur actors. The initial idea was to create a site-specific theatre production with carnival elements, in which the young people who were the core participants of the workshops would try to involve the other residents of the village in a process of creative collaboration and thinking about the future of the village. This participatory social experiment was to be captured in a reportage film that the community view years later, thus providing a baseline for assessing the future state of the village community. However, StereoAkt’s suggestion was to combine theatre and film work to make the filming itself the carnival

event to which the villagers might flock, and by documenting the preparations for the “big” shoot, we could capture the young people’s fears related to involving the adults, the results of their own efforts, and the future of the village. Based on a joint interpretation of the research results of the two previous workshops, i.e. the individual and collective local dilemmas related to agency, we ended up developing a concept of a communal film shoot of a “making of film” consisting of three scenes.

The first part focused on staging a talent show and re-enacting key scenes from the young participants’ favourite films. The second part focused on the local conflicts preventing the local community from acting together, using the “power of unity,” the community resource so often emphasised in the course of community painting. The third part was a street theatre scene we would internally refer to as “low-threshold,” which offered the opportunity for any local resident who had stayed away to come outside their front door and to compose themselves into the community film by performing a simple but surreal gesture.

The starting point for the first part was the documentary, *The Wolfpack* (2015, dir. Crystal Moselle), which shows the socialisation of brothers locked up in a big city high-rise through the films they watch and re-enact and the practice of reshooting. The re-enactment of famous film scenes, seen many times and recalled regularly, proved to be a safe space for self-discovery for the young people of Bodony as well. Organising the shoot for the costumed re-enactment of a classic Bud Spencer-Terence Hill scene and a duel scene from *Troy* also provided an opportunity to learn about the dramaturgy of filmmaking. This, in turn, was the starting point for making two short films of self-representation using the green box technique. In the first one, a Roma dance is shown with the backdrop of the Heroes’ Square in Budapest, chosen by the protagonist. The second one shows the participants perform their own rap song in front of a backdrop they painted. All the details were decided by the actors during the shooting of the scenes, but they did not know how their work would fit into the film as a whole. The finished film also included footage from two other exercises. First, individual interviews were conducted, in which the protagonists explained their aspirations, plans and dilemmas for their personal futures by explaining the dream job images they had created in the photovoice workshop. Then we filmed a “secret room” scene familiar from the world of reality TV, in which the actors were not to talk about themselves, but rather to show their secret talent they were still afraid to reveal to the

public. At a joint viewing of the footage, the actors could choose to include a moment of their talent clip itself or rather images of them viewing the footage of their secret talent.

For the second part, we used group discussions and drama pedagogical games to find conflict situations in the life of the village that participants considered irresolvable. Our starting point was a version of Augusto Boal's forum theatre convention often used in drama in education (DiE) workshops, in which a protagonist in a difficult situation is confronted with several antagonists at the same time, who prevent the protagonist from achieving his or her will. This form of participatory theatre encourages the audience to intervene in the action. That is, any spectator can stop the scene they are watching by clapping, then step into the protagonist's role and show in the restarted scene how he or she would enforce the protagonist's will against the antagonists. In the course of creating the scenes, we try to reconstruct the participants' everyday experiences that fit into the dramatic structure as authentically as possible. A variety of parent-child disputes and classroom and school bullying situations came up, but what the participants found the most exciting were family rivalry and the escalation of conflict. After analysing several local family and household conflicts, the team concluded that the conflicts between households they knew internally typically started from small disagreements, and it was typically mutual "jealousy" driven by limited opportunities that pushed relationships into lasting resentment. In these cases, the will of an "external" actor, such as a young family member, was not even registered by the adults. In the scene that was eventually filmed, a wedding mishap is shown: the bride's jealous younger sister (perhaps accidentally) spills red wine on her sister's wedding dress, and the parents (the fathers and mothers of the bride and groom) respond to the tense moment by continuing their prior argument of rivalry (looking down on each other and identifying as superior), and exposing the secret affair between the younger sister and the groom in the process. The audience was allowed to intervene in the scene on the day of filming. [Fig. 6.] The solution consensually accepted with applause, the intervening spectator resolved the situation not assuming the role of the bride, but that of a suddenly appearing older female relative who helped the bride escape. The preparations for shooting the third part included several formal and thematic games. The first set of exercises involved creating a remake of a video clip in which they lip-sync their favourite song with their most desired environment providing the backdrop. The background is intermittently

interrupted by a slowmotion panorama of the village, showing the villagers in front of their houses making unusual gestures. The Seoul skyline was chosen as the backdrop for the Hungarian pop song about love, and the village street was populated by young people dressed in different kinds of protective gear and performing practical jokes. The second set of exercises was a preparation for the community mobilisation necessary for the shoot. Back at the time of the individual dream job interviews, the participants had to identify a small but significant change that the young people wanted to achieve in the village, but could only be realized by working together. Making the football pitch level and re-growing the grass seemed a public policy reform that could be achieved through community collaboration, and the most important moments of this reform were captured on film. If the young people later became unsure of their agency, we could refer to the film documentation as evidence of the collective success achieved through small steps, following the logic of community development. We also made an advance demonstration of the effectiveness of our joint efforts in another preparatory exercise, when we tried to invite the villagers to the day of the filming. Many of the participants were worried about villagers who were in a quarrel with each other (and perhaps with the participant's family or even with the participant) and wondered how they would refuse when asked to come up a week later to watch a theatre performance in front of the community centre, or at least to stand outside their houses to show themselves for the filming. As a first step taken together, we approached a farmer thought to be one of the "toughest cases" in order to borrow his horse and carriage for the filming. Although the farmer did not want to appear in the film, he was happy to offer the use of his carriage "for the village, in the village's interest." With the help of the horse-drawn carriage, we organised a loud and spectacular carnival parade, during which the young people dressed in festive outfits befitting a wedding rang the doorbell of each house and handed out personalised invitations to all the residents for the day of the filming.

Of the village population of 120, 80 people gathered on the day of the shoot. They contributed to the preparations for the stage wedding, played the wedding party by eating the prepared dishes and played the audience in the forum theatre scene. In the closing scene of the film, we see the bride running down the main street of the village with the villagers in the background. The residents, who show surprising gestures in front of their house – prying, scolding, paying respect or just expressing themselves – were played

by the villagers themselves, with the young people previously modelling the gestures. We can see a public worker fleeing with a string trimmer, a person in a red leather jacket dumping oranges from a wheelbarrow, a kid bouncing on a trampoline in front of a house [Fig. 7], a man barbecuing in front of his house and setting the stand on fire, and passers-by who take reverse photos of the Google Streetview car with their mobile phones.

During the making of the film, the participants continued to reflect on the issues raised in the two visual workshops, constantly redefining their dilemmas about their social position resulting from their age and place of living and about their social identity and their questions about the cohesion and agency of the village as a community. The theatricality of the filming institutionalised a tiny public sphere in which the same overarching dilemmas could appear simultaneously at the safe distance of a fictional framework and as practical questions for concrete action plans in the work of representation. The possibilities of the creative process, conceived as art-based participatory action research, are no doubt determined by the forms of work devised by the workshop leaders and the order in which they are carried out, but we saw that the participants were able to subvert and adapt the newly learned forms of work to their own interests and to censor the resulting works based on their individual and collective tastes.

As for the distribution of the films, we also made sure to keep the screenings in the tiny public defined by Gary Fine (2012) as the meso-level. This was meant to give the filmmakers the opportunity to confront their own representational possibilities through the now separate work, without becoming permanently alienated from their own representations, in the sense that they always have the possibility of withdrawing, supplementing or shaping them further. In this spirit, we agreed with the actors that the film would only be screened for audiences of somewhat predictable sizes and compositions, and the actors would be present at the screenings and in the subsequent discussions as representatives of the whole creative team. The voicing of the experiences of reception offers an opportunity for the filmmakers to encounter new interpretations of themselves and their lives, to correct what they consider misinterpretations by sharing further stories, and use the resulting dialogue to make acquaintances with people who represent new resources for them. These people are primarily “weak social ties” for them, i.e. compensatory social capital they can use to overcome the disadvantages suffered as a result of the loss of institutions and exclusion from the labour market and schools.

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*Figures 1–3. First Photo Voice Exhibition
(photos by Gabriella Csoszó, copyright sajatszinhaz.org)*



*Figure 4. Second Photo Voice Exhibition
(photos by Gabriella Csozó, copyright sajatszinhaz.org)*



*Figure 5. Posters of the community painting workshop
(photos by Márton Oblath, copyright sajatszinhaz.org)*



Figures 6–7. Community mural painting
(photos by Márton Oblath, copyright sajatszinhaz.org)



Figures 8–10. Community film
(photos by Gabriella Csozó, copyright sajatszinhaz.org)

“Whoever is not against us is for us”: Sectarianization of politics in Hungary¹

RUDOLF METZ – VERONIKA KÖVESDI²

Abstract

So it is not we who exclude those who do not vote for the government, but those who exclude themselves from our community who do not agree with us. Of course, we cannot draw any far-reaching conclusions from this statement, but it indicates the nature of the community around Orbán. Modern political trends in democracies, such as post-truth, populist, and identity politics, have produced a solid emotion-based distinction between true believers and non-believers, polarizing the perceptions of the legitimacy of political regimes and decisions. The paper aims to capture this process by introducing the concept of sectarianization built on Max Weber's thoughts on political sects in democracies and Émile Durkheim's theory of cults in modern societies. We highlight four core components of sectarianization through the illustrative case of Viktor Orbán's Hungary: artificially produced charisma; exclusive but voluntary community (schism, conversion

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and ex-communication); monopolized political rituals; and controlled belief system (propaganda). Building on theories of political/civil religions, personality cults, sociological research on new religious movements and studies on political behaviour and communication, we demonstrate the analytical usefulness of the concept.

The sectarianization of politics may be familiar to us from the literature on Middle Eastern states that seeks to explain the nature of religiously based political and cultural conflicts.¹ These studies focus on how political and state actors mobilize religious identities to gain political advantage and legitimize their claims to power, delegitimizing and stigmatizing out-group members or non-conformist behaviour. The age of post-truth, modern populism and polarizing “tribal” politics suggests that the sectarianization of politics is a valuable concept even in Western democracies.

Applying the concept to the United States, Eli J. Finkel and his colleagues argue that political sectarianization encompasses the “tendency to adopt a moralized identification with one political group and against another”.² According to their basic religious metaphor, the main driving force behind group behaviour is not “genetic kinship” but a strong belief in the moral superiority of one’s sect. Unpacking this definition, this article describes it as a dynamic process in which political actors seek to determine and redefine the religious aspects of the political community, building on excessive moralized group attachments in order to legitimize their politics and delegitimize other political forces. This process creates a strong identity, belief and emotion-based distinction between true believers and non-believers. However, political sects have always existed in democracies, like small groups of ideological vanguards or social movements on both sides of the political spectrum.³ They rarely become dominant regime-forming forces. In the last decade, digital media have gained enormous representational and community-building power, making these marginalized groups more visible and prevalent, such as the reactionary, atavistic alt-right movements,⁴ environmental and climate activism⁵ and progressive social justice movements.⁶

The article seeks to answer the question of how a closed group of believers is formed around a strong and charismatic leader and, in parallel, how their belief system prescribes and legitimizes the collective action and thinking of the political group. Utilizing the cross-fertilization of different disciplines, such as the theories of political/civil religions and personality cults, sociological-anthropological research on new religious movements and studies of political behaviour and communication, we will explain polarizing political

beliefs, exclusive group identities and radicalizing collective actions through sectarianization using the example of Viktor Orbán’s Hungary.

We will approach the study of sectarianization from two perspectives. On the one hand, we draw heavily on Max Weber’s essay published in 1905. He formulated the idea that sectarian organizations and group dynamics – such as individual voluntary participation, competence-based selection of leaders, exclusive groupings and limited but direct democratic decision-making – are essential to the functioning of modern democratic societies.⁷ On the other hand, the works of Émile Durkheim and his followers⁸ were not explicitly concerned with sects but with the community-building power of cults in modern societies, where exclusive belief systems, individualism, voluntarism and the selection of leaders are increasingly important.

In other words, this perspective focuses not on religious organizations or groups but on the factors that shape them: the elements of belief (persons, myths and symbols) and practice (rituals). While beliefs determine how one should and should not think about “sacred” or “profane” things or people, rituals prescribe how one should and should not behave in the presence of sacred and profane things and people. Political sectarianization aims to monopolize these forces. Accordingly, the article examines the process of sectarianization along four central dimensions. These are (1) the artificially created and maintained charisma; (2) group dynamics based on isolation, exclusivity but voluntarism (schism, conversion and ex-communication); (3) the monopolization of political rites; and (4) the control of the belief system (propaganda).

The analytical usefulness of sectarianization can easily be lost if we take two considerations seriously. First, religious analogies to politics are always incomplete and limited.

We are analyzing the religious dimensions of politics, which do not necessarily provide an institutional framework or a kind of spiritual transcendence like traditional churches but can function as central determinants of people’s beliefs about the world, their political behaviour and thus the symbolic legitimacy of the political regime. In this sense, the political role of faith is not approached from the point of view of the mobilization of religious communities and churches, as is usually done in the literature.⁹ Political beliefs – i.e. individuals’ convictions about what they cannot confirm by direct experience but feel to be true and unquestionable – shape the community and determine group dynamics, just as traditional religions do.

Second, it is also important to emphasize that the article does not treat sectarianism as a normative label, as is usually the case in literature and public discourse. The root of the pejorative connotations lies in the negative historical experiences of totalitarian regimes and destructive religious groups. These religious movements have usually generated moral panics and anti-cult mobilizations in society,¹⁰ which can also be observed in politics. For example, Steven Hassan, a mental health counsellor and former cult member, offers advice in his book on how to leave and recover from the “Trump Cult”, how to reverse “mind control” or “brainwashing”, and how to help friends and family members to do so.¹¹ This anti-cult view is largely based on the compulsive brainwashing/brain control thesis, for which no clear scientific evidence has yet been found.¹² In contrast to Hassan, prominent cult researcher Robert Jay Lifton (2019) has offered a less dismissive diagnosis. In his interpretation, the former US president could shape reality for his followers through propaganda while not becoming a totalitarian cult leader. Relying on the Weberian understanding of political sects, we aim to stay on a middle ground of evaluations.¹³ While in Weber’s approach, the sects represented political pluralism,¹⁴ sectarianization intends to create a monopolistic source of legitimacy in society. The article interprets this process as the central legitimization dynamic of Weber’s leader democracy, which explicitly focuses on the charismatic authority and democratic authorization of the leader.¹⁵

The illustrative case: The Orbán regime

The popularity of populist, illiberal and authoritarian politics is rising, helping leaders such as Donald Trump, Giorgia Meloni, Janez Janša or, indirectly, Jarosław Kaczyński to power. None of them have gone as far as the Hungarian prime minister (PM), who has been able to stay in power with four two-thirds victories in a row, shaping his country’s politics for a long time, which in turn has not (yet) resulted in political repression and violence that define Vladimir Putin’s Russia. Building on these developments, we argue that contemporary Hungarian politics as an extreme case magnifies the main characteristics of sectarianization.

Scholars generally refer to the emerging political system as the “Orbán regime”, but loyal commentators already talk about the “Orbán era”.¹⁶ Critical assessments usually stressed institutional and constitutional

factors (e.g. checks and balances, the media system or local governments) of the democratic backsliding, interpreting this transformation in different competing conceptual frameworks (e.g. hybrid regime or authoritarianism).¹⁷ Here, we focus not on these changes but on the nature of legitimacy in the Orbán regime. Following the scholars who define the Hungarian political dynamics in Weberian terms, we argue that charismatic, plebiscitary and quasi-democratic authorization became the core dynamic of the regime’s legitimization.¹⁸ While Orbán’s charismatic leadership does not result in a totalitarian or dictatorial cult of personality, loyalty to and blind faith in the leader and the ruling party, Fidesz,¹⁹ is still a crucial dynamic in Hungarian politics. At the same time, the regime is built on a selectively constructed closed community or identity that identifies itself as the System of National Cooperation through a populist, quasi-religious and nationalist rhetoric, symbols and rituals,²⁰ excluding those who are not a member of the nation. The regime’s political formula is simply: “You are either with us or against us”.

This mentality is not far from the Hungarian political mindset in general. Two religious thoughts deeply rooted in Hungarian politics were originally attributed to Jesus: “He who is not with me is against me; whoever does not gather with me truly is scattering” (Matthew 12:30, Luke 11:23) and the seemingly more permissive “For whoever is not against us is for us” (Mark 9:40). These two thoughts did not just lay infamously the foundations of the political religion in the Hungarian communist regimes but also described the mitigation of Stalinist dictatorship. However, at a general level, the two thoughts are not radically different. Both arise in connection with the “exorcism” in the Bible but from different perspectives. While the stricter and narrower formulation is used against external attacks (the accusations of the Pharisees), the more permissive one is applied to those who cast the devil out of others in the name of Jesus. Both doctrines point to the same faith-based group dynamic, which determines the identity politics of the Orbán regime. At the level of citizens, the political line of the governing party remains permissive and voluntary (at least formally), but at the level of political and cultural elites, it has become much more hardliner and exclusive, where public criticism is interpreted as a sign of disloyalty and can easily lead to ex-communication. The words of Zoltán Osztie, a Catholic pastor and pro-government opinion leader, illustrate interdependent doctrines spectacularly. He said in an interview after a mass in Orbán’s honour in 2022 that: “whoever does not join the community

excludes himself/herself from the community. So it is not we who exclude those who do not vote for the government, but those who exclude themselves from our community who do not agree with us”.²¹ Of course, we cannot draw any far-reaching conclusions from this statement, but it indicates the nature of the community around Orbán.

The question of who is a true member of the Hungarian political community has defined Hungarian political culture since the nineteenth century. It is usually closely linked to another dynamic: the waiting for a political saviour. According to Balázs Apor, every Hungarian regime in the last two centuries (e.g. the monarchy, right-wing authoritarianism, communist dictatorship and democracy) has produced a similar leader cult as a central source of legitimacy, in which the leader not only embodies the political community but also becomes its champion. He argued that that the “Orbán cult” is a condensation of all these historical legacies, creating the Hungarian equivalent of a new and modern representation of the strongman²². His argument suggests that the religious character of Hungarian politics is typically and traditionally concentrated on one person, which has reinforced the polarization of perceptions about the legitimacy of the Hungarian regime.

From sacralization to sectarianization of politics

The literature usually describes the process as the sacralization of politics, whereby political communities loosen or sever their ties with traditional institutionalized and metaphysical religions as they seek a new basis for political legitimacy: new belief systems, myths and rituals. In this way, modern states take on the characteristics and functions of traditional and institutionalized churches.²³ The new secular belief systems are based on the image of a chosen sacred community that provides ethical and social codes and commandments to define “the meaning and the ultimate purpose of the social existence and prescribe the principles for discriminating between good and evil”.²⁴ While the religious nature of politics provoked fierce debate among theorists,²⁵ the sacralization of politics can be a useful heuristic tool if the theoretical argumentation serves an empirical understanding of the role of beliefs and actions in the legitimization of political authority. However, the literature tends to be limited to the analysis of extreme forms and static endpoints.²⁶ “Namely, the political religions” are generally seen as

the totalitarian techniques of legitimization that define Stalin’s Soviet Union or Hitler’s Third Reich, and the “civil religions” in democratic systems, such as the French and American Republics or the post-war German democracy. Differences culminate in the nature of political power and leadership, the dominant ideology, the practice of legitimization, and norms of collective actions and beliefs.²⁷ But the religious side of politics is transient and contingent.²⁸

The belief systems of democracies are even more fragile than those of totalitarian regimes. The basic idea of democracies often creates unrealistic expectations in society, which politicians and institutions are unable to meet. This tendency inevitably leads to disappointment, especially in an age of permanent existential²⁹ and intellectual(post-ideology³⁰ and post-truth³¹) uncertainty. At the same time, democratic competition can keep people’s beliefs in legitimacy flexible and renewable. People may periodically/permanently turn away from politics and fall into apathy, while others desperately search for something or someone to believe in. This tendency can intensify the competition between belief systems, making political visions even more radical and unrealistic. The rise of populism has revived the religious functions of democratic politics,³² promising political redemption on earth.³³ On the level of the political system, sectarianization aims to capture this critical dynamic process, whereby a regime becomes increasingly exclusive, closed and leader-centred while avoiding losing the illusion of democratic legitimacy and becoming totalistic or dictatorial like political religions. The question, then, is not how the state replaces the churches in a secularized world (sacralization of politics) but how people’s faith is shaped in a particular direction in modern democracies and what are the consequences for political legitimacy (sectarianization of politics). We have combined the concepts of cults and sects to create an integrative analytical framework.

The sociology of religion often typifies different forms/stages of institutionalization of religious organizations such as cults, sects, denominations and churches.³⁴ Sects are usually identified in line with Weberian theoretical traditions in contrast to institutionalized churches underlining voluntary conversion, homogeneous and exclusive membership, ideological and behavioural requirements of becoming members (being chosen ones and ex-communication), schism and protest against the values of the rest of the world (radicalism), small, democratic, personal organizational structures and charismatic leadership. Meanwhile, the literature has difficulty interpreting cults. According to sociologists, cults represent a lower level

of institutionalization. Compared to the sects, they are usually even more loosely organized and amorphous groups focused on providing new spiritual benefits (salvation, healing, and ecstatic experiences) to adherents.³⁵ The problem stems from the conceptual demarcation between different organizational forms, which depends only on how we sort out the various real-life religious movements.³⁶ The religious groups become moving targets: they are constantly changing and evolving in terms of beliefs, organization and leadership. Some scholars drew attention to the fact that cults can also be centralized and institutionalized as much as sects.³⁷ In the other strand of the literature, researchers have studied leader cults as an institutionalized and hierarchical legitimation mechanism in communist, fascist, and Nazi regimes. They argue that it is inconceivable for a cult to develop in open, democratic regimes.³⁸ It is not surprising that cults have been charged with negative connotations in the last century when we look at these dictatorial or totalitarian regimes and the destructive religious movements that flourished during this period. The interpretations converge here, but there is a more obvious connection.

While researchers of new religious movements claim that the shared commitment to charismatic leaders is a definitive element of cults,³⁹ the study of personality cults usually draws on the Weberian definition of charisma, describing them as the routinization of charismatic authority.⁴⁰ However, at this point, the conceptual boundaries become fully blurred.

In the article, we adhere to Weber and Durkheim's definitions: the political sect is a specific religious-based mode of how people voluntarily organize themselves around charismatic leaders and exclusive belief systems, while political cult refers to the symbolic object (e.g. leader, symbol and myth) of their worship that shapes collective thought, behaviour and social life. Combining these perspectives, we address a broad set of phenomena. Sectarianization encompasses analytical dimensions that the literature on personality cults finds difficult to interpret within the same conceptual framework, such as manufactured or staged charisma, ideologically closed community and identity (vanguardism and true believers), ritual practices of political beliefs and control of the belief system (propaganda).

Dimension 1: The staged and manufactured charisma

Religious enthusiasm and devotion to leaders are often described with the concept of charisma.⁴¹ In his essay on the political significance of sects, Weber argued that “[t]he religious qualification of the personality, and not any kind of academic knowledge, legitimates the leadership of the congregation”.⁴² Although he did not mention charisma, we can assume that he was referring to a similar form of leadership if we look at his definition of charisma: “[T]he power of charisma rests upon the belief in revelation and heroes, upon the conviction that certain manifestations – whether (...) religious, ethical, artistic, scientific, political, or other kind – are important and valuable”.⁴³ In this sense, leaders become the embodiment of faith, especially if they founded the political sects as prophets. For Weber, they are one of the “purest bearers of charisma” who have exclusive access to the “truth”, denying others who claim the same title.⁴⁴ Their revelations are formative, creating and demanding new obligations.

As Weber put it, charismatic faith “revolutionizes people “from within” and shapes material and social relations according to its revolutionary will”.⁴⁵ Thus, the recognition of charisma becomes the followers’ inner obligation.⁴⁶

Durkheim has similarly recognized the spontaneous emergence of leaders in religious communities:

(...) a man who is speaking to a crowd – if he has achieved communion with it. (...) [H]e feels possessed by a moral force greater than he, of which he is only the interpreter. This is the hallmark of what has often been called the demon of oratorical inspiration. This extraordinary surplus of forces is quite real and comes to him from the very group he is addressing. The feelings he arouses as he speaks return to him enlarged and amplified, reinforcing his own to the same degree. The passionate energies that he arouses reecho in turn within him, and they increase his dynamism. It is then no longer a mere individual who speaks, but a group incarnated and personified.⁴⁷

Durkheim’s theory of the “cult of man”⁴⁸ can provide an explanation of how an individual can rise to power with religious fervour. In his interpretation, individuals in modern democracies acquire a cultic status based on the promise that secular salvation is not only possible but also desirable.

This means that sacred power is internalized within the individual. As a result, rituals take on a special regulative function, testing the moral purity, commitment and ability of individuals. According to Durkheimian interpretation, since all people have equal access to this sacral power, those who can authentically demonstrate their moral purity and skills through ritual will emerge as leaders.⁴⁹

In its pure form, charisma is always fragile because it depends on the constant affirmation of followers. In other words, the gift of charisma is easily lost if leaders fail to serve the interests of their followers and demonstrate their divine, magical or heroic power.⁵⁰ For political sects, the mere demonstration of charismatic virtues⁵¹ is not enough. They seek the opportunity to transform authority into a more stable form. In the process of sectarianization, this routinization of charisma⁵² may not yet manifest itself in concrete institutionalization or depersonalization, but it is evident in the efforts to artificially produce, manufacture and stage charismatic authority through propagandistic media representation and public events.⁵³ From this moment on, sectarian leaders' charisma does not necessarily have to be organically or spontaneously accepted by their followers. Still, their public images must resonate with people's deep-seated needs and expectations; these efforts go beyond the pursuit of popularity and mobilize core symbols and myths. Since leaders can neither oblige others directly to follow them, because it would undermine their authority,⁵⁴ nor can they fully control their public appearance in democracy,⁵⁵ at least as regards perceptions outside their own milieu.

In the Hungarian case, it is particularly striking how a cult status or almost religious aura has organically developed around Orbán. Through interviews with Orbán's supporters and an analysis of comments collected from the forum section of his official website between 2002 and 2008, a cultural anthropologist showed how admiration and love transformed the Hungarian leader from a simple, ordinary man into a statesman.⁵⁶ The way Orbán shaped and exploited political situations also contributed to the organic development of his charisma,⁵⁷ but more spectacular is the effort to preserve the previously formed impressions. The image of the "simple child of the people" and the omnipotent, infallible, invincible statesman was selectively constructed as a kind of bricolage,⁵⁸ mobilizing countless (sometimes contradictory) symbols and myths. We can get a comprehensive picture about his manufactured charisma if we look at his English-language website used to run alongside the official site (now it is inaccessible, redirecting the

visitor back to the official site). The webpage is very straightforward and leaves nothing to the imagination. The website guides the visitor through the PM's journey to becoming a successful and heroic statesman, highlighting the moments that challenged him: as a freedom fighter against the communist dictatorship; as an opposition and party leader against the Hungarian socialists; as the PM against the political, economic and moral crises fuelled by the international left.⁵⁹ His charismatic prophetic status is revealed only in the contrast of these challenges and opponents, as his close followers emphasize in their books about him.⁶⁰

The struggle between David and Goliath is a central element of Orbán's leadership myth. As a rural (poor) lad, he had the courage to stand up to giants such as the liberal intellectuals of Budapest, the Soviet Union, the domestic and international leftist, globalist elite and the European Union. The website also highlights this message:

I have worked my way from a small Hungarian village to studying law in Oxford, later becoming leader of the opposition and head of government. While I believe that holding high positions is not a merit in itself, curiosity and readiness to learn from others is a must to achieve success in any field.⁶¹

Just as G. Fodor summarized it, the PM is “[a] self-made man politician who became successful on the basis of his abilities, talents and knowledge”.⁶²

Like the website, friendly commentators⁶³ provide insights into the perceived personality and everyday life of the leader through several personal roles. The love of football and sportsmanship, the figure of a “family man” who cares for his family and community, as well as the “ordinariness” based on the shared lifestyle and consumption habits (in particular, in relation to food and alcoholic drinks) are often emphasized. Another important element of his public image is his conversions to Christianity and to the national right were undoubtedly sincere.⁶⁴ The PM's social media strategy also reinforces the image of the private person and the statesman. A recently published article shows that Orbán's charisma, as displayed and created in social media, is inevitably embedded in a broader framework of identity politics.⁶⁵ The symbolic representation of the nation gives real meaning and significance to his image of a likeable and competent leader capable of confronting his enemies. The analysis also suggests that elements of the

Hungarian PM's online image are constantly adapting to public resonance and the changing political environment.

Orbán's image in the books published by pro-government commentators⁶⁶ can serve as a guide for the community on how to see, relate to or express loyalty to the leader. One of the PM's greatest admirers describes his leader in a book published by the party's foundation, as follows: "If I interpret Orbán's will to win, his elemental strength to overcome disadvantages, his muscular physique, his quick reactions, his razor-sharp wit and intelligence from the point of view of love for him, then I see in him the charismatic statesman".⁶⁷ The praise and flattery do not stop there. Without claiming to be exhaustive, various attributes appear in the assessments in these works: artist, authoritative, believer, brave, champion of justice, charismatic, chosen, comrade, consistent, decent, decisive, direct, easy-going, energetic, excellent orator, experienced, family man, fierce, founding prophet, Freemasonry Grand Master, good-looking, hard-working, heroic role model, holy warlord, humorous, intelligent, intuitive, inventive, invincible, Machiavellian, mature, mission-driven, moderate, normal, offensive player, optimistic, pastor, persuasive, pioneer, player-coach, populist, powerful, practical, Prince, problem-solving, radical, rational thinker, realist, realistic politician, relentless, Renaissance man, responsible, revolutionary, self-made superstar, sensitive to public, sentiment, sharp wit, statesman, steadfast, (physically and politically) strong, stubborn, suspicious/untrusting, tactical, tenacious, tireless, top athlete, tough, true democrat, uncompromising, unmannered, visionary, war leader (able to fight, conflict-seeking), winner, wise.

Even though the descriptions are often contradictory and ambiguous, the authors echo the admiration that the regime would like to emphasise for the leader. Indeed, some of these labels, especially those related to political skills, are also accepted by even the more critical writers.⁶⁸ A recent empirical study⁶⁹ has also shown that both Fidesz and oppositional voters are aware of their leader's charismatic qualities. The real difference is in the emotional relationships with the Hungarian leader.

Dimension 2: Sect-like community

Weber defined the political sects in contrast to established churches.⁷⁰ The main differences lie in the nature of the organizational structure and

membership. Whereas in traditional churches, membership is acquired by birth but is open to all, sects are voluntary but exclusive, i.e. only those who are qualified and faithful can be members. There are three main features of sectarian group dynamics.

The first characteristic draws attention to the moment when the sect is formed and turns against the bigger community to which it previously belonged. Weber pointed out that “sects alone have achieved the combination of positive religiosity and political radicalism”.⁷¹ His friend and colleague, Ernst Troeltsch,⁷² went further and pointed out that sects always emerged from a schism. Thus sects should always protest the outside world in their beliefs and rituals, which makes them much more radical and ethically rigorous than other congregations. From our perspective, political sects seek to embody the only “true” political belief system.

The Orbán regime prefers to define itself as a Christian democracy drawing on traditional religions and churches. It is symbolic that the new Fundamental Law – accepted in 2011 without involving opposition parties or referendum – started with a “National Avowal” (or “National Confession of Faith”, *Nemzeti Hitvallás*) and a motto from the National Anthem “God bless the Hungarian”. Old Christian churches, the Neo-Protestant Faith Church (*Hit Gyülekezete*) and the Association of United Hungarian Jewish Congregation (*Egységes Magyarországi Izraelita Hitközség*) are also integral parts of the regime, providing moral and political support to the ruling party. However, direct religious elements are symbolically and practically subordinated to patriotism⁷³ and right-wing populism⁷⁴ since many Hungarians are not religious or simply live their faith individually.⁷⁵ Christian democracy has become a carrier of schism or heresy to Western liberal democracies.⁷⁶ Orbán infamously referred to Hungary as an illiberal state in 2014 as opposed to the dominant liberal approach of governance.⁷⁷ Later he clarified his formulation:

Let us confidently declare that Christian democracy is not liberal. Liberal democracy is liberal, while Christian democracy is, by definition, not liberal: it is, if you like, illiberal. And we can specifically say this in connection with a few important issues – say, three great issues. Liberal democracy is in favour of multiculturalism, while Christian democracy gives priority to Christian culture; this is an illiberal concept. Liberal democracy is pro-immigration, while Christian democracy is anti-immigration; this is again a genuinely illiberal

concept. And liberal democracy sides with adaptable family models, while Christian democracy rests on the foundations of the Christian family model; once more, this is an illiberal concept.⁷⁸

While sects are typically described as small groups, Orbán and his party's dominant role in Hungarian politics still carries the characteristic of protesting against the outside world. That is to say, sectarianization, even if it rises to a dominant position, is able to create a fictional outside world in which the community of faith must be defended. The Hungarian right wing's moral victimhood and siege mentality⁷⁹ have been elevated to a global level by becoming the pioneer and "last bastion" of the conservative revolution⁸⁰: building a national conservative hinterland at home,⁸¹ attracting opinion leaders from abroad (e.g. Chris Rufo, Douglas Murray, Kevin Roberts, Rod Dreher, Tony Abbott and Tucker Carlson), and setting the international agenda of conservatism by hosting events (e.g. Conservative Political Action Conference [CPAC] Budapest and the Budapest Demographic Summit) and publishing periodicals (e.g. *The Hungarian Conservatives* and *The European Conservatives*).

The second characteristic is that group membership is based on the voluntary decisions of individuals. The revolutionary power of charisma manifests itself in the conversion that individuals must voluntarily undertake. In this "transformative momentum", the individual's values are transformed, old commitments are abandoned, and they adapt to the chosen community. Conversion is rarely sudden but often marks a long process: converts suspend their doubts and begin to cultivate blind faith in charismatic authority, in ready-made truths (for example, about one's marginalized position in the black-and-white external world), in the sacredness (goodness) and higher purposes of the group. Weber defines a sect as a voluntary community of individuals⁸² based solely on religious qualifications (commitment to the faith). However, he distinguished the visible "religious elite" from the much larger group, called the "invisible church". In the process of political sectarianization, the elite is a small inner circle of committed and loyal believers.⁸³ They not only confirm the special status of the leader⁸⁴ but also receive a charismatic gift by gaining access to hidden knowledge. Their career in the sect depends solely on their loyalty to the leader and their voluntary commitment to the charismatic vision.

Meanwhile, the invisible church of the electorate has no direct access to real knowledge. Believers admire their leaders from afar, demanding

constant emotional recognition for themselves, which reinforces their attachment. Targeted policy decisions and messages work as “love bombs”,⁸⁵ demonstrating that leaders care about their followers, creating a sense that they are truly special to them. In that sense, solving a social problem or the effectiveness of a programme is only secondary. In addition, ordinary people can easily get lost in the world of politics (without the necessary information and competencies) by distancing themselves from their real-life experiences. They are, therefore, also starved of intellectual guidance directly from the bearer of charisma or indirectly from anointed members of the community. In contrast to the elite, political salvation does not require constant political participation and demonstration of faith but only a periodic expression of loyalty during elections or a tacit renunciation of oppositional politics. As Weber has noted, personal commitment cannot be fully controlled since only God can see who the invisible members of the sects are.⁸⁶

The invisible nature of membership triggers the moral struggle around questions of who are the real members of the community and who are the enemies of the people/nation/class? The boundaries of the community are blurred, yet by high moral and ideological standards, members are certain of the answers to these questions. As a result, the political sect extends beyond its own physical boundaries symbolically, yet it narrows the boundaries of the bigger category geographically, linguistically and socially. This is why critics of the Hungarian government (e.g. left-wing and liberal intellectuals, politicians, voters and NGOs) have become traitors or anti-nationals. External villains usually represent another level of this conflict.

The colossal and truly dangerous opponents, such as the bureaucrats of the European Union, the international left, the global network of Hungarian-born businessman George Soros and the United States (unless Donald Trump is the president) as permanent scapegoats or political challenges (e.g. war and migration) as a political environment, make the special abilities of the leader really important, stabilizing and revitalizing the charismatic engagement in the community.⁸⁷

The third characteristic is exclusivity at the level of the visible elite, where only credible demonstration of loyalty can guarantee economic, social and political status. Xavier Márquez has pointed out that the expression of loyalty is one of the central group dynamics of leader cults:

These signals of support can be called “flattery”, given their typically insincere and excessive character. Rulers, therefore, have good reason

to distrust them. In order to be credible as a signal of loyalty, flattery needs to be costly, binding the flatterer reliably to the leader in ways that cannot be easily disclaimed, even if this cost is measured only in terms of a loss of status for the flatterer. We should therefore expect that when power is highly personalized and intra-party competition for leadership-allocated resources is fierce, flattery will tend to become even more excessive and insincere since the fact that everyone else is flattering the leader means that “ordinary” praise tends to be devalued as “cheap talk” and discounted accordingly. Flattery “inflation” should lead to typical cultic phenomena.⁸⁸

The Orbán regime has created an environment where self-driven zealotry became a general behavioural pattern among the members of the political elite competing for limited resources and outbidding each other in signalling loyalty. This group dynamic is no accident. An early assessment, based on interviews with experts and elites, pointed out that Orbán “subordinates everything and everyone to himself. He expects unconditional loyalty and can enforce it”.⁸⁹

His close followers are one hundred per cent dependent on him, and he often provokes conflict and competition among them, keeping everyone around him in constant motion.⁹⁰

The nature of these dynamics can be particularly well illustrated by the case of G. Fodor, who gave up his former academic and scientific career to serve the regime actively. As a political thinker, he was, for a long time, a central figure in Fidesz’s intellectual background and became Orbán’s personal advisor. Meanwhile, he also had his own television show, managed the oldest think tank of Fidesz, called Századvég, and created a provocative online media platform (888.hu). The primacy of his loyalty is reflected in the book he wrote about the Hungarian PM, in which he said:

Fidesz has two foundations: “one is the flag”, that is, unity, and Viktor Orbán, who creates, protects, preserves and strengthens unity. Orbán is the most important “structure”. [...] If everything is in order and he is in his place, things will go up, if not, they will go down. Therefore, the protection of this structure is a commanding duty, essential for success.⁹¹

The purpose of the book, in which G. Fodor demonstrates his loyalty and faith as a member of the Orbán team, can only be fully understood in its context. Since shortly before the publication of the book some personal and political conflicts arose around him, which led to the loss of his former status and made it more important and costly for him to prove his loyalty. The final thought of the volume is particularly telling in this respect:

Man is fallible, who can sin and err. I can sin and err, just as you can sin and err. So the question is not just what happens when you violate the norm, but also what happens when I do. The resulting uncertainty can only be resolved by a commandment that is binding on all [...] the commandment of comradeship.⁹²

This “rule book” is even more important to us. Although the author promises readers that they will gain some hidden knowledge from the book, it is not really about the leader, but about the formulation of core political beliefs. The heart of the book is a dictionary of key terms that every true believer should know, as they are formulated in the book. Since all the rules are derived from Orbán’s politics, some points are taken directly from the PM’s speeches, as if they were teachings directly from him. Expressions of loyalty have a coordinating propaganda function, as Márquez has already recognized:

[...] it describes what people need to be seen to believe to avoid social sanction, and thus the kinds of signals of support for the leader that need to be produced by particular audiences in response to propaganda. Moreover, propaganda can itself be produced as a signal of support for a leader by elites who have reason to fear that others will denounce them for insufficient loyalty.⁹³

In short, the loyalty demonstration and revelation of the elite is crucial, as those define for believers what is the accepted way of thinking and behaving in the community.

The significance of exclusivity is reflected in the ex-communication. Showing signs of disloyalty or even questioning charismatic authority publicly will result in retribution. These individuals not only lose their status and benefits but may even trigger public discrediting in the economic elite (Lajos Simicska), government (József Ángyán), intellectual hinterland

(Zsuzsa Hegedűs, Péter Ákos Pod, József Pálincás), among social influencers (Bettina Tóth). The case of sociologist Zsuzsa Hegedűs, who was a social-political advisor to Orbán for a long time, is particularly emblematic. In 2022 she resigned from her position after the PM's provocative speech at the Tusnádfürdő Festival, in which global migration was portrayed as mixing races. Moreover, she called this speech racist and Nazi. Orbán rejected this critique in his polite reply, but the community interpreted it as a kind of betrayal and launched a counter-attack. A U-turn came a few days later when the sociologist withdrew her resignation, accepting the PM's explanation about his ambiguous words: she was proud of him again.⁹⁴ At the end of 2022, she passed away, and Orbán bid farewell to her on social media.

Given the enormous media attention of each of the cases mentioned above, we could say that marking a group member who failed in terms of loyalty or principles is a demonstration to the public and can be used for multiple purposes, depending on the status of the scapegoat. While media attention is focused during the scandal, so it can be used to remove unfavourable narratives from the public discourse; the sacrifice of the guilty is a cleansing ritual to resolve social criticism towards the party. In this sense, the rituals of skill testing work the other way around when someone proves unworthy of membership in the community. It is a message for the party elite, who do not follow the rules, that they can be sacrificed. Social violence channelled towards a single individual (sacrificing a former member of the community) can restore the social order.⁹⁵ Scapegoating, whether directed inside or outside of the community, becomes a permanent force for creating cohesion in political sects.

Dimension 3: Monopolizing political rituals

Following Márquez's definition, rituals or rites are understood as practices in which a group of people interact with each other by focusing their attention on a particular object, symbol or person that they worship.⁹⁶ This gives the term "political rituals" a somewhat limited meaning. We associate them with collective or public actions such as elections, demonstrations, marches, commemorations, political conferences, sporting events and music festivals, or public speeches in the media (interviews and speeches). These rituals can stimulate emotional experience,⁹⁷ mobilize and renew political faith.

Sectarian communities aim to monopolize the most important rituals of the community in order to control and focus collective attention, emotions and actions on a specific direction. Rituals become even more important, as they establish and “protect” the inner sanctity of their community and the moral status of the leader, allowing people to move from the world they experience to the world created by charismatic leaders.

However, controlling rituals does not mean that participation is compulsory. Márquez argues that voluntary participation leads to more successful rituals in terms of recognition of charisma. Moreover, these events and collective experiences also activate a kind of self-affirmation mechanism in the participants:

[...] ritual participation can enhance “conformity motivations” even among those who do not feel particularly drawn to the leader. Because rituals involve emotional amplification, they can enhance the positive affect of free participants towards the focal point of the ritual, viz. the leader in a cult of personality. Thus, for those people who are predisposed to attachment to a particular leader, regular participation in such rituals enhances and strengthens their commitments to the leader and the group for which the leader is a focal point of interaction.⁹⁸

In a very similar way, James R. Meindl and colleagues have imagined the spread of charismatic commitment as a kind of “contagion” in the community.⁹⁹ According to their understanding, charisma has an indirect effect that reaches individuals through followers. That is, people catch charismatic commitment like a cold from those who already have it. For example, at a large political event or rally, the emotional reactions of others may convince us that “the guy delivering that speech up at the podium must really be charismatic if these people are acting this way”.¹⁰⁰ In other words, charismatic commitment can have an impact on those who have not experienced it but can witness it as others have. This is why participation carries more weight for the elite. On the one hand, there is peer pressure to express loyalty to the leader and the community. On the other, their authentic and sincere commitment can convince others. Let us not forget that the books, articles and public statements about Orbán written by his close and distant supporters have precisely the same function.

The Orbán regime relied heavily on controlled rituals to mobilize the invisible church. Perhaps the most emblematic example is the regular Peace marches organized by a small group of political veterans of the party called The Civil Cooperation Forum.¹⁰¹ Although the main message may change, the choreography is constant: ordinary supporters, pro-government intellectuals, celebrities and high-ranking politicians take a walk to hear the leader's speech. Physical movement helps participants to feel a sense of sacrifice and shared identity due to various state, national, direct religious and party symbols: badges, flags, signs, clothing accessories and even T-shirts depicting the leader. Peace marches hijacked Hungarian national holidays and state ceremonies, but even without a rally, Orbán's public speeches can bring crowds to the streets on these occasions. These rituals help Orbán blur the boundaries between his political roles as the nation's leader and the head of the party, just as between the categories of the Fidesz voters and the nation, elevating the leader and his community above the everyday political struggles. Since the 2022 elections, the PM gives speeches at national holidays in closed (registration required) events held in cordoned-off rural town squares. Previously, he only attended central state ceremonies in Budapest. Now, he only speaks to a selected, exclusive audience, which makes listening his speech live a privilege. The PM's appearance at sporting events also has special symbolic value: watching a football match with the political, cultural and economic elite. Like any other direct political event, these occasions are saturated with symbols of the community (such as flags, coats of arms and the map of Greater Hungary) and collective experiences (such as the singing of the Hungarian national anthem or the nationalist song "Nélküled" [Without You], written by a right-wing blues-rock band financially supported by the government).

We can also identify a different set of rituals when charismatic revelation and prophecies come into focus, determining what to believe in a given period. A perfect example is the PM's weekly interviews on state radio or his regular more ideological "world-changing" speeches at Bálványos Summer University and Student Camp (Tusványos), the party's annual private meeting in Kötcse or other exclusive events organized by the party and government (e.g. State of the Nation and Fidesz Congress speeches). National and international conferences orchestrated by pro-government organizations can also serve this purpose in which the elite (like-minded experts, thinkers and politicians) echo the leaders' narrative or interpret the outside world accordingly (e.g. CPAC Hungary in 2022 and 2023).

Some festivals also have political importance, like the Tranzit Festival, the Tusványos Festival or the Mathias Corvinus Collegium (MCC) Festival, mixing political programmes (e.g. roundtable discussions and lectures) with light entertainment (e.g. concerts).

Dimension 4: Controlling the belief system

Based on Durkheim’s theory on modern cults, we can argue that in closed religious communities, maintaining the moral “purity” of individuals becomes a primary function.¹⁰² Sectarianization thus intensifies efforts to isolate members of the community from influences that might “contaminate” their beliefs. This function is performed by propaganda,¹⁰³ which, according to its original meaning, is a systematic effort to disseminate (political) beliefs in order to influence people’s actions and individual beliefs in a particular direction.

Propaganda does not typically bring about a radical change in people’s consciousness but rather mobilizes symbols and narratives that resonate with the audience’s pre-existing beliefs.¹⁰⁴ This means that propaganda cannot be identified with terms such as “brain-washing” or “mind control”,¹⁰⁵ which are very popular in the literature on new religious movements and totalitarian political regimes but lack any empirical evidence because they assume some kind of coercion behind the process beyond manipulation. The true nature of propaganda is revealed in its indirect effects and coordinating function.¹⁰⁶ As an intellectual guide in modern politics, it helps trigger individual cognitive processes such as the so-called partisan-motivated reasoning”, i.e. prior attitude effect, selective perception, and confirmation and disconfirmation biases that promote self-conviction.¹⁰⁷

Political sects aim to filter information from the outside world that might undermine the group’s core beliefs creating their own social reality. They try to determine the way in which information is presented and consumed by their followers, discrediting voices, news and information that do not depend on them.¹⁰⁸ Researchers of political communication commonly refer to this phenomenon as the “echo chamber”. This is not to be confused with filter or epistemic bubbles facilitated by how the spread of the Internet has radically changed the way news is produced, disseminated and consumed. Thi Nguyen (2020) points out that although the literature treats these terms as synonymous, there is an important difference between them: bubbles

cover an information environment in which, for some reason (algorithms or news consumption habits), certain relevant voices are not infiltrated and thus do not reach the people in the bubble, whereas in echo chambers, relevant voices can reach people, but only in a distorted way that questions their credibility and veracity. Accordingly, the echo chamber is:

an epistemic community which creates a significant disparity in trust between members and non-members. This disparity is created by excluding non-members through epistemic discrediting, while simultaneously amplifying members' epistemic credentials. Finally, echo chambers are such that general agreement with some core set of beliefs is a prerequisite for membership, where those core beliefs include beliefs that support that disparity in trust.¹⁰⁹

Political sects reinforce this confrontation with the outside world, but they do not completely isolate individuals from other sources of information. They do, however, teach them how to manage contradictory information: the members of political sects have access to the information they need, but interpret it through the epistemic filter of their beliefs. In this light, the creation of echo chambers is partly a self-reinforcing process, as believers seek information that justifies and supports their existing worldview for self-defence or self-affirmation while resisting or avoiding contradictory news. People learn to trust only those news sources that are loyal to their community and leaders.

The Hungarian case also points in this direction. Since 2010, the Hungarian government has established a growing dominance over the media in terms of ownership structure, administrative and financial resources, and sources of information.¹¹⁰ Fidesz's ambitions can be traced back to the "media war" of the 1990s, in which it became a central myth that left-wing media dominance made right-wing governance impossible between 1998 and 2002 and contributed to the subsequent electoral defeats. The slow process of the 2000s was accelerated and completed by four consecutive two-thirds majorities: from the restructuring of the public media and the establishment of political control over the National Media and Info-communications Authority to the creation of a loyal private media ownership group and a pro-government media conglomerate (i.e. the Central European Press and Media Foundation) to its indirect financing through advertising by the government and state-owned companies. The aim of this political endeavour

is to squeeze out critical voices. The new media network will allow the government's messages to be delivered quickly, efficiently and without distortion. In this media space, a journalistic practice has emerged that indeed echoes the ruling party's narrative.¹¹¹ As a result, those who only consume news from traditional media platforms are being informed through a one-sided narrative. Opposition politicians are generally not invited and interviewed by pro-government media. Their voices or messages are usually presented in a distorted and negative way and are primarily intended only to contrast government policies. However, this media dominance, which would imply a fully isolated echo chamber, is questionable if we look at news consumption.

Empirical research suggests that political party affiliation is a determinant of news source choice and news consumption. But this does not mean people will not encounter opposing views. An online survey found that there is a significant number of people who are informed by their prior party preferences, but there are more who consume news in a mixed way.¹¹² Another study also found that while some people are indeed stuck in an echo chamber, most people do not get their information about the world from there, or not only from there.¹¹³ In addition, analysis of the comment section of news outlets on Facebook showed that one-third of users went to the opposition side to debate,¹¹⁴ which did not destabilize their point of view but rather reinforced their preferences (disconfirmation bias). Thus, despite media dominance, pro-government voters may still be confronted with conflicting information. It is no coincidence that the theory of cognitive dissonance was inspired by a new religious movement. Leon Festinger and his colleagues' classical work demonstrated, through the failed prophecies of a UFO cult, how people strive to harmonize their beliefs and experiences (reality).¹¹⁵ In political sects, propaganda aims to resolve such cognitive dissonances by maintaining a state in which people can overcome these conflicts alone. Thus, believers can easily exclude conflicting information by selectively perceiving reality based on their own pre-established political preferences and attitudes (selective perception bias). Their prior (and propaganda-supported) attitudes can also have the effect that people perceive arguments in support of their beliefs as stronger than those in opposition to them (prior attitude effect). Conversely, they question the truthfulness of contrary information or the reliability of its source. This assumption is supported by Béla Janky's research series.¹¹⁶ His results suggest that a major proportion of Hungarian voters become

somewhat immune to rational arguments or framing if the issue receives significant political attention. Based on their prior political engagement, voters interpret and justify why they internalize their political community's position regarding a certain issue. Consequently, there is no significant effect of encountering opposing facts or arguments, and Hungarian voters face a polarized interpretation of political and social reality without a drastic separation of news consumption.

Nevertheless, it is important that opinion shapers and politicians who serve as support are easily accessible so that supporters do not inadvertently waver in their beliefs. A comprehensive study of the 2022 online election campaign¹¹⁷ has shown how much energy and resources the Hungarian government is investing in strengthening the online presence of its politicians and public commentators (learning from the opposition's success in the 2019 local elections). The results of the study show that thanks to advertising, pro-government politicians are more popular in terms of followers, and their posts attract more reactions. But it is not enough to be there for voters when they are in doubt; the right person has to be there. The narrative presented by the opinion shapers of the ruling party is the same, but there are significant differences in style. The Megafon Központ (Megafon Centre), indirectly created and funded by the government, trains, financially and technically supports influencers who emphasize the same narrative but in different styles. Another digital platform, Axióma (Axiom), founded by pro-Fidesz circles, operates along similar lines, producing online content that echoes more traditional conservative values and ideological messages, often involving high-profile politicians.

Voters are not left alone offline either, as government messages are repeated on billboards and in radio and TV commercials. National consultations serve the same purpose. Since 2010, the government has used this instrument 12 times, focusing on issues such as the new constitution, social and economic issues (e.g. pensions, minimum wage and family rights) and crisis management (e.g. migration and the related so-called "Soros plan", epidemics, the Ukraine-Russia war and the energy crisis). This plebiscitary or quasi-participatory instrument¹¹⁸ is similar to the referendum but lacks transparency and accountability and does not bind the government or generate a consensus in society. Moreover, these questionnaires are usually sent out after political decisions and legislation have been made. The aim is, therefore clear: to legitimize government policy with its own committed followers by consolidating their preferences.

The sectarian community's efforts to cultivate its own elite and control their (political) socialization are also noteworthy. The MCC stands out from these efforts in terms of its portfolio (research, publishing and training) and its geographical reach, both at home and abroad in Hungarian communities. Relying on government support, it is dedicated to recruiting elites through a wide range of free training programmes and scholarships aimed at primary, secondary schools and university students, as well as those already working for the government or pro-government organizations.

Conclusions

It is not easy to decode the normative content of sectarianization and see the underlining social processes and dynamics. Relying on Weber and Durkheim's related works, this article aimed to unpack organizational and symbolic aspects of political sects. First, the artificial production and staging of charisma play a stabilizing role in sectarianization. As a result, even if followers had previously recognized their leaders' special abilities organically and spontaneously, charisma became routinized, controlling followers' perceptions about the leaders. Second, the sectarian community was also examined in contrast to the outside world, as well as in relation to voluntary self-conversion and exclusive group membership. Third, we highlighted the tendency for political sects to hijack the main rituals of the community in order to focus people's attention and emotions on a particular symbol, issue or leader. Fourth, we discussed the efforts to control the shared belief system that political sects seek to achieve through propaganda and the creation of echo chambers.

Viewed from the outsiders' perspective, sectarianization can easily appear to be a political endeavour that strongly resembles self-destructive religious movements, but this is far from the truth. These movements are much closer to totalitarian political religions and leader cults. Nevertheless, the sectarianization goes beyond the simple personalization of candidates and leaders that defines modern democracies.¹¹⁹ This process reveals a closing political system in which the political regime is based on the personal authority of a leader, the autonomy of the public sphere is being reduced, political competition is monopolized and dominated by a single party, a siege mentality towards the outside world is strengthened and the perception of political issues and actors is determined by deep beliefs

and dogmas. In this sense, the emergence of political sects can indeed be seen as a complex barometer of the transforming legitimacy of a democratic system.¹²⁰ However, it is very difficult to determine its outcome as a process: can a sectarian regime be consolidated? Can the charisma of sectarian leaders be completely routinized? How long and to what extent can exclusivity be enforced and institutionalized? Will the overt manifestation of coercion replace voluntarism? While Viktor Orbán is by no means a new Jim Jones or David Koresh, his regime is a good example of the defining elements of sectarianization. As we have argued, sectarianism is an important element of the Hungarian regime, but certainly not the only one, if we think only in terms of political institutions or economic (tribal, clientelistic, feudal) dependencies. Nevertheless, it will be important in the future to explore the legitimacy and group dynamics of visible and invisible sects in Hungary more deeply through personal interviews.

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Displacements: Contexts for a participatory media project¹

ANDRÁS MÜLLNER²

This paper presents a participatory film intervention focused on young people, which was held within the framework of a grant coordinated by the Minor Media/Culture Research Centre and took place in the form of a summer camp in 2021. After revisiting some historical examples and definitions of participatory film, I will focus on the concept of displacement as used in film theory and psychology, which I attempt to refunction and thereby reverse its negative connotations. I will go on to analyze the catalyst method, one of the various forms of implementing participatory video as a visual research method, which was the one used in the research described here. The participatory film methodology based on the camera-as-catalyst is meant to foster inter-group collaboration through camera use in order to achieve a free performance and interplay of identities and ultimately to strengthen social cohesion. Beyond the emancipatory intent, the diachronic and synchronic case studies are also linked by the fact that most of the

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analogous projects mentioned were also collaborations with young people, as was the case in the Minor Media summer camp. In the final section, I analyze the films made by the young people in terms of their relation to contemporary popular culture and the performance of adolescent identities defined by liminality.

Keywords

Minor media, participatory video, Challenge for Change, camera as catalyst, youth participatory action research (YPAR), displacement, liminality.

Participatory video – definitions and beginnings

Participatory video as a method of social research, and often of participatory action research, has proliferated in the development industry over the past four decades. In their encyclopedia entry on participatory video, Chris Lunch and Tony Roberts draw parallels with Paolo Freire's notion of "conscientization," quoting others. "[I]n the process of making films about their own social circumstances participants learned to use the camera to 'read the world' more critically, reflect on the causes of social injustice, and better articulate the change they wanted to see in the world." In the authors' words, "[t]his Freirian logic of critical voice and emancipatory intent is referred to in all of the other seminal texts on participatory video" (Lunch and Roberts, 2015, p. 1). Participatory video is therefore used primarily, though hardly exclusively, for participatory research and for improving the

In recent years he edited several collections of essays in different subjects, and published five books of his own. Funded by National Research, Development and Innovation Office between 2019 and 2023, Müllner and his research team conducted a research on participatory film as a visual research method, titled "The history and current practices of Hungarian participatory film culture, with an emphasis on the self-representation of vulnerable minority groups". Müllner is member of the board of trustees of Artpool Research Centre and Romano Istituto. In 2025, he received the József Ürményi Award from the dean of Faculty of Humanities, ELTE. Contact: mullner.andras@btk.elte.hu

situation of disadvantaged and marginalized groups in the field of development and in participatory action research.

The definition of participatory video can be based on the degree of participation. Some would include Flaherty's ethnographic-anthropological documentary *Nanook of the North*, but the origins of participatory filmmaking understood today as a research method concerning vulnerable communities can be traced back to the 1960s. The Challenge for Change/Société Nouvelle (CfC/SN) program was launched in 1967 by the National Film Board of Canada (NFB). When Canadian video artist Katerina Cizek was asked in an interview what the program meant to her, she replied: "[W]e don't make documentaries about people, we make media projects with people" (Miller, 2010, p. 429 – italics by me: A.M.). In this spirit, the CfC/SN has, in fact, become the prototype for development programs facilitated through participatory video methodology from the 1970s to the present day.

The CfC/SN was a series of activist participatory film/video projects; launched in 1967, it ran until 1980. Its origins date back to the mid-1960s, when the population of the fishing villages of the Fogo Islands in Newfoundland became impoverished, and the state wanted to solve the objectively untenable situation by relocating people to the cities. When the residents resisted, the NFB – chaired at the time by John Grierson, who had had a long career in documentary film – and the Memorial University of Newfoundland jointly proposed a plan to break the deadlock through a film intervention. The project, led by filmmakers Donald Snowden and Colin Low, aimed to interview villagers in a cinema direct style, film the conversations, take the footage to other villages and communicate the problems of the villagers to government decision-makers, who were then brought together with the Fogo Islanders for a new film. A total of twenty-seven films were produced in this process of horizontal and vertical communication, which could be described as a "video bridge" (Frise and Cizek 2009, Corneil 2010). Approximately three thousand people saw the films at the thirty-five screenings held during that period.³ Although the people involved were not yet filmmakers, which later became common (though far from exclusive), the process is nevertheless described as grassroots, democratic and fully participatory. Indeed, the Fogo process served as a model for subsequent projects: it created solidarity among stakeholders and forged a community across

3 On the reflective, horizontal and vertical communication used in the Fogo process, see Corneil 2012; Yang 2012, p. 111; Low et al. 2012, p. 49.

municipalities; it strengthened the participants' political agency, revised the power relations automatically associated with research, and fostered reflexivity and self-awareness. It also produced the important outcome that the islanders did not have to leave their homes, because they established a cooperative with government assistance, which in turn enabled them to transition to sustainable farming.

The meanings of *displacement*

As a result, one can arguably draw a parallel between forced physical displacement and non-participatory objectifying documentary filmmaking and state that the CfC/SN program could simultaneously overcome both. Migration as forced displacement, whether or not it is controlled from above, is not only a common experience of marginalized communities in the physical sense, but this is also what they experienced in terms of representation through the documentaries made about them in the 20th century. If the inhabitants of the Fogo Islands had been portrayed by documentary filmmakers in an objectifying and/or victimizing tradition in which “the social actor [...] becomes the victim of a representational and institutional discourse in which he or she is robbed of voice or agency within the film” (Corneil, 2012, p. 20), their exclusion from the process of representation, being pushed outside, as it were, may well have eliminated their chance for radical and dialogical advocacy. The negative process would have predictably resulted in their physical exclusion from the island they considered home, given that this was the government's original “rescue” plan. The quality of representation, while not in itself a solution in a complex socio-economic situation, is linked to material relations and can facilitate or hinder their development – this is one of the insights of media anthropology in the context of the linguistic or representational turn in the broadest sense (Ginsburg et al., 2002). The democratic sharing of control over representation is what Corneil calls the ethics of access.

Corneil, who analyses the CfC/SN program, including the Fogo process, as an example of the civil rights movements of the 1960s, cites Bill Nichols' metaphor, namely that the power differential between representer and represented in traditional documentary films results in the latter “experiencing displacement,” because the former has exclusive authority over

representation (*ibid.*). Let me quote the original passage in Nichols' text, referring in turn to Brian Winston:

The politics of space, the policing of boundaries, and maintenance of distancing devices lie behind Brian Winston's critique of the expository tradition in documentary as one that constitutes its subjects as victims. The position of victim recalls the documentary's preoccupation of death: victimization is a maiming or murdering of the individual to produce a typification or stereotype.) When both filmmaker and social actor coexist within the historical world but only one has the authority to represent it, the other, who serves as subject of the film, experiences a displacement. Though bodily and ethically absented, the filmmaker retains the controlling voice, and the subject of the film becomes displaced into a mythic realm of reductive, essentialized stereotype, most commonly romantic hero or powerless victim. (Nichols, 1991, p. 91 – italics by me: A.M.; see Winston, 1988).

Though not in this particular passage, Nichols invokes Freud and the Freudian concept of displacement elsewhere in his book. This is how he links two (or even three) kinds of displacement—"displacement" in the local concrete and medial representational sense, and 'displacement' in the Freudian sense, due to psychological reasons – in an interpretation that also engages Edward Said's concept of Orientalism:

[The] Other does not exist in the real. Like the Orient to Said's Orientalist, it is an imaginary construct, a Freudian displacement that is written over a real being or group. The Other is pure representation and, in this context, it is the representation of the non-white, non-male, non-heterosexual, non-Western, non-capitalist as everything we, who are everything the Other cannot be, need. (Nichols, 1991, p. 287)

The concept of displacement can link the mutually reflecting psychological and sociological phenomena, although Nichols does not elaborate on the metaphor of "written over" in the quote, a term that complements the concept of displacement, which is our main concern here. At the risk of offering a slightly simplifying explanation, displacement as used by Freud is replacement as a defense strategy of the unconscious to enable

the communication of repressed desires or traumas, awareness of which is blocked by the obstacles (barriers) of the defensive mechanism of consciousness. In other words, displacement in the Freudian sense is an objectifying representation that, although it translates a psychic trauma into a symptom that can be treated (to some extent), it also affects the displacer, in so far as he or she is externalized and alienated as the protagonist of the displacement, being simultaneously its subject and object. At the same time, like an enigmatic and endlessly recurring “dream,” stereotyping documentaries (those about victimization and heroism as well as those involved in degradation and victim-blaming) also displace those they are about. Referring to Said, Nichols argues that objectifying, “othering” documentaries also indirectly represent the desires of those who control these representations, who are thus also unconsciously “trapped outside” the image they are creating. In the case of the Fogo Islands, the aim of the process was to arrest the recurring “dream” by raising awareness of social disadvantage in community discussions of the films. In terms of the analogy with psychoanalysis, this may be called a type of *socio-analytical process*.⁴

Once refunctioned, the objectifying concept of *displacement* can release positive metaphorical energies. The “displacement” suffered passively by subjects and communities, that is the exclusion from representation, can be counteracted by another “displacement” that may occur in a reflexive displacement. *Displacement* implies objectification and alienated communication both in its Nicholsian and Freudian senses, but the same concept can be refunctioned to refer to reflexive and effective communication between parties that are distant from each other, occupy different places in the hierarchy of power or operate different communication protocols. By extricating itself from an uncanny repetition, a community is relocated through a visual intervention, steps out of the vicious circle of templates imposed on it, and becomes subject of a reflexive socio-analytical process. Of course,

4 The use of the concept of raising awareness in action research can be traced back to Kurt Lewin (1948) in the planning-action-observation-reflection-replanning model, while its use in critical pedagogy can be traced back to Paolo Freire, among others. Transformational pedagogy is a synonym for critical pedagogy. The participatory improvisation techniques of critical or transformational pedagogy have their origins in theatre, but the relevant youth studies scholarship includes examples of improvisation techniques being used in the course of filmmaking. (See Schensul-DalGLISH, 2015)

this not only dislocates those in a position of power, but also challenges the community itself to break out of its habitual monotony.

Participatory film community work with young people (preteens and teens) is extremely critical, because the identity of this age group – or rather their intersectional identity complex – is being formed at this time. The lived life situation of young people is a displacement synonymous with liminality.⁵ The participatory cinematic process arrives at this natural transitoriness, and the question is how it can interact with it. Consequently, what is at stake in collaborative work is often precisely how an evolving identity can be captured, positively affirmed and reinforced in a process that can be described as ritual. Through its socio-analytic potential, participatory film action research can fundamentally catalyse this transitional process of coming of age, displacing its determinate character and putting identity development on a different, unconventional course. Clearly, this is always situational, relative and variable rather than something guaranteed and given. In the case of the Dunaszekcső-Tomor complex camp program, this entailed physical displacement as well as a figurative one through the displacement, relativization, and the performative acting and parodying of identities constructed in the moving image. Granted, by the standards of successfully achieving an idealized escape from stereotypically fixed identities, the results were uneven and at the very least somewhat ambivalent. At the end of my paper, I will discuss the contingencies of our own project, including limits on the free choice of identity and subject positioning.

The catalyst method

The professional program of the Dunaszekcső-Tomor participatory film camp was created by Sári Haragonics, in collaboration with Gábor Rumann and László Siroki.⁶ Based on Haragonics' experience as a participatory

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- 5 Some of them are people with Roma identity, which makes them immigrants in the eyes of some members of the Hungarian public despite seven hundred years of coexistence, a displacement without any politics of recognition, which only deepens the challenges faced by Roma, especially when those converge with age-related difficulties.
 - 6 For more on Sári Haragonics' individual development as a documentary filmmaker and as a scholar writing on participatory video, and the stages of her career so far, see her essay in this issue of *Film and Media Studies* (Haragonics, 2023) and her blog

filmmaker, the program included the games and film genres she had used in previous projects and is discussing extensively in the DLA thesis she is currently completing, where her description of the camera uses the metaphor of the catalyst. This is how she comments on the development of the method: “[in] the beginning, these projects were not aimed at resolving inter-group conflicts; the camera and the means of filming were used primarily to express self-representation and to improve intra-group relations and cooperation” (Haragonics, 2020). She eventually began to use participatory filmmaking in order to facilitate inter-group communication, which may remind one of the concept of the “video bridge” mentioned above. However, unlike in the case of the Fogo Islands, where the video made participants aware of what was happening to them in a larger context through the recognition of their identical social situations, participatory film helps her create a contact zone for groups from different social situations, and it is this encounter that enables one to get to know the other and to become aware of one’s own situation in relation to other.⁷ In this film-based social research method,

post on the Minor Media/Culture Research Centre website (Haragonics 2020), both of which also discuss the role of the camera as a catalyst. She is a research team member of the Minor Media/Culture Research Centre and its four-year grant awarded by the Hungarian Scientific Research Fund. Gábor Rumann’s and László Siroki’s lectures at the Minor Media/Culture Research Institute provide more information about their work (Rumann, 2021; Siroki, 2021).

- 7 This is how Gábor Biczó describes the contact zone from the perspective of cultural anthropology: “[The] physical contact zones of different cultures are conducive to the creation of zones of interaction and influence, so-called transition zones, spaces of contact, in which the characteristics of the cultures involved are mixed and mutated. To put it more generally or in more modern terms, the zone is a transcultural and multicultural place.” (Biczó, 2014, p. 91) The combination of cultural and media anthropologies allows the inclusion of virtual-imaginative spaces in the discourse of the contact zone, which can also benefit from the theory of the “third space”. In addition to the nearby (physical) first space and the distant second space, we must also take into account the virtual third space that connects the two when we build “video bridges” These video bridges operate as contact zones in more than one way. The films are contact zones, and they also transform the distant spaces into which they are embedded into contact zones (or create another contact surface within those spaces). Our cases demonstrate that web-mediated popular culture can be one of the links between cultural zones, in this case between those of a segregated or self-segregating

the “camera” thus plays a catalytic role in the encounter and cooperation of different groups, mainly children, adolescents or young adults. I put the word “camera” in quotes because I want to evade the lure of technological determinism: the mere presence of the camera does not catalyze, does not “dissolve” fears, does not “dissolve” inhibitions, boundaries, prejudices, stereotypes, etc. – all this happens, if it happens, in the situation involving multiple participants. The camera is a necessary technical condition, but what actually catalyzes it is human intervention, with regard to which all participants have equal weight, from members of the communities involved, through academics and researchers, to film experts and those representing funders and sponsors. In other words, the metaphor of the catalyst somewhat deceptively fetishizes the camera, though this “deception” is ultimately an intrinsic feature of metaphors as such.⁸

At first sight, the “camera as catalyst” method does not belong to classic participatory video methods used in action research in the field of development. One of the major distinctions, for instance, is that the young people participating in the two locations of the Dunaszekcső-Tomor camp did not

minority culture and a majority culture that tends to self-segregate itself. No doubt, these two are themselves contact zones to a varying extent. The point of the participatory film camp is to combine the two by hybridizing the imaginary-virtual and the physical-actual. Separate zones are transformed from distant to close by the inclusion of a third space and the concrete encounter of different groups. So the qualifier “physical” in the passage above may well be combined with “virtual”: “[The] physical and virtual contact points of different cultures...” etc.

- 8 A well-known historical precursor to Haragonics’ method is the film *The Human Pyramid* by Jean Rouch, considered the first representative of shared anthropology and audiovisual reciprocity (Rouch, 2003, p. 44). The term catalyst also has a historical antecedent. In his 1974 book *Documentary: A History of the Non-fiction Film*, Eric Barnouw lists “catalyst” among the many types of documentary film or rather filmmakers (explorer, reporter, painter, advocate, etc.). He includes the filmmaking practice of Jean Rouch and the visual anthropology filmmaking project of Sol Worth and John Adair (and Richard Chalfen, an MA student at the time) with young Navajo filmmakers. Catalysts (directors, films) may stimulate social change: “As members of the community saw themselves and others in discussion, subtle shifts in opinion took place. The tapes thus stimulated and improved intra-community communication, as well as serving as a bridge to officialdom outside the community.” (Barnouw, quoted in Corneil, 2010, p. 391)

make films about problems that adversely affect their respective communities, often mutually reinforcing each other and thus escalating in intersectional situations (themes recurring globally include housing poverty, limited or no job opportunities, the climate crisis, school or street violence, disadvantages of women, etc.). Instead, they made short films on themes set in advance in the professional program with the aim of making contact and gradually getting to know each other and, above all, playing together.⁹

Another related difference is that the videos definitely did not aim at vertical communication of the sort discussed in the case of Challenge for Change, that is contact with decision-makers; metaphorically speaking, what we built was a “video bridge” rather than a “video staircase”. This may be taken as cause for self-reflection or even self-criticism, as we may seem to be avoiding pressing social problems at hand, such as a lack of opportunities for employment and the resulting deprivation in Tomor and the surrounding small villages, the segregation of schools and settlements, the anti-Roma attitudes constantly cropping up in the interviews, the dissatisfaction with local (municipal) power politics, the disadvantaged position of small villages in terms of health care (with direct consequences for the physical and mental health of the population), the lack of or difficult access to institutions (such as a store, clinic, cultural center, pharmacy, post office, sports facilities, sports grounds, cinema), the disastrous state of public transport, etc. However, this is not necessarily the evasion it might seem at first glance: addressing problems by foregrounding the topic explicitly may not be all that effective when one works with young (preteen and teen) communities. Another consideration is time, as a problem-centered approach predictably takes a long time; one week would not be enough.

The professional development of the camp focused especially on play and themes likely to encourage young people to open up to each other on an individual and community level. Therefore, despite the fact that no specific social problem was identified, the camp was to address a problem all too familiar to the organizers and Hungarian youth today: the atomization and segregation of groups from different ethnic and other backgrounds, the lack of an integrative social imaginary, and the result that some citizens cannot or will not “imagine” a diverse community. Even if specific social problems were not exposed during the filmmaking process, the camp nevertheless

9 The videos are in a playlist on the Minor Media/Culture Research Centre’s YouTube channel, though they are currently not listed as public.

fulfilled the expectations of traditional participatory video development in this respect. The young people more or less learnt how to use the camera and microphone, practiced cooperation through filming, and became interested in the situation, life and cultural specificities of the other. Even though no specific social problem was thematized, comparable results were achieved, as a society of solidarity and inclusion was being constructed on the micro level.

Participants from Tomor and Dunaszekcső, in fact, mentioned difficulties and expressed criticism of limited life opportunities implicitly or explicitly in the course of the playful filmmaking process. I will discuss these in the final chapter (film analysis). This was combined with the evocation and re-enactment of popular culture, which allowed young people to perform their identities through music tracks, virtual games, technical gadgets and other objects.¹⁰ As Mitchell suggested, quoting others: “[w]here practicable, children’s own unique filmic subculture should prevail over researchers’ conventions, which are traditionally aligned with documentary film or scientific observation.” (cited in Mitchell et al. 2012, p. 4). The same principle underpinned Luttrell et al.’s research on young people’s strategic impression management online, i.e. the way in which research participants shaped their self-image and identity through their online communication, primarily through video. Seventeen-year-old research participant Danny (quoted in the epigraph) admittedly grew up watching YouTube videos and it was natural for him to start filming as he saw it in other videos when he got his first camera (Luttrell et al. 2012, p. 164). The researchers did not want to interfere with this process by bringing in an external topic, so they simply asked the young people to make a video about “what matters most to you” or “make a video about your, your world, or your life.” Even when researchers outlined a fictional situation in more detail, there was also a sense of wanting to leave the framework wide open: “You have a cousin who is moving to the Worcester area. Take pictures of your school, your family, and your community that will help them understand what to expect” (ibid. 166). There are obviously drawbacks to a broadly defined task or a lack of directions, but in this case the priority was self-definition through moving images without external interference. When compared to the research described above, the Dunaszekcső-Tomor film camp shows two differences.

10 On the inclusion of the (popular) cultural perspective of children and young adults in research, see Piemontese (2021, pp. 180–181).

Firstly, unlike the research by Luttrell et al., the Dunaszekcső-Tomor camp was community filmmaking rather than an individual one, which in and of itself imposes constraints on individual ambition; secondly, the topics offered were more specific. That said, we chose topics that would allow the young people to express themselves playfully and lend themselves to the free performance of their identities linked to ethnicity, gender, location and age group.

The research¹¹

This intervention is part of a four-year research process, which focuses on the history and current state of participatory filmmaking, and includes a variety of actions in the form of online challenges, weekend workshops, and summer camps. While the current paper focuses on the films made during the summer camp of 2021, the process actually started earlier than the camp organized in August 2021. Since we were aware that our four-year time frame would be too short for collaborations started from scratch, we worked with organizations and professionals who had been organizing film camps for years or were more or less continuously producing video content with children. Our research began almost simultaneously with the Covid pandemic, so our participatory filmmaking working group started an online filmmaking action in spring 2020, which began with the facilitators' films about their quarantine experiences, and, upon their invitation, challenge videos by three geographically distant groups of children in Dunaszekcső, Hűvösvölgy Children's Home (Budapest) and Tomor. The facilitators of the series, entitled "The Way of the Mask," were Gábor Rumann, Nándor Grosch and László Siroki in the three locations. One of the aims of the filmmaking process was to get to know the young participants, as we were planning to organize a camp with them at some point, hopefully in person, a plan we shared with them early on. We were able to maintain intensive contact with two of the three communities (Dunaszekcső, Tomor) and started organizing the summer camp in spring 2021. Since the catalyst methodology required us to start the camp with a schedule and at least a rough plan for the film projects, we wrote a detailed professional program, led by Sára Haragonics with contributions by Gábor Rumann and László Siroki, representing the

11 See Müllner (2020) for the research plan revised into a study.

two locations. The catalyst methodology guaranteed the participatory nature of the filmmaking activities in the camp: the film scripts were devised by the children in small groups, facilitated by group leaders; they chose the filmmaking roles they wanted to learn and take on, and which side of the camera they would like to be on. They chose the music, the interviewees from the village and the locations. In most cases, they did the filming and were actively involved in the initial and final editing process. There were two layers to the educational process, because group leaders included not only the experienced film professionals, but also students who had learned the participatory filmmaking method in a university course and had practiced it over a pre-camp weekend workshop. There were intensive discussions about the films being made during the camp, as noted in my research diary. In the spirit of the methodology used, the set games, film topics and genres were all aimed at fostering the young participants' collaboration on a broad spectrum. The "single-take" videos involved team play through jointly choreographed movement, the "generations" type films involved creative dialogue between people of different ages and cultural experiences, the "eight-object" films involved young people interacting through their favorite objects, and the "postcards" involved the formulation of a message to a distant other. These events justify calling the activity in the camp participatory and reflexive, insofar as we took every opportunity to discuss the events that were taking place and the films, which we were constantly re-watching.

We wanted the time spent together at the camp to help deepen the online relationship through in-person contact, but as something to be continued in the research process. After the camp, however, we were unable to maintain a long-term sustainable relationship with the (children's) communities and at best managed to do so sporadically. The reasons include the following: the Achilles' heel of all participatory film projects is financial sustainability. The cost of equipment, trainers' fees, accommodation, travel and board make it very difficult to maintain the relationship. In this case, there were two additional contributing factors: the distance between the three locations, where the participants lived, and the pandemic. The latter resulted in the postponing of a screening in Tomor to February 2022 (six months after the camp), because the hosting institution cancelled the program scheduled for autumn 2021 due to the pandemic. That said, the camp can be considered part of a process: not only was it preceded by extended preparatory work culminated by the actual encounter, it is also intended to serve as a prototype for the next camp, which is already being planned. Yet, an

expert in action-oriented participatory research may well ask why we call our research participatory – the brevity and delimited nature of the six days spent together question this categorization of the initiative. This criticism is understandable, since participatory action research tends to last for months or years, and applying the name of this method to the present experiment may seem a misappropriation in this respect. Without intending to dilute the definition of participatory action research indefinitely, I suggest that the following considerations may lead to a possible compromise (or further constructive discussion). Although Sol Worth and John Adair's (1972) three-month film project with Navajo indigenous youth in 1966 is considered one of the great precursors of participatory film, its duration seems shorter than the common duration of an anthropological research project expected in academia at the time, yet longer than a typical contemporary participatory film action. The examples of social anthropologist Michael Stewart's study of participatory film thematic weeks in London schools (2011), or the global projects of the participatory film organization Insight Share, which lasted a few days, may also evoke the criticisms mentioned above – both of which are relatively short projects in which researchers and filmmakers work with disadvantaged groups.

From the 1960s onwards, film was increasingly put at the service of participatory social research, which also meant that the traditional time-frames of research were transformed, precisely because of the nature of the filmic intervention. Of course, long-term programmes have not disappeared, but they have been joined by those of shorter duration. Filmmaking is always a high-intensity, dense activity, and it is therefore advisable to concentrate on a short but uninterrupted period of time together. Here, one of the results of the intervention, i.e. participatory action research, is the film itself, which can be used for further purposes. Indeed, there may be some doubt about the emancipation that is attempted in such a short time. In our case, the emancipatory nature of the action lies both in the filmmaking process (learning to film and the possibility of producing one's own image) and in the reconciliation of different social groups. Yet, the tension between a short-term participatory media project and a long-term participatory development project is also clearly visible in the light of our own participatory film action. This tension can, in my opinion, be resolved by combining the two approaches. Cinematic film actions can be considered legitimate in themselves, but they can take on a deeper participatory character if they are implemented in action-oriented participatory research as a kind of

communicative prosthesis. Such a collaboration with the Siklósbodony site is also taking place in the framework of our own OTKA research.

As for the Dunaszekcső-Tomor cooperation, organised within the framework of the ELTE Minor Media/Culture Research Centre's OTKA research, the process is not closed, but is in a suspended state waiting to be continued, first with screenings in Budapest and across the country, talks, short weekend film actions, and the next camp in summer 2022. With the camp itself, we have thus set out to bring together two communities of children, distant from each other in terms of space and social background, and to create the conditions for them to make films together. In the light of the above, I consider this research to be a *participatory media project*.

Film analyses

In the following, I will distinguish types of films and set up specific thematic and genre categories for their qualitative analysis. As this individual process is not collaborative, it may seem to be an instance of appropriation, whereby the collective analysis and evaluation of the works produced at the conclusion of participatory film projects are then channelled back into the research process (see Sawhney 2012 on participatory evaluation). Although my analysis does include the young people's views from time to time, this does not turn the interpretation into something "shared," communal or organically participatory. Consequently, the following analysis lays no claim to anything more than an individual researcher's account and awaits supplementation by further shared interpretations. What I consider significant in the following analysis, however, is that certain analytical categories can be set up, such as intersectionality, parody as reinterpretation, location based identity, hybrid genres, influences of popular culture, or challenge interpretable as interpellation. Such an analytical approach through conceptual categories is not unprecedented in the tradition of participatory film.

In the making of "single-take" videos, participants had to agree on a song which would be the soundtrack of their clip, which required compromise. At first glance, the Tomor group's choice of Ignác Rózsa's "party" song, "The gypsy kid was caught by the police," seems to be a variation on the topos of the "gypsy criminal," even if the lyrics show a transition between third-person accusation, second-person address and first-person

claim of innocence.¹² In the intricate and dynamic movement captured on camera, the actors performed in four teams (four to five members per team) of innocently caught “gypsy kids”, “policemen”, illegal “apple thieves” and peepers from behind trees. The entire story is embodied in a single take of a precisely choreographed music video, in which the relevant lines of the lyrics are ‘sung’ or rather lip-synced by a member of the group plus a narrator (the filming was done to music, and the music track was added to the video later). The faces, the gestures (e.g. the spectacular throwing of apples), the forms of movement (an unexpected cartwheel – literally gypsy wheel in Hungarian – during an escape), the route taken (running around the statue of Pál Tomori while fleeing), the props (the lurkers’ sunglasses), and especially the comic chase, give the short film an ironic burlesque quality. The racist topos appears, but the liberated play keeps its distance from it through the use of parody.¹³

In the “Postcards” category, the young participants had to make a film about their own living space and send it to the other camp; then they were to respond to the clip received, engaging in a dialogue with it. Three short films were produced in this category in each camp. The presentation of people, landmarks and important places introduced the recipient to the personal and spatial frame of reference of local identity. In Dunaszekcső, for example, there was an ironic tour of the playground and a serious one with the Danube in the background, the latter also mentioning the camp in addition to the village. In Tomor, the guide rode a bike along the main street of the village and invited comments from people standing in popular places, who spoke about the places and the events taking place there as stakeholders (playground, Andi’s shop, statue of Pál Tomori, kindergarten, Calvinist church), and then the rooms of Romama, a Roma apartment restaurant (social cooperative and community center) were shown by the young people of Tomor, reflecting on current events there, thus establishing contact with the people of Dunaszekcső (“we are watching your film” in the

12 These are the lyrics of the song: “The gypsy kid was caught by the cops / though he knew nothing, / it happened so suddenly. / Catch someone else, may my Mother die if I did something. // Gypsy kid, you’re in trouble, / ’cause they’ve blamed it on you, / Someone said you were walking around. / Lord, what am I gonna do, what’s gonna happen to me. // No matter how I say I’m innocent, / the cops are taking me away, and I’m all alone.”

13 Single-take films belong in the NER (*no editing required*) type of films.

dining room, which is confirmed by the camera focusing on the screen). The short films include numerous examples of interpellating, addressing or otherwise embedding the other in one's own video, and thereby initiating and continuing the dialogue. "They addressed us as 'Tomor people,' so we addressed them as 'Dunaszekcső people,'" said one young person from Tomor. The Tomor group's postcard "Field Circus" was answered by a similarly funny, playfully acrobatic and ironically staged postcard from Dunaszekcső.

The "Generations" category called for a similarly dialogic quality, as the documentary materials (primarily interviews) filmed in one place were supplemented by fictional interludes (mainly re-enactments) in the other. The interviews were conducted by the participating young people as interviewers, camera operators, sound recordists or directors. In their capacity as interviewees or at times co-players, local residents also became participants in the course of the filmmaking, so this may be a genre that calls for an especially conscious policy of sharing and public access. We saw warning signs of this during the filming. An elderly participant from Tomor, the grandmother of a little girl from a camp, who had been involved in several film shoots and was extremely helpful and involved, approached us after one of the shoots and asked the crew not to upload the film to the Internet under any circumstances. She actually only meant the interviews, apparently unaware that the purpose of the category was to playfully mix and hybridize the categories of documentary and fiction, which are clearly separated in public consciousness. She became a "victim" of this, for example, when she had to recall a mobile phone story anachronistically as a childhood experience ("*we always spent the money we got for cinema on phones*" – Childhood in Reverse), but also by having her appearance in another film (As long as there is health and internet) dubbed over by Bělga's song *Back in the Day* (Bezzeg régen) ("Back in the day the neighbor invited me over [...] back in the day no one planted cedars', etc.) as a foreign voiceover."). All this raises the ethical question of how far the game can go in depriving someone of their own voice, to what extent one group's voice (that of the young) can parody another's (that of the elderly), repeating clichés ("studying is what matters"). This is an ethical question, but it should be approached situationally and deliberately rather than dogmatically.

Some of the "Generation" films deal with intersectional themes, portraying the victims of the depicted conflict as gypsies and women, though within a parodic framework. In the documentary of the same title, "Father,

food is ready, sir” chant the girls in a chorus in the eponymous docufiction film, holding hands and wearing flower-patterned shawls and aprons. We have work to do first, come and help, the father replies. But we don’t want to help, we want to learn, say the girls. The father insists, however, and the girls start working around the house. The black-and-white images are replaced by color images of a boy with an XP controller; a combine harvester is working the land in the video game on the TV screen. The boy is called to lunch, but he keeps playing (working?) instead of going. A lonely drum solo soundtrack both accompanies and estranges the film. Once again, the ironic treatment of the generational conflict is apparent in the parodic staging of the (supposedly) traditional Roma roles (of daughter and father) and the video game as virtual work, with the color scheme and the soundtrack supporting (or undermining) the interpretation. This short film begins with an excerpt from an interview with a mother from Dunaszekcső: “Old people sometimes forget they were once young and they keep saying, Back in the day it was different! But they used to have the same conflicts with their parents or grandparents.” In addition to the idealization of the old days, there are other recurring motifs in the generational films, such as *Star Wars* as a significant pop cultural reference point, which appears in both the Tomor and the Dunaszekcső narratives; in the latter, it appears in the context of remembering the Dunaszekcső cinema and its heyday (in the form of an old poster), and in the former, it appears in another memory, in which the narrator recalls a specific *Star Wars* re-enactment in his childhood. Classic *Star Wars* characters appear in the current re-enactments (in which interview narratives filmed in one location are re-enacted in another), and in various ways an ironic morality play is created in both cases: whoever does the right thing gets into the cinema, and whoever wants to be the greatest of them all is the bad example in the priest’s sermon, who advises his parishioners to “co-operate and make participatory film camps” instead. Granted, the parishioners are asleep on each other’s shoulders.

The explicit aim of the so-called “eight object” films was to create a story that could include one object from each of the eight crew members. The implicit aim was more ambitious, however: the objects brought by the young people would tell something about them, or rather they would tell a story about themselves through the objects while making the film. From the magical fairy tale frame (Andriská’s Tale) to the silent film (Family Secret – Iza’s Secret) and the gypsy magic fantasy and mafia film combo (The Godfather) to the commercial infotainment hoax (Family Secret

– Iza’s Secret), several genres appeared in films, which also included cameo glimpses of the facilitators (Anything but the cat!, Andriska’s Tale, Godfather) and the camp stories associated with the instructors (Anything but the Cat!, Godfather). The genres evoked and the stories told suggest that the “eight subject” films can be considered at first sight as feature films and form a distinct group alongside the single take clips, postcards and generational films. The latter three genres are also permeated and fertilized by fiction, so the difference is not in terms of fictionality but rather in terms of the feature film. The single takes address fan identity through the preferred soundtrack, the postcards expose local identity through the representation of the home and its environment, while generational films ironically defend preteen and teen identity in a nearly universal confrontation with the educational intentions of the elderly. By contrast, the eight-part films use objects to show involvement, which facilitates engagement and connection. Most importantly, the young participants from Tomor and Dunaszekcső made the eight object films together, in mixed crews, and they reflect generational proximity rather than any regional, ethnic or any other cultural difference. Without any further clue, to which community would we attribute a magic wand, a guitar, an XP controller, a Rubik’s cube, a helmet, a medal, a football, etc.? Earlier in this text, the choice of free identity and subject positioning was mentioned as an open possibility to be exploited through participatory film as a visual research method, and to counterbalance the burden of determined identities (projected by the majority, but often internalized by the minority in question) and the burden of representation. The history of participatory cinema includes numerous such emancipatory practices; it needs to be ascertained how far our project could go in playing a liberating game with fixed identities. The young participants of the camps organized in the framework of our research defined themselves and each other in space and time (“Tomor people” and “Dunaszekcső people”, as well as “generations”), as committed to art and culture (“film and music fans”, “performers”), and as balancing on the border between imagination and reality (when making docufictions), etc.

At first glance, it may seem that ethnic identity designation, which is used nearly exclusively by the majority in Hungary today, was one of many possibilities in our camp, although it was clear from the beginning that a group of children with Roma identity would encounter another with a non-Roma identity. Yet, there was/is another side to the liberating identity game that one experienced as soon as one stepped out of the gate. According

to my research diary, it was difficult to find a filming location in Tomor because there is virtually no free space. The young people's stories reveal that movement in and around the village is fundamentally determined by private land and its protection, whether it is the land and forests on the border or the lake in the area. Thus, although the opportunity to play with identities could be taken advantage of in some private houses or in the community space called Romama, the limiting nature of the wider site could not be ignored. The young people also placed themselves in the category of the "unauthorized" as residents of the village. They linked this circumstance to their own Roma identity in different ways. In any case, the fact of exclusion as an external constraint was a determinant and, in my opinion, a defining element of subordination (judging by the number of times it was discussed among ourselves). To this we can apply Bill Nichols' description, which I have already quoted in an earlier part of this paper: "the politics of space, the policing of borders and the use of exclusionary procedures" may be a trigger for "being on the outside" in a negative sense as an identity-defining constraint. But we can also give the example of identity pressures that are (are) represented by the very pop culture that young people prefer – or at least that allow them to place themselves within a certain restrictive framework. The question may arise why a mulatto song about the conflict between the "gypsy kid" and the "policemen" was chosen by vote as the background music for the single. This is very similar to the discussion on the participatory film about young people's engagement with deviant and criminal themes and how the development practitioner can address this internalised identification.¹⁴

Half-way conclusion

Errors in a research process can be corrected through Kurt Lewin's spiral progression (Lewin, 1948, pp. 205–206). Firstly, there was a long delay before we could interpret the films together in an organized setting and archive this interpretive conversation for later study in the research process. Of course, we kept discussing the films made and any partial results throughout the camp, both with the young people and among ourselves (the latter happened

14 On "gangsta imagination" in relation to Roma immigrant youth in Madrid, see Piemontese 2021, p.181

several times after the camp), but this was ad hoc rather than comprehensive and planned. Participation was also left somewhat to chance, and some (such as the elderly in Tomor) could not participate at all due to their absence. In the end, the discussion took place in Tomor six months after the camp. Secondly, although I tried to prove in the film analysis section above that a playful and less problem-oriented approach to filmmaking can also have the problem-posing potential of a classical participatory video method, it would be worth trying a more guided topic selection and combine it with the catalyst method in the remaining research process. To this extent, action research could give rise to a more multi-faceted intervention, and film education and getting to know each other (beyond the clichés) could be supplemented by immediate or distant concrete goals. In other words, there is room for enriching the “activist imagination”¹⁵ through the conscious use of media, and doing that while moving up, rather than down, Hart’s ladder (Hart, 1992, p. 8; Hart, 2008): instead of having to work on issues proposed by professionals, the young people should use video to formulate the most important issues that concern them to ensure a more intense participation.

The greatest challenge of participatory filmmaking with respect to the event of displacement analyzed above is how to make it a genuine and positively experienced performative event for the participants. Moving to an actual distance from one’s home by traveling is no guarantee for displacement, though the novelty of a changed location may offer a chance for something exciting and constructive to happen. For the participants from Tomor, the change of scene entailed both a removal from their familiar environment and admission into an unfamiliar but friendly one. For the participants from Dunaszekcső, members of the majority without any direct experience about Roma youth from a remote settlement in Borsod, it was an opportunity to step outside the ideas they had likely had about them and also to join the social circle of guests. Similarly, the actual participation in image making offers insight into the practical, yet also meaningful, conceptual nature of filmmaking, which process once again has the potential to move one beyond of a passive relationship of being merely the subject of

15 Marcus describes activist imagination as media use by subordinated groups for traditional identity politics and representational purposes, highlighting recent issues related to citizenship and the public sphere driven by utopian desires for emancipatory projects (quoted in Ginsburg et al., 2002, p. 8).

the film. The films, in turn, open to transgressions of familiar constraints of genre through re-enactments, subversions, appropriations, ironic adaptations and parodic invasions, and also allow the young people to bring a part of their own lives into the film in the form of a story or object, alongside similar parts contributed by others. Adopting Worth and Chalfen's terminology, I would like to propose a combination of the two types of participatory genre, namely a combination of autobiographical documentary with community documentary, which was, in fact, the case in the films made at the camp. In this sense, the Dunaszekcső-Tomor participatory film camp can be considered an example of private or civic social science, insofar as the young people conducted "research into themselves," however playfully, and this research was carried out in a participatory way. It is too early to tell if this participatory film research has genuine transformative power and manages to displace socially fixed identities from existing templates (both of others and one's own). In some respects, the research described here is still in the state of a media project, something decried as a negative trend by Corneil, who was quoted earlier in this paper. Yet, if these films are viewed as forms of play with local, gender, ethnic and generational cultural identities that are performed in them over and over, this may imply resilient and reflective distancing, as a type of displacement.

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Mediating distant violence: Reports on non-photographic reporting in *The Fixer* and *The Photographer*¹

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The recent consolidation of graphic reportage as a genre of graphic non-fiction has brought a distinct non-photographic regime of visual documentation with its own temporality and affective engagement. Graphic documentarism both complicates and relies on the gentrification of the comics as well as the changed ontology of the photograph and has its unique ways of mitigating the risks of distortion and exploitation in covering violent conflicts in distant locations. The two works examined in detail both focus on journalistic mediation of distant conflicts, reporting not only on the places and events of violence but also on their being reported. In Joe Sacco's *The Fixer: A Story from Sarajevo* (2004. London: Jonathan Cape), the structural vulnerability of the documentary account due to complex mediation is conveyed through an affective engagement based on intimacy and haptic visuality. This autonomous non-photographic regime of visual documentation is compared to Emmanuel Guibert, Didier Lefèvre, and Frédéric Lemercier's *The Photographer: Into War-Torn Afghanistan with*

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Doctors Without Borders (2009. New York: First Second), a hybrid reportage combining graphic non-fiction with photojournalism. The comparison suggests that the unique qualities of non-photographic documentation are difficult to maintain when the photographic discourse of factuality not only surrounds the work as a dominant set of expectations, but is integrated into the graphic narrative.

Writing in the aftermath of war and conflict often takes place in a global economy of storytelling, in which a violently disrupted life is represented by a mobile and privileged outsider visiting one of the world's "hotspots". Graphic narratives are no exception; in fact, the medium of comics has recently become a popular choice for intercultural representations,³ owing partly to the (false) assumption of its universal accessibility, and partly to the capacity of multimodal representation to transmit nuances of difference simultaneously through its various channels. When graphic narratives mediate between a local atrocity and the global circulation of images and interpretations of war and organised violence, they tend to move from the material culture of violence towards our eventual distant act of consumption through acts of collaborative witnessing that often threaten to collapse into masquerade on the one hand, and disaster tourism on the other. The insider producing an account for a distant audience (conceived as generically global and uninformed or specifically assumed to have the power to intervene and change local conditions) may be merely an interlocutor or the author of the final product. There can also be significant variation in the duration, degree and quality of the mobile outsider's "proximity to the events and the resulting relation to the conflict. All of these affect the distance between the event and its mediated consumption and the types of transformation that occur (such as translation or intercultural interpretation). In the present study, I focus on the latter type of account, in which outsiders author accounts of dramatic conflicts elsewhere and embed their reporting on war and conflict in an equally sharp reporting on the problem and process of reporting itself. The problem of mediating between distant victims and privileged audiences in a non-photographic medium is central to both works under examination: after a detailed analysis of Joe Sacco's (2003) Sarajevo-based graphic reportage *The Fixer*, I compare it to a project that involves different media, *The Photographer*, a hybrid graphic-photo-graphic report from "war-torn Afghanistan" co-authored by Emmanuel

3 An entire recent volume devoted to this potential is Denson, Meyer, and Stein (2013).

Guibert, Didier Lefèvre and Frédéric Lemerrier (2003–2006, 2009a, 2009b). Their different methods, employing and departing from photographic documentation, highlight not only the ethical dilemmas of mediating distant human suffering, but also the new role of the non-photographic image in reporting.

Photo fatigue

The rising popularity of graphic reportage⁴ within non-fiction graphic narrative and its current position in journalism is, ironically, a function of its improved cultural prestige. It is, at first glance, an ironic turn of events, since an important part of the recent history of graphic narrative has been its gentrification, its partial absorption into the category of the literary along with the appropriate prestigious forms of production and circulation. (This has long been assumed to be the primary function of the English term “graphic novel”. A long-time critic of the term, Art Spiegelman grudgingly acknowledges in a recent interview that it has been an effective “marketing term”, the two component words of which convey a “double respectability”[Chute, 2014, p. 219].) This process has emphasised the growing distance between long-form comics and the ephemerality and disposability associated with serial publication, a crucial context of the early history of comics. Of course, practices of collection and the typical lifecycle of comics from comic book to trade paperback have mitigated against the disposability of serial publications, but the re-association of the comics with journalism and the press in the form of graphic reportage might still seem to jeopardise the hard-earned high-cultural legitimacy of the graphic novel. It is a modified return, however, that is ultimately

4 As the gradual and so far fairly localised emergence of a unique potential, rather than a mass movement, particularly visible in the United States and France, this increase is significant in relative terms. Patrick de Saint-Exupéry comments in 2010: “There is only one Joe Sacco in the United States, as far as I know. There aren’t 100 000 out to anchor graphic work in the real. In France or in Belgium, there are also some authors who are interested in this topic. But they know that it is not an easily explored vast virgin territory. It is a space that is open, but everything is under construction” (Benaïche and Mauger 2010, my translation).

rather a beneficiary of the rise and occasional canonisation of graphic novels as serious works. First, the comics' successful bid for serious journalism depends on its broader acceptance as a serious form and, second, graphic reportage partly grows out of the autobiographical/memoir narrative that has been central to the development of the graphic novel (Caraco, 2013), because – for reasons intrinsic to the medium – graphic reportage tends to be participatory and reporter-centred.

With reportage, the graphic narrative is reinserted into a very heterogeneous media landscape, drawing on the status of the long-form comic, yet significantly departing from its temporality and modes of reception. Analysing the book as a cultural institution, Carla Hesse (1996, p. 27) notes that, far more important than the technology of printing, it is a relationship to time that defines the book:

[T]he book is a slow form of exchange. It is a mode of temporality which conceives of public communication not as action, but rather as reflection upon action. Indeed, the book form serves precisely to defer action, to widen the temporal gap between thought and deed, to create a space for reflection and debate.

It is this slowness and permanence enshrined in the book as a cultural form that most prestigious examples of graphic narrative have been gravitating towards. When graphic narrative aligns itself with journalism, however, it is positioned at the slow end of a faster discourse framed by requirements of timeliness, without completely giving up the values associated with book culture. In the French quarterly *Revue XXI*, which is programmatically though not exclusively devoted to graphic reportage, a typical report takes 9–12 months, and the fastest ever – Jean-Philippe Stassen's report *Visiteurs de Gibraltar* – took three and a half months. The work cycle of the material published in the magazine is comparable to the slower types of traditional reporting (complex investigative reporting, long-term coverage of a topic), but the self-representation of the journal – once again programmatically – foregrounds the information that it is distributed in bookshops rather than at newsstands. The same bookshop distribution is true in the case of the even more recent French tri-monthly *La revue dessinée*, although the two are markedly different in offering the option of digital access: both have sophisticated supplemental websites and social media representation, but one of the journals is emphatically print only, while the other has a digital

tablet version. At the opposite end of the spectrum is the born-digital and resolutely digital-only Symbolia, which augments graphic reportage through various audiovisual, animated and interactive elements. This slower time is contrasted to the 24-hour news cycle and the time and scope of the Twitter model of instant encapsulation: “But the BD needs time. Articulating things in 30 pages, mixing text and drawing, it’s a huge job... At XXI, we have a very different relationship to time”, comments the editor of *Revue XXI* (Benaïche & Mauger, 2010). Similarly, Argentinian graphic artist José Muñoz claims that, “the trembling humanity of a drawing is an antidote to the electronic-ification of communications” (Mauger, 2009). This temporality also explains why graphic reportage is drawn to wars and conflict particularly in the form of aftermath reportage: the long view of the consequences of complex and often lasting situations, geopolitical quagmires, long-term ecological processes.

If this history explains why graphic narrative can afford to return to journalism, it does not explain what makes it attractive as a medium of reportage. In accord with the report’s intermediate position between news and opinion genres in the press, graphic reportage takes on key functions of infographics: visualising the non-optically accessible truth of events and situations. Whereas in infographics this commonly means showing their causal and structural relationships, in graphic reportage it is also their affective, experiential truth linked to lived, embodied experience to which the reporter has access, thanks to being physically present at the scene.⁵ This emphasis on the observer’s experience foregrounds the presence, perspective and representational choices of the person(s) representing. By the same token, graphic reportage can represent its subject in terms of its subjective experience with no assumption of unmediated reality. This self-reflexive, mediation-conscious reportage attains its effect partly through its distinction from photographic images as the twentieth century’s primary medium of documentary evidence.

The distinction from the mainstream of journalistic images has a novelty value, presumably a merely transitory edge of an emergent sub-genre embraced by editors in the hope of attracting new readers. Graphic documentary visuality is expected to escape the reinforcement of the expected (in the

5 In some cases, works of graphic journalism strategically integrate comics and infographics (maps and diagrams), as in Dan Archer’s (2013) Nepal: “I was 14 when I was sold”, a piece on human trafficking from Nepal produced for the BBC.

form of isolated images conforming to received knowledge) and the media blindness resulting from repetition and saturation by overly familiar images. What is expected is more than a new diversion among all too many diversions, however; it is a slower, possibly more contemplative kind of looking, in which the temporality of image making cultivates attitudes akin to viewing pre-snapshot or early photography. The different, though likely, transient capacity of these images to be seen anew would be worth little for graphic journalism, however, if they could not be seen in a documentary function. What makes their documentary function in reporting conceivable – besides the sense that they document a particular experiential aspect of facts – is that the distinction between photographic document and graphic representation has been modified by the changed ontology of the photograph in digital photography. Belgian comics artist Jean Philippe Stassen still aligns the images of graphic reportage with literary reportage in opposition to the photographic, because of the different contracts offered to the reader (“the images the artist proposes for illustrating – or developing – a fact are the products of his subjectivity. Just like the facts that pass through a writer’s sensibility and his literary style offer a point of view” [Mauger, 2009]). In fact, whether one posits this as merely an intensification of conditions inherent in the chemical-based photographic process (Osborne, 2010) or a clear ontological divide, photos have arguably come closer to being “drawn”. The guarantee of their documentary authenticity has long relied primarily on institutional warrants rather than technological necessity (Fetveit, 1999, pp. 789, 797–798), and digital data processing has brought new issues, such as visually undetectable pixel- level modifications, to be covered by the evolving norms of processing between capture and display (Osborne, 2010, p. 65). There may be a disjunction or lag, however, between knowledge and response here: despite the “self-consciousness of the potentially illusory character of the photographic image” that brings the warrants of the graphic and photo-graphic documentary image closer to each other, one’s reaction to images presented as photographic facts may linger, and unlearning it may take much longer (as long as a sense of the photograph as a “transparent” image-trace survives). It is in this transition that the graphic documentary image has made its recent advances.

“I’d barely traced the edges of his secrets”: *The Fixer*

Joe Sacco’s entire oeuvre – his best-known body of work on the Israeli – Palestinian conflict and the break-up of Yugoslavia as well as other reports – engages with the process of collaborative witnessing, displaying an awareness of the limitations and complexities of discursive access and understanding, and the ethical dubiousness of trading on other people’s pain and suffering, while attending to the potentially dangerous and noble task of making them seen and heard. In a sense, Sacco’s career can itself be taken as a dramatisation of this issue – adopting the medium of graphic reportage as an exile from the ineffectualness of traditional journalism, the American homeland and its media institutions, while nevertheless enjoying the privileges of his intermediary position. What makes *The Fixer* unique and particularly memorable within the oeuvre is that it makes journalistic mediation the central theme of the work. It offers Sacco’s most sustained and complex enquiry into the difficulties of finding a professionally authentic and ethically responsible position vis-à-vis one’s subject in journalism and within a haptic aesthetic of non-photographic documentary work. By employing the unique qualities of the medium to engage questions of privilege, mobility, accuracy and authenticity, *The Fixer* focuses on the elusiveness of a non-exploitative intimate access to one’s subject. It is important to note that what is at issue here is not graphic non-fiction in general, but the specific genre of reportage, in which the perception and physical experience of persons, locations, events and actions is transformed into an account for those unable to experience it first-hand. Tellingly, Sacco gave up a graphic non-fiction project on the Vietnam War, because he had no first-hand experience to rely on (Adams 2008, p. 124).

The Fixer goes beyond the usual acknowledgement of the reporter’s subjective, interpretive view (most often signalled by the intra-diegetic representation of the reporter’s avatar) by choosing two mediators as his twin protagonists and setting up a narrative structure that focuses primarily on the chain of mediation. The dual protagonists are Sacco, the journalist, and Neven, his one-time local informant and organiser, his “fixer”; and in typical aftermath reportage fashion, the journalist revisits Sarajevo years after the conflict. In the alternating stories of Neven’s war experiences and the journalist’s interviews with him years later, the book examines the flow of information through a chain of intermediaries and their transactions of access and interpretation. It is important to distinguish when general problems

of intercultural reportage are merely exemplified by visual reportage and when non-photographic reportage inflects and mitigates these problems in unique ways.

The processes of information gathering are quite elaborate in some of Sacco's other works; at times, they are even more intricate than in *The Fixer*, with more types of contributors, whether or not they are explicitly represented in the text. He explains, for example, about *Footnotes in Gaza*:

I had read bits of Ben Gurion's testimony, but one of my Israeli researchers found a newspaper that reprinted his entire response to the incident at Rafah.... I read a snippet of the story of Mark Gefen, an eyewitness soldier who talks about a "human slaughterhouse". It was footnoted to a magazine back in the eighties. Someone found it, and then my editor translated the whole document for me. (Chute, 2014, p. 144)

Translators and interpreters are also prominent figures in much of Sacco's oeuvre, their re-articulation of personal testimony foregrounded rather than transparently elided in the text. Brigid Maher notes several visual techniques for safeguarding the reader's awareness of the translation process, and preventing the original utterance from being supplanted even when no bilingual text is presented: visually depicting the translator, including the translator's reporting phrases, and alternating speech balloons between witness and translator, both of whom are depicted as speaking. This ensures that the complexity of a complex bilingual oral exchange is residually present despite its double condensation into its monolingual shortened written version due to the constraints of the speech bubble (Maher, 2011, p. 126). Although *The Fixer* forsakes some of this diversity of contributors to journalistic fieldwork and research when it compresses them into the larger-than-life character of the fixer and Sacco's reporter avatar, it compensates by painstakingly dissecting the chain of communication and its distortions and dependencies that are belied by the smooth, unified representation in a text creatively controlled by a single author.

Between us and the city that would not speak, there is Sacco and his fixer. Sacco, who provides the reader access to the story, is in a position that replicates ours: even though he is on the ground, his access and understanding are largely based on the fixer's selections and interpretation, quite problematically so, as the fixer's motivations and reliability are increasingly

called into question (by common sense and witnesses who refuse to corroborate his accounts). The fixer's position and financial gain are born out of this dependence; otherwise it would be possible to eliminate him. There is a tension between fieldwork-based journalistic authenticity – the wealth of verifiable factual detail and the rigorous marking of time through a visual black-and-white separation of then and now in the text, as the “journalist's standard obligations – to report accurately, to get quotes right, and to check claims – still pertain” (Sacco, 2012, xii) – and the structural vulnerability of the documentary account, due to the tenuousness of the interpretive chain of information at the end of which the public consumes representations of remote events. The focal shift from the subject of war to that of war reportage is clear from the decision to keep and study this increasingly questionable source and incorporate his contested narration in a text otherwise employing rigorous journalistic methods of fact-checking, recordkeeping and multiple sources. Unless this problem is the primary subject of the book, it would make little sense to compromise the journalist's work.

The book stages this problem of access as the scene of the fixer's birth, instantly embedding his monetising of privileged access in the commoditisation of human suffering as a news item: an Australian television crew filming kids playing in the garbage. This is the master image of ineffectual and ethically dubious global journalism that Sacco's own enterprise is measured against. The crew takes up Neven on his challenge to film the real front line and rewards him for his services, thereby informing him of the market value of his provision of access. This is one of several occasions in the narrative when the disempowerment of locals is expressed by association with waste and a denial of adult agency either by infantilisation or old age.

The fixer's subordination to the foreign correspondent is analogously compared to a subhuman status contested by Neven when he is not allowed to join a journalist at dinner (“I asked him, ‘Do you have a leash?/ Maybe it would be more convenient’ ” [Sacco, 2004, p. 50]). This subordination and association with waste always entails a reduced capacity for mobility or even complete immobility, and it becomes increasingly clear that the exchange value of information cannot be readily converted to mobility and agency. In fact, the narrative closes with Neven still dreaming of his passport and “getting his ass out of here”/ “As soon as possible” (Sacco, 2004, p. 104). If it were not obvious to the reader what it means to break this statement into three identical panels, the panels of stasis and eternal longing (“as soon as” probably meaning “never”), our final view of Neven is from a rising

bird's-eye perspective. We are literally dropping him, and the narrator's small text boxes fall out of the panel frame and towards the ground, like falling leaves, bombs, or litter floating down into the giant wastepaper basket of the aerial cityscape.

Thus, the chain of procuring and transmitting knowledge not only allows distant publics to inform themselves, despite the occasional human error,⁶ but also appears from time to time as a far more sinister chain of trade transactions between differently empowered partners in which the disempowered offer themselves as subjects, if necessary masquerading at whatever is most likely to be consumed. This commentary is most clearly offered in two scenes when Neven recounts hiring prostitutes for journalists. In the first scene, a woman is hired to have sex "with a party of seven journalists" (Sacco, 2004, p. 7) and, in the second, a prostitute is hired to pose naked in a German photographer's photo essay on "Nightlife in Sarajevo" (60). In both episodes, the jobs of the journalists, the fixer who "arrange[s] whores" for them, and the (professional or occasional) sex worker are cuttngly intertwined under the concept of labour, reassuringly called "completely normal"(7) and just "another job" (60). The transaction is explicitly part of producing media coverage in the second scene, but the first creates an equally strong connection between prostitution and the fixer-reporter-reader relationship, as the exchange is clearly and immediately juxtaposed with the relationship between the journalist and his fixer, "This conversation is costing me 100 dm, but 100 dm does not begin to fill the crater of my obligation to Neven" (8).

There are also two less obvious, but equally meaningful, connections between sexual exploitation and journalistic transactions here: the intersection between felt experience and external observation and the monitoring of the flow of information. Neven recounts: "Afterwards she said she *felt suicidal*. I said, '2000 DMs. *You can live for a year on that.*' " The reported exchange reflects two sharply conflicting senses of living in terms of exchange value and the dignity of human life. It is also a question whether the transaction would merely take place, protected from passing into discourse, or whether it would be transmitted as a story (7). "She was worried that her boyfriend or brother would find out. I said, 'If they find out it will be because

6. "By admitting that I am present at the scene, I mean to signal to the reader that journalism is a process with seams and imperfections practiced by a human being – it is not a cold science carried out behind Plexiglas by a robot" (Sacco, 2012, xiii).

you tell them.’ ” Our finding out, then, is at the troubling intersection of her ultimately betrayed secret and the voicing of her felt pain. This is the model of narrative exploitation and service that the whole book grapples with. That said, when Sacco’s work, and specifically *The Fixer*’s “transcultural coverage” of traumas is read as part of a late capitalist “trauma economy”, or “the economic, cultural, discursive and political structures that guide, enable and ultimately institutionalize the representation, travel and attention to certain traumas” (Tomskey, 2011, pp. 50, 53), the power differentials and exploitative aspects of the interchange seem to obscure the intimacy and emotional engagement that is also a genuine potential of the re-articulation of painful testimony and the haptic visuality of graphic narrative. Significantly, this is where the nature and consequences of the graphic medium substantially inflect the process of reporting; the more an analysis brackets this as a minor aspect of reporting in the broader framework of economy or journalism, the more bleak the resulting assessment. A “haptic aesthetic” is the most concretely signalled by tactile contact in Sacco’s *Palestine* (Scherr, 2013, p. 25), but it informs his work and, indeed, the entire medium of the comics more generally, where the transmission of embodied experience happens through the book as a tactile “discursive-material node” bearing the traces of drawing, handwriting and lending itself to holding and haptic browsing rather than a merely symbolic site for author/reader interactions (Orbán, 2014, p. 181).

In other words, while Tomskey convincingly argues that ostensible exchanges of resources and information are co-dependencies and exploitations of the economic value of trauma in response to the international demand for mediatised trauma in the form of “intense” yet “fleeting” media fascination with the crisis of the day (Tomskey, 2011, p. 54), they are not simply that. Integrating stories with visual reporting more pervasively than the logic of illustration would justify can open dominant scripts of geopolitical events to the everyday, the liminal visual presence of the settings of daily life and its “constant hum of practices”, a “proximity to the everyday outcomes of geopolitical events” (Holland, 2012, pp. 110, 112). When this is the case, even products of fleeting media fascination can open a space of contestation as their “narrative practices make possible oppositional readings of dominant geopolitical scripts” (Holland, 2012, p. 108). The fact that the author retains the privileged position of those able to buy disaster stories and images for distant consumption does not limit his account to an articulation of elite-centric official narratives in popular culture. If there is

a genuine contestation of dominant narratives, the “simplifying scripts” of geopolitics through “low-level interactions” (Holland, 2012, pp. 108, 113), conversations and personal interviews, a space of intimacy and empathy can open between the trauma on site and its institutionalisation.

Graphic reportage is also a laborious process that requires a prolonged connection with its subject in an embodied relationship. It is a particular kind of creative reconstruction that has its own intimacy because of the time involved. When Sacco says in an interview that “[d]rawing is a lot harder than being there” (Wilson & Jacot 2013, p. 152), the comparison is obviously not to primary victim experience, but to his own witnessing on site. Even so, this seems a self-indulgent statement at first glance, but it is worth paying close attention to the language that articulates the emotional toll of drawing the images of atrocity again and again: there is a relationship to the body and the imagination that is hard to articulate, important, yet skirts close to appropriating the victims’ experience. “You inhabit everything you draw”; “you sort of have to appreciate holding up a bat to hit someone over the head”; “you kind of have to go through the motions” – the embodied experience of imagining an experience in which whatever feels close is fundamentally not yours, this is what all the “sort ofs” and “kind ofs” in Sacco’s responses mark (Wilson & Jacot 2013, p. 152). It is a methodologically intimate reconstruction that is “weird” precisely because it stops short of over-identification. (Once over-identification happens, the experience is felt, rather than kind of appreciated in a weird way.) All of this matters also because there is *kind of* a residue of this appreciation in the embodied reading of graphic reportage. This *kind of* going through the motions is attenuated further in reading, since the reader clearly does not inhabit a drawn subject in a similarly prolonged, intimate way – it is a key practical difficulty of graphic reportage journals that we read and current affairs develop much faster than they can draw – and yet the reader’s difficulty in claiming the haptic visuality of reading as an experience is not unlike the graphic artist’s. Sacco aims at this intimacy of nevertheless unclaimable experience: “I can actually show [that] and help the reader sort of visualize *themselves* in that space” (Wilson and Jacot 2013, 147, emphasis added). It is a mistake to argue that the “stylisation of reality” creates a distance that controls this type of “affective engagement” in graphic narrative, as has been suggested in an analysis of French comics artist Etienne Davodeau (Le Foulgoc, 2009, p. 88); engagement is sustained more by the tactile nature of visuality and its sense of proximity in the comics rather than immediacy.

The page describing a visit to Neven's elderly aunt back at his apartment (owned by the aunt and legally lost by Neven in the end) and a subsequent visit to a bar are a characteristic encapsulation of this evocative power of graphic documentation, the pervasive setting informing its visual communication of disaster, and the intimacy of haptic vision combining empathy with a sense of difference – our mobile protagonists wading in a wasteland of dirt and junk they are in touch with, yet are defined by not being part of. The different states and qualities of life, the relationship of value and waste, seeing and being seen, and relative powers of mobility are non-photographically documented. A page of five expository panels about the aunt, her apartment and her being “the main reason” Neven is staying in Sarajevo is followed by a page horizontally split between two large panels (Sacco, 2004, pp. 45–46). The top image is an overhead view of the living room, where the aunt is lying on a couch by the wall surrounded by unimaginable clutter, used dirty plates, bottles and cans, dirty clothes. It is sharply divided by a graphic distinction of tone and shading that is irreconcilable with any photographic representation of the space: the room falls into the coextensive spaces of mobility and stasis. As we know that Neven also lives in this wasteland (5), this representation shows that mobility is paramount: you are not part of it as long as you can leave it, which they promptly do.

It is not a fantastic image – all shapes and forms obey the laws of physics and perspective and underwrite the non-fiction contract of the text – but it is profoundly counter-photographic in its violation of the rules of light. The two men dynamically walk out of the sea of decay and disorder; she is included among the abandoned useless objects, a thing that can be seen by the visitors, but cannot look back, and is indeed on the verge of becoming unseen in the meticulously drawn layers of disarray on all horizontal surfaces of the room. The difference between agency and its lack is absolute, and the state of life as waste and object has no direct connection to the state of autonomous life (she is not talked to, only talked about). It is visually inconceivable that she is alive, yet she is (“the main reason I’m staying in Sarajevo”) and she *can’t* (“see a thing”), and this living is what is paradoxically conveyed in the image – not a metaphoric living death, but an actual life lived this way. In contemplating and scanning the minutiae of her world, the reader can un-see her objectification and see her life (a life lived as something that looks like an object but is not, though it/she has no power to make this known). Neven’s comment that contests living for others in the name of autonomy (“I have my own life to live”) ironically

applies to the old woman as either a sentence of life imprisonment or as the affirmation of the dignity of human life despite all. Combined with the bottom image, in which Neven turns out to be unable to get a passport and leave, his autonomy and dynamic movement turn out to be severely limited and relative, and the scene is positioned within the story of its transmission (to the passport-holding journalist eventually narrating it to us). inscribed into the pages are relationships of power derived from the differentials of quality of life, agency, value and mobility, including our own.

If representation is a collaborative product here – and there is a strong sense in *The Fixer* that it is, despite the single author and copyright holder – there is at best a shared ownership of the story, in which lived experience and its account are inextricably fused. Once “the story” is both the events and their account, and the account has been formed by the artist, not taking it or giving it back is only viable as an ideal horizon for ethical obligation, an impossibility one must aim at. This is akin to the ideal or limit concept of the “ethics of the spectator”, as posited by Ariella Azoulay in the context of photography (2008, p. 340), which at least in this respect lends itself well to the documentary graphic images discussed here: the potentiality of the image to be seen ethically in the future through the inevitable “gap between the stated aims and what has actually taken place in the encounter between photographer, photographed and camera” (124) and thereby turn into a claim, a grievance and “redefine limits, communities, and places” (120). Sacco explains the ending of *Footnotes* with the artistic gesture of silence marking the wish to – once again, “in a way”, “kind of” – return “the whole story”:

Had I sterilized this whole event by the process of looking at it? Sterilized the component parts for myself? In a way, I kind of just wanted to give the whole story back to the people who suffered. – I kind of knew the grander picture. But those individuals are the ones that went through it. (Chute, 2014, p. 152)

Yet listening, reimagining, reconstructing and even silence can only return the story to the “people who suffered” via the reader’s empathy and changed understanding (the ethics of the spectator). If the spectators within the chain of transmission are “at best imperfect copies or representatives” of this ideal, this neither invalidates the ethical duty to aspire to it, nor conceals the possibility of actual complicity. *The Fixer* is realistic and rather disillusioned in this respect: there is no access to an unfiltered reality of

suffering, and there might always be a more trusted informant than one's current informant. In the end, Neven himself is wrapped in the account of a trusted informant wrapped in the narrator's account and the authenticity of his words is restored at the very moment he is finally too far to speak, turning into a vanishing point with all "the people who suffered". And yet, they are not vanishing, as the journalistic work of the book has established them as living their own lives before and beyond "the story" intersecting with ours. The last of the "Last Words" are the author's "most thanks" to an extra-diegetic Neven, which ought to remind us: there is a perspective from which we are vanishing too, becoming smaller and smaller to participants in a conflict we might never truly understand – the question is whether as human beings in the face of extreme violence or as privileged members of a richer, more mobile community at leisure to contemplate in wonderment a scene of distant suffering.

Lines, gaps and contact sheets: *The Photographer*

The Fixer is a representative example of the most sophisticated attempts at establishing an autonomous non-photographic regime of visual documentation. It is completely graphic and contains none of Sacco's photographic notes (it is known from special editions⁷ and interviews how much he relies on photos for the authentic recreation of scenes, architectural details, clothes, etc.). The book includes no representation of such reference photos being taken; the reporter's professional tools of documentation that do appear at times are the notepad and the tape recorder (Sacco, 2004, p. 20, p. 92), the latter playing an important role in the narrative as well. The photographic is completely absorbed and subordinated to the graphic, most memorably in the hand-drawn representation of a single personal photo kept by the fixer to remember his war buddies and prove his heroic action against overwhelming force (34, 100). The autonomy of graphic documentation is affirmed by refusing to let the photo break through its homogeneous field, and the photo's claims to unique mnemonic and documentary power are made increasingly tenuous in the course of the narrative: in an

7 The special edition of *Safe Area Gorazde* (Sacco, 2011) not only includes some of the author's reference photos, but presents a side-by-side comparison of the photos and the panels.

early scene, the fixer successfully uses the photo as proof of his participation in a unit during the war, though he fails in expanding the photo's power to prove his account of specific unlikely actions merely by association ("It was taken shortly before we went into action against the 43 tanks" [34]). Later in the narrative, the photo breaks down completely as either a mnemonic aid or documentary proof: he takes out the photo of his comrades in vain, unable to remember their names.

Of course, even such a consistent effort to construct an autonomous regime of non-photographic documentation inescapably works in the context of photography as a privileged discourse of truth and factuality over the past century. It surrounds the work as a dominant set of expectations in the media landscape of its production and reception, and it is refused in counter-photographic images, but it is not part of the work. Once photographic and non-photographic media of reporting share a space within the same work, however, the role of graphic reportage changes significantly. How does the more than occasional combination or possibly integration with photography alter the documentary effectiveness of the graphic medium, its role in reporting, and the intimacy associated with its haptic aesthetic? The hybrid graphic novel *The Photographer* constructs a graphic non-fiction narrative around the much earlier photo documentation of a medical mission of Doctors Without Borders (Médecins Sans Frontières; MSF) into Afghanistan in 1986. The hybrid text is once again a reporting on reporting; a photojournalistic assignment originally aimed at validation through documentation (securing public representation and funding for MSF) is reported in the narrative by comics artist Emmanuel Guibert and colourist Frédéric Lemercier based on Guibert's lengthy interviews with the photographer.⁸ The unfolding story of the mission is told through the story of its recording. The book – serially published in French in 2003–2006 and collected in a volume in 2008 – thus combines, at least at first glance, a comics narrative of Didier Lefèvre's participation in the MSF mission with a detailed photo essay; and the two seem to be woven together seamlessly into aftermath reporting formulated as a first-person memoir on behalf of the photographer. The story of the preparations, the difficult trek across the mountains

8 The interviews between the two were subsequently published in the separate volume *Conversations avec le photographe* in 2009 to commemorate Lefèvre's untimely death (Guibert et al., 2009a). The book is illustrated with his photographs taken between 1986 and 2006.

to set up a hospital and the even more dangerous return journey that nearly kills the photographer is laid out harmoniously; graphic and photo sequences seem to flow into each other in a steady rhythm, joining forces to tell a convincing and affecting story. The reading experience, however, is quite different. The relationship between the graphic and the photographic is unsettled and remains so throughout the work. Does the chronology of the project make the graphic narrative a running secondary commentary on a photo essay, resuscitating a core material languishing in obscurity for many years due to a lack of media interest, or rather the media's preference for more shocking and spectacular images? Or, given that the photos are not quite a work in a strict sense but at least partly the raw material from the photographer's workshop, is what we are looking at primarily a comic book illustrated and authenticated by photographic images? These are relevant questions even when a single author produces and combines these media more concurrently, but they are intensified here by the different times and authorities of the creative components and, as already mentioned, by the inclusion of two distinct types of photographic sequence. Besides enlargements, that is photographic images extracted from the immediate context of their production, the book includes an abundance of photographic images in various, sometimes extreme, degrees of multiplicity and variation, presented as contact sheets. Strips of raw images normally intended for image review rather than viewing, in the original size or somewhat enlarged, but still framed by the film material itself, introduce problems of image status and image relationships that deeply trouble the flow and texture of the narrative. These are multitudes of versions, alternative views and moments of a subject that do not necessarily involve seriality. They depict many successive moments of an event or scene, often representing different settings of the technical apparatus rather than meaningful phases. They are variants that are not meant to work together but an array from which the best image can emerge – preselections from the real resulting from some ratio of intention and accident before they have been subjected to a selection based on seeing the image produced. The frequent red lines marking the frames to enlarge and occasional red crop marks visualise this subsequent selection, which is dissolved in the inclusion of all images, whether selected or unused. Formally, these contact sheets convert into panels with deceptive ease, yet their “panelisation” belies the fact that they do not operate by the logic of panel sequencing and their multiplicity of moments explodes the logic of panel sequencing. There are exceptions to this, when individual images from

a contact sheet are selected, extracted and rearranged into a real sequence of photographic panels, such as the two-page sequence of a previously explained special Afghan custom of negotiating by hand (Guibert et al., 2003, pp. 7–8). Size also introduces a dilemma: unlike large mountain landscapes, village scenes and portraits, these actual size and moderately enlarged contact sheet images are too small to see unaided by a magnifier. Are we meant to see them, if necessary, by poring over them with a magnifying glass, or should we be content to have a passing view of the tiny details with even tinier variations as proof of the images’ and their subjects’ existence?

The result of these questions in the reading process is a very dynamic sequence of dizzying displacements. Panel sequences, photo enlargements and “panelised” contact strips significantly shift the logic of organisation, status, and mode of viewing. Some analyses have maintained that this dynamic is a harmonious and collaborative narrativity, where “[i]n no way do the abrupt shifts to a photographic register disrupt the coherency of the storytelling” (Pedri, 2011). In fact, the shifts are even further amplified by the disproportionate attribution of all verbal narration and dialogue to the graphic narrative (as opposed to photo captions or writing on photos). This is maintained throughout the text, as even what could easily be photo captions are rigorously presented in text-only comic panels. The type of explicit narration that names and contextualises characters and events, that propels the story forward and establishes causal relations is provided solely by the graphic narrative. (A four-page wordless photo sequence of a crucial near-death experience is strictly separated from the surrounding graphic narration, in which the story of taking the photos is constructed in words and increasingly abstract drawings). This split has important consequences for both the photographic and the graphic elements. The photos neither have an autonomous narrative function because they narrate so little (virtually never moving the story along), nor are they simply illustrative or authenticating since they appear far too excessively to illustrate and authenticate. Instead of doing their own narrating or illustrating, they take on a silent, mysterious character, pulling one out of the narration and establishing a deeper world, one that recedes much further into the background even in the case of identical scenes. This ontological and functional split between the graphic and photographic explodes the narrative time and time again. As the narrative is followed, one keeps plunging into the silence of the photograph, then pulled back into narrative proper, slipping between modes of reading and viewing. This limited narrative capacity is

not inherent in the photographic image as a paradigmatic case of the monochronic still image, but rather in its specific use here. Still images, including photographic ones, can easily form narratives in sequence (though their appearance as single objects or parts of a series depends on various generic and contextual factors), and even a single still image may evoke or imply narration (Kibédi & Varga 1989a, p. 35, 1989b, pp. 96–98; Wolf, 2002, p. 96), where any “distinct narrative content” of a photograph must result from an intended “association between the image and the narrative” (Currie, 2006, [1999], p. 46). If this is not the case here, it is not due to any intrinsic narrative incapacity of the photographic, but a relative and relational surplus attained through juxtaposition with an explicitly narrative and discursive graphic representation. In the case of the enlargements, it is a combination of silence and an excess of factuality: the photograph’s “difficulty with selectivity” (Adams, 2008, p. 187) creates a reality effect through automatically captured detail. This is not necessarily a validation of the truth discourse of photography, but a more powerful enclosure and inward-turning of the framed image. The photographic is often used here with the “punctuating capacity of the photographic frame”, “bringing readers to pause and break away from the familiar storyworld” (something Nancy Pedri [2014, p. 62] attributes to photo frames in multimodal life-writing elsewhere). It is the rigorously maintained muteness of photos within their frames that endows specifically the photographic with the kind of deceleration or pause effect that often characterises silent, wordless (drawn) panels or pages in graphic reportage (Banita, 2013, p. 57).

For the secondary reporting of the graphic narrative, the old photos of street scenes in Peshawar or female members of the mission posing in “chadri” might well be facts of documentation that could be seen as pictures of photos, staying on the plane of graphic reporting. Even though one might expect this attitude to be supported by the visibility of the non-transparent materiality of the film roll (betraying the production of the image), the photos derail this smooth interaction precisely through their (far from inevitable or medium-determined) under-narration.

Rather than establishing a bedrock of truth or authenticity, their muteness indicates a reserve of the unvoiced, a hinterland of the unseen that recedes to the background and demands to be seen, voiced and understood. This actualisation is an ethical response to the event of photography, which can only be suspended, caught in the anticipation of the next encounter that will allow for its actualization: an encounter that might allow a certain

spectator to remark on the excess or lack inscribed in the photograph so as to re-articulate every detail including those that some believe to be fixed in place by the glossy emulsion of the photograph. (Azoulay, 2012, p. 25) This demand differs in kind from the clarifying discourse provided within the graphic narration – the graphic reporting on the photographic report – highlighting by the very existence of the explanatory narrative discourse the incapacity of the photograph to serve as “an immediate, incontrovertible, complete record of experience” (Pedri, 2011).

The collaborative work of graphic journalism hinged on the collaboration between local informants and distant visitors in *The Fixer*. Although *The Photographer* conveys a hierarchy of relative knowledge ability, in which rather clueless documenters try to grasp the meaning of what they are recording from experienced outsiders and locals, the collaborative work the book highlights inheres primarily in the unsettling collaboration between media, switching between alternatives that keep dislodging each other and showing how different media create different versions of reality.

The reason this is more generally significant for graphic reportage is that it shows the fragility of its non-photographic aesthetic, how much the potentiality of tactile visuality and a sense of proximity and affective engagement depends on an extensive text and immersive reading.

Many sequences with such potential exist in this hybrid text, including the powercut and the ensuing heat at night, the team’s arrival into Afghanistan at night, or the most prolonged sequence of the photographer’s near death by exposure on his independent return journey (Guibert et al., 2003, pp. 10–11, 36–37; Guibert et al., 2006, pp. 42–71). The more prolonged, the more powerful they are, yet even so they cannot sustain the type of non-photographic documentariness that operates in a fully graphic reportage. It is noteworthy that these formally identical shorter sequences cannot accomplish this when the graphic narrative is built on the photographic as a way of seeing rather having it as the inescapable horizon of dominant expectations of documentation and when it is integrated with photographs that cannot be absorbed as occasional illustration. New and fragile graphic reportage might be compared to the legacy of the photographic regime of documentation, yet the transformation of the photojournalist’s never seen photos is perhaps illustrative of a more general potential: despite photography’s apparent power to dislodge the graphic mode of reportage, it is the graphic narrative and its discursive difference that revives and mobilises something that has become lost, inert and inarticulate in the photographic record.

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Dilemmas and models of legal tools against disinformation, with particular regard to the political communication¹

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The aim of this paper is to provide a systematic overview of the key issues in the regulation of disinformation. It describes the actors involved in the dissemination of disinformation and their responsibilities, the decision-making competences for determining the truth, the individual and community interests affected by disinformation and the legal responses to these violations. The second part of the study proposes regulating political disinformation.

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- 1 Based on Polyák, G., Nagy, K. & Szalay, K. (2024). Dilemmas and models of legal tools against disinformation, with particular regard of the political communication. In: Batura, O, Holznagel, B. & Kalbhenn, JC (Eds.) *Disinformation in Europe: Challenges, Legal Instruments & Policy Recommendations*. Baden-Baden, Germany: Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft mbH & Co. pp. 45–64.
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Regulatory dilemmas

The debate over the need, feasibility, and design of regulation against fake news and disinformation requires rethinking some of the most fundamental issues in freedom of expression. Temporary and simplistic solutions inevitably lead to the result that, while a significant amount of disinformation does not disappear from the public domain, regulation threatens many communications that would otherwise be protected by freedom of expression. This should, in particular, be taken into account when formulating any uniform EU legislation. While there seems to be no intention of such uniform regulation by the EU institutions, the problem is clearly visible in regulatory initiatives such as the European Media Freedom Act³ and Regulation on the transparency and targeting of political advertising.⁴

Reducing disinformation through regulatory means raises seemingly insoluble dilemmas. First, whenever digital platform operators or the state fail to act against disinformation, they are accused in political debates of irresponsible negligence for not doing their utmost to protect the purity of public discourse; but if the same platform provider or state decision-maker removes a piece of communication that is said to be disinformation, they are immediately accused of censoring free public discourse. Second, the same regulatory instrument that, in one country, can protect the public and democracy, in a democracy-deficient country may actually strengthen autocracy, widening the scope for action against political opponents. The third type of dilemmas concerns the individual freedom of the electorate: freedom of expression certainly implies the freedom to question the reality of any fact and to challenge any authority, but an infinite number of

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- 3 Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council establishing a common framework for media services in the internal market (European Media Freedom Act) and amending Directive 2010/13/EU, COM(2022) 457, 16.9.2022.
- 4 Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council on the transparency and targeting of political advertising, COM(2021) 731, 25.11.2021.

individual, subjective truths makes it difficult, if not impossible, to live together in society and to solve common problems by democratic means. If we consider the average voter incapable of distinguishing between true and untrue statements, of recognising manipulation, we underestimate him or her; but if we expect the voter to adjust himself or herself to today's information noise and make a responsible decision on that basis, we overestimate him or her. Ultimately, from a constitutional point of view, our biggest dilemma is whether democracy is strengthened by more widely restricting freedom of expression than in the past.

This contribution provides a dogmatic analysis of the legal regulation of disinformation. It outlines the actors involved in the dissemination of disinformation. It takes stock of who, and under what authority, can be in a position to determine, with binding force, whether a communication is true or false. It shows how different types of disinformation can cause individual and social harm and what regulatory responses have been developed to date. Finally, it outlines a possible framework for regulating against political disinformation.

Actors in the spread of disinformation

In the dissemination of disinformation, we can identify essentially the same stakeholders as in the dissemination of any message intended to influence. In many cases, such as health (e.g., homoeopathy) or scientific (e.g., flat earth) disinformation, the spread of disinformation is motivated by sheer ignorance, and the disseminator is often unaware that the message is untrue. This does not change the individual and social consequences of the disinformation, but it may affect the legal responsibility of the disseminator.

However, most disinformation messages serve the political or economic interests of a specific entity. In these cases, the primary legal responsibility for disseminating disinformation should lie with the very actors whose interests it serves. Yet, this entity is often not or can only be identified with difficulty. This is particularly true in the case of political disinformation campaigns organised from abroad, where the aim is to have a foreign country shape the target country's political relations in line with its own interests.

The effectiveness of disinformation messages depends to a large extent on the creative way they are delivered to the community (Baptista & Gradim,

2020; Baptista & Gradim, 2021). From text messages to deepfake audio and video, any media technology can be used. There is no need for professional creatives; essentially, all the necessary tools and applications are available to the widest audience. The developers of such tools and applications are, therefore, also key players in the dissemination of disinformation, even if their legal liability could only be established in exceptional circumstances.

Disinformation can be disseminated by professional media, which use human editorial decisions to determine what information is included and what is not. In addition to online news sites, this can include YouTube channels and podcasts, as well as Facebook groups and groups on messaging services where any posting and messaging must be approved by a moderator – all of which are based on preliminary human decisions about the content available to information consumers. Of course, non-digital media can also spread fake news. In all cases, the human editorial decision implies an acceptance of responsibility for any content included in the offer.

The literature, public debate, and legislation have recently focused on the role of global online platforms. There is no doubt that these platforms have gained unprecedented power in the operation of the digital media system: from the conditions for reaching audiences to the financing possibilities and the normative framework for digital communication, they dominate the entire process. Competition in the relevant markets for the platforms is either non-existent or very unequal. Technically, they are in a position to limit or eliminate the spread of disinformation or any harmful information. They can remove problematic content from the information flow by modifying their algorithms and deleting or blocking information. They can do this much faster and more efficiently than any public body.

The above-mentioned “responsibility” is not a single category of law but may include civil, criminal or administrative liability, depending on the national legal system. In the context of disinformation dissemination, it is important to distinguish between subjective, fault-based consequences and objective, result-based consequences. Objective consequences can, therefore, also apply where no subjective liability can be established. The objective consequence is typically the removal of the problematic information, which does not necessarily imply liability on the part of the disseminator of the fake news. The objective consequence can be used to mitigate or remedy the individual and collective harm resulting from the problematic communication. In principle, it is a quick but not irreversible solution to remove problematic communications. This results-based consequence was already

provided for in the e-Commerce Directive⁵ and is taken forward in the Digital Services Act.⁶ The specific regulatory design of objective liability may lead to the risk of deleting too much information. However, it is an appropriate solution to the problem that, in many cases, it is not possible to identify the disseminator and especially the beneficiary of disinformation, and that, in many cases, the disseminator spreads the disinformation unintentionally or even unknowingly, so that individual liability cannot be established, but the individual and social damage caused must be reduced.

Decision-making competencies in determining the truth

One of the most difficult questions about the regulation of disinformation is who should be given the power to determine, by binding force, whether a particular communication is true or false. This power provides a broad means of controlling and restricting the exercise of freedom of expression.

Such a power may derive from legislation. The most typical is the empowerment of courts and administrative authorities to decide disputes. These decisions are taken in accordance with well-regulated procedures and can be enforced. At the same time, courts and authorities are only able and obliged to discover “procedural truth” that is based on the evidence before them. Thus, procedural truth is not, in fact, the final word in judging the truth of a statement, but the sum of the persuasive force of the evidence (Spiegelman, 2011).

The law can empower not only courts and public authorities to make binding decisions on the truthfulness of communications, but also private bodies, non-governmental organisations, and even for-profit organisations. The traditional forums for such dispute resolution and decision-making are arbitration tribunals. In the context of co-regulation, dispute resolution is typically carried out by industry self-regulatory organisations under a state mandate. However, with the adoption of the e-Commerce Directive,

5 Directive 2000/31/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 8 June 2000 on certain legal aspects of information society services, in particular electronic commerce, in the Internal Market, OJ L 178, 17.7.2000.

6 Regulation (EU) 2022/2065 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 19 October 2022 on a Single Market for Digital Services and amending Directive 2000/31/EC, OJ L 277, 27.10.2022.

a regulatory solution has become common in the European Union (EU) that essentially leaves the decision on the availability of digital content to for-profit intermediaries: the hosting provider is obliged to delete or block the information if it becomes aware of the information's unlawful nature. This regulatory model is taken forward by the Digital Services Act. A finding of infringement in such cases may require a decision on the truthfulness of the information, as well, even if not all the violations are committed by means of untruthful information and not all the untruthful information is unlawful. While this notice-and-takedown type of procedure significantly reduces the workload of courts and public authorities, it does not allay concerns about the possibility of often wide discretionary decisions affecting fundamental rights being outsourced to business actors with a clear business interest in maintaining and shaping the flow of information.

The relationship between intermediaries or platform providers on the one hand and users on the other is governed by private law rules, namely contracts or general terms and conditions. In this contractual relationship, the user authorises the service provider to assess the user's behaviour and the information the user publishes in accordance with the service provider's rules, and to take action accordingly. The service provider also implements the measures it has ordered, which the user can, in principle, contest, even in court. However, service providers' complaint-handling procedures can make it disproportionately difficult for users to enforce their rights (Istanbulluoglu, 2017; Istanbulluoglu & Sakman, 2022).

Public policymakers, media players and platform providers are increasingly relying on fact-checking organisations to verify the accuracy of communications. For fact-checking organisations, the authority to qualify a communication typically derives from an agreement with the platform provider. However, fact-checking organisations can also operate without such an agreement as journalistic and/or civil society initiatives. In this case, their findings on a piece of information are not binding. In all cases, an important legitimating factor for these organisations is the public trust that surrounds journalism as a socially rewarding profession. The stronger and more general this trust, the more accepted fact-checking organisations' activities are. However, if this trust is weak, fact-checking organisations can also become entrenched in the public's polarisation and even reinforce it. After all, fact-checking organisations cannot avoid being labelled by the public as belonging to one side or the other of the political divide, and their

findings are, therefore, more likely to be considered credible by those who feel they belong to that political side.

Deciding whether a piece of information is true is ultimately a matter of personal autonomy. Individuals are free to decide which sources of information they consider credible and which they do not, which evidence and contexts they accept as relevant and which they do not. This individual freedom is protected by human dignity and freedom of expression. It cannot be denied, and, except in the most brutal dictatorships, it cannot be taken away in practice, even if there is no guarantee that the individual is capable of making an informed decision.

Disinformation with legal relevance

The victim of disinformation may be a specific individual and/or a community. Individual and social harms often occur simultaneously due to disinformation. However, disinformation is a social phenomenon that threatens many aspects of social coexistence, and therefore, action against it is justified even in the absence of specific individual harm.

Disinformation is not a legal category in general. However, by taking into account the individual and community interests at stake, we can identify the legal remedies available to address disinformation. It is precisely the individual and societal impact of disinformation that justifies its legal limitation. It is not the disinformation per se, not the content of the communication, which makes the restriction of communication justifiable from a constitutional law point of view, but the individual and social harm caused (Frau-Meigs, 2021). In all cases, disinformation leads the person receiving it to make an incorrect, unfounded decision that would not have been made with the right information. Such incorrect decisions range from health damage to misguided consumer choices to uninformed political and public choices.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, health disinformation received the most attention. The harm caused by health disinformation is easily identifiable at both the individual and societal levels. Untrue health information puts the individual as a biological being at risk. The harm to health, physical integrity and even life is clearly measurable at the individual level. At the societal level, such information may lead to epidemics, but in any case, it

will come at a significant cost to the health and social care system. Several EU legislative acts set the framework for health communication.⁷

At the individual level, the moral being of man is threatened by untrue information about a specific person (Polyák & Nagy, 2021). These untruths diminish both the social standing and the self-esteem of the person concerned. At the social level, disinformation concerning a specific person leads to exclusion and hatred. National legal systems provide for civil and, in some cases, criminal protection against untruths in the context of personality rights (e.g., laws against defamation and libel). Social harm is addressed through rules that restrict hate speech.

Another typical area of misrepresentation is disinformation about various goods and services. Such untrue statements harm the individual as a consumer and typically cause financial damage. At a societal level, these disclosures threaten fair competition and the social market economy. Consumer protection provides extensive legal remedies against misleading or deceptive communications about goods and services. The EU has regulated consumer protection issues in several pieces of legislation.⁸ In 2011, the Consumer Rights Directive was adopted, which mainly sets out specific rules for distance contracts, including information obligations.⁹ The most comprehensive piece of EU consumer protection legislation in place,

7 See Regulation (EC) No 1924/2006 on nutrition and health claims made on foods; Directive 2002/46/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 10 June 2002 on the approximation of the laws of the Member States relating to food supplements, OJ L 404, 30.12.2006; Directive 2001/83/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 6 November 2001 on the Community code relating to medicinal products for human use, OJ L 311, 28.11.2001.

8 Eg. Council Directive 93/13/EEC of 5 April 1993 on unfair terms in consumer contracts, OJ L 95, 21.4.1993; Directive 1999/44/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 25 May 1999 on certain aspects of the sale of consumer goods and associated guarantees, OJ L 171, 7.7.1999; Directive 98/6/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 16 February 1998 on consumer protection in the indication of the prices of products offered to consumers, OJ L 80, 18.3.1998.

9 Directive 2011/83/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 25 October 2011 on consumer rights, amending Council Directive 93/13/EEC and Directive 1999/44/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council and repealing Council Directive 85/577/EEC and Directive 97/7/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council, OJ L 304, 22.11.2011.

and the one that tackles information that distorts consumer choice, is the Unfair Commercial Practices Directive (UCP Directive).¹⁰

Political disinformation

The most commonly cited area of disinformation is political communication. Untrue statements in political discourse put individuals, as citizens and voters, at risk. Such communications make it impossible for voters to make informed decisions on public issues. Therefore, at a societal level, political disinformation is a threat to democracy as a whole. There is no comprehensive, general regulation of political communication which does not focus exclusively on the period of election and referendum campaigns. The second part of the study examines whether political communication can be regulated in a complex way, as is the case in the EU in the field of consumer protection.

The overall aim of constitutional regulation to suppress disinformation should be to enable individuals, as biological and moral beings, as consumers and voters, to make decisions based on real facts. Indeed, decisions based on incorrect and untrue facts can cause serious harm at both individual and societal levels. Regulation against disinformation can comply with the constitutional standard of freedom of expression if the restriction of communication is necessary to protect clearly defined individual and/or community interests, and the regulation is designed to ensure proportional intervention, i.e. limited to justified cases.

Voter protection?

It is impossible to precisely count the forms, tools, and methods of political influence that distort the will of the electorate, i.e., manipulate voters into making a decision they would not make on the basis of factual information. The paper is hereafter a thought experiment, an elaboration of the main

10 Directive 2005/29/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 11 May 2005 concerning unfair business-to-consumer commercial practices in the internal market and amending Council Directive 84/450/EEC, Directives 97/7/EC, 98/27/EC and 2002/65/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council and Regulation (EC) No 2006/2004 of the European Parliament and of the Council, OJ L 149, 11.6.2005.

points of a fictitious regulatory concept that comprehensively addresses the forms of communication that can unfairly influence the will of the electorate. The predecessor to this thought experiment is the EU's consumer protection legislation, namely the aforementioned UCP Directive.

The UCP Directive also recognises that businesses can restrict consumers' freedom of choice in many ways, leading consumers to make choices that are ultimately not in their best interests but that they would not have made without the business's unfair communications, marketing, or other commercial practices. Unfair commercial practices deprive the average consumer of the opportunity to make a choice appropriate to his or her needs and interests. The UCP Directive addresses the impact of commercial practices on consumers and seeks to cover both foreseeable and unknown abuses through a variety of legislative techniques. It lists the typical abuses by precisely describing the conduct, defines the unforeseeable groups of abuses that have a specific mechanism of action and covers, by means of a general clause, other abuses that are not among the above but that distort consumer choice. The law provides for an institutional and sanctioning system that, when imposing legal consequences, takes into account the overall social impact of the abuses and the number of consumers potentially affected.

Two conceptual elements of consumer protection regulation in the UCP Directive can serve as a model for the regulation of political influence: on the one hand, the identification of the impact on consumer choices as the starting point for regulatory intervention, and on the other hand, the definition of abuses, as precise as possible, but open-ended.

Our hypothesis is that the consumer protection regulation of unfair commercial practices, in its structure and threshold-setting mechanism, is a suitable starting point for rethinking the constitutional regulation of political communication.

Applying the concept to electoral choices, it is important to consider

1. what is the imagined voter whose freedom of choice is protected by the regulation,
2. who are the actors whose information practices influence voters' decisions,
3. which are the communications and information practices that influence voters' choices,

4. which communications and information practices distort voters' decisions in an unfair manner or by unfair means,
5. the institutional and procedural arrangements for enforcing the legal consequences of certain unfair information practices.

Consumer choice, voter choice

We all make consumer choices several times a day, continuously. The higher the price of a product or service, the longer the consumer plans to use it, the more likely they are to research it thoroughly before making a purchase. In the case of daily consumer goods, it is more likely that the consumer carefully examines either prices or other product characteristics, whereas for consumer durables, the decision-making process is typically longer and requires more effort to select the product (Stankevich, 2017).

The consequences of consumer choices are largely immediate. Some of the indirect consequences – environmental, economic, etc. – remain hidden from the consumers, but the impact on their own lives – whether the product or service works properly, whether it is functional, whether the consumer is satisfied or dissatisfied with the consumer experience, etc. – can be assessed by the average consumer. The foreseeable impact of consumer decisions, their immediate consequences in terms of money and utility, enable and motivate the average consumer to prepare for a decision by being well-informed and by comparing the information obtained.

In contrast to consumer decisions, the impact of voter decisions on a given voter's life is, in the vast majority of cases, indirect and does not bring immediate change. Of course, the (sense of) direct involvement varies, depending, for example, on how vulnerable a voter's life is to the political situation at the time and on its intensity. However, most voters typically do not experience direct, immediate change as a result of the election. The more indirect the perceived impact of the decision, the less likely it is that the voter will make a significant effort to prepare for the decision.

In a narrower sense, voter decisions can be made only in parliamentary, presidential, and municipal elections, as well as in referendums. In principle, the long period between elections could be an opportunity for voters to prepare for the decision, inform themselves, reflect, and even review their own attitudes and prejudices. However, this preparation process consists of a number of politically relevant actions and decisions, as well: how much time the voter spends on consuming information, which media he/

she uses, which media he/she is willing to pay for, whether he/she reacts to political content on social media, whether he/she creates it, whether he/she participates in a demonstration, whether he/she joins a party or a politically relevant NGO. All of these decisions, which cannot be precisely quantified, can be seen as preparation for the exercise of the right to vote. All previous decisions are summed up in the vote.

The regulatory concept proposed below is, therefore, not merely a rethink of campaign regulation. It covers the whole process of voter decision-making and is essentially a concept of comprehensive regulation of political communication. It takes into account and assesses the relevant actors and typical methods of political communication and political influence, based on their impact on the electoral decision. It is proposed to judge the influence on voters' will not only on the basis of the actual votes cast in an election or referendum but also on the basis of hypothetical electoral positions that are used in opinion polls: the aim of political influence is to ensure that, if the election or referendum were held this weekend, voters would vote for a particular candidate or position.

The “average voter”

The consumer protection legislation is based on the assumption that commercial practices should be judged by the behaviour of the average consumer who is reasonably well informed, observant and circumspect, taking into account social, cultural and linguistic factors.¹¹ Thus, when assessing the impact of commercial communication, the average adult's awareness and care can serve as a benchmark.

As with the average consumer, we must assume that the average voter's attitude to political messages is determined by trust. According to a definition borrowed from Francis Fukuyama, “Trust is the expectation that arises within a community of regular, honest and cooperative behaviour, based on commonly shared norms, on the part of other members of that community” (Fukuyama, 1995, p. 26). This means that the assumption that informed voters do not believe political messages is neither acceptable for the functioning of democracy nor for news consumption behaviour. This does not absolve individual voters from the moral obligation to inform themselves extensively, but the average voter certainly cannot be expected to conduct

11 Judgment of 12 May 2011, Ving Sverige, C-122/10.

their own fact-checking or to constantly seek to debunk manipulative information. Democracy cannot be built on mistrust. It makes democratic decision-making completely impossible if the voter has to assume that the information received is untrue.

In fact, a broadly informed voter is expected not only to be aware of the relevant facts and conflicting positions on a given issue before making public policy decisions, but also to be aware of the consequences of his or her decisions, both for him or herself and for society as a whole. The consequences of consumer decisions are generally easier to see, and in many cases, civil law rules on defective performance and other consumer protection rules can relieve the consumer of those consequences. On the other hand, consumers are not fully aware of all the consequences of their choices, especially the social consequences, such as environmental pollution, the use of disproportionately cheap labour or the maintenance of cruel animal husbandry conditions.

However, in order to be aware of the consequences of their public choices, voters should be familiar with, for example, the complex rules of the electoral system and the referendum procedure, including at least the way candidates and lists are drawn up and seats are calculated, but also the impact of election results on party funding. However, even with this knowledge, they can only judge the impact of their vote on political parties and parliament. Inevitably, there remains considerable uncertainty in the electorate's decision, which is the essence of representative democracy: the voter gives a general mandate to parliamentarians to regulate any area of social relations in a way that binds the voter. It also gives the elected representatives the power to delegate rule-making, for example, by settling the balance of power and authority between parliament and government by regulating local government and other autonomies.

When electing representatives of the people, even the most rational voter can take into account only the facts promised in an election manifesto. Only in very exceptional cases do electoral promises stand behind detailed, comprehensible feasibility calculations. Even the most detailed election promises cover only a small part of governance. For the majority of a four-year parliamentary term, government decisions are a response to situations that arise in the meantime. Some of the electoral promises will certainly be overridden by a possible coalition government before it has even started. In addition, the accountability of elected representatives for promises is rather limited, as representative democracy is based on the

principle of a free mandate, which precludes the recall of individual representatives. Moreover, the voter should estimate how the implementation of specific promises will affect his/her life and what this impact means for his/her future.

This makes it quite difficult to determine what the voter's decision covers and when it can be considered an informed and reasoned decision. The choice is not a choice between right and wrong answers but, to a large extent, a decision of trust: the electorate votes for the candidate or party they believe can, through its governance, shape their own life situation for the better. In addition to the voter's knowledge, values, sympathy, and commitment to ideologies, parties, and politicians, as well as his or her current life situation, play a decisive role in this assessment.

The average voter is assumed to have a basic knowledge of the electoral system and the institutions of the rule of law. Ultimately, this voter will seek to make the optimal choices for his or her own interests and worldview, based on the available information. In practice, there is always a mix of rational and ideological weighing, based on beliefs. This also clearly shows the limitations of any regulatory solution. Any regulation against distorting political decisions can, at most, aim to put the voter in a position to identify a rational choice in his or her best interests, based on the real facts.

The "average voter" does not explicitly seek complementary or sometimes contradictory sources of news but tends to use more than one medium for information. The actual consumption of news is typically superficial, focusing on the information highlighted in the headline and lead or even as a background activity. Focused news consumption is short-lived and limited to one or a small number of media (Camacho Fernández, 2023; Mitchell et al., 2016). The most popular news sources are most likely to be present. Of course, it is not only traditional and social media that play a role in this orientation, but also direct human contact. Moreover, public value choices are influenced not only by information of an explicitly public nature but also by light entertainment content. However, no regulatory solution can be envisaged that responds to all distorting factors in theory. Of all the sources of institutional information, the education system is best placed to provide a better or worse response by shaping critical thinking skills (Pinto & Portelli, 2009).

Activities likely to influence political decisions

Article 2(d) of the UCP Directive defines “commercial practices” as any act, omission, course of conduct, or representation, or commercial communication, including advertising and marketing, by a trader, directly connected with the promotion, sale, or supply of a product to consumers. These practices are carried out by an undertaking interested in selling the goods or by a person acting for or on behalf of the undertaking.

The possible regulation of political disinformation aims to counter unfair political influence, analogous to consumer protection regulation. Activities likely to influence political decisions include all activities from argumentation to intimidation, from press conferences on policy issues to posters published in election campaigns, and from financial support to the organisation of demonstrations, which have the purpose and/or effect of influencing the political decisions of voters and shaping the will of the electorate. Overall, however, the vast majority of political influence is exercised through some form of communication.

One form of political influence is increasing a political actor’s popularity. However, the activity of influencing can also be aimed at reducing a political actor’s popularity or undermining their credibility. Indeed, it may simply aim to increase or reduce confidence in the political system as a whole. On specific issues that require a political decision, activities of political influence may aim to strengthen support for a proposed solution or weaken that proposal. In this paper, activities that are likely to influence politics are understood as all deliberately used means and methods of political communication aimed at persuading voters to support a particular candidate or position in an actual or perceived election or referendum.

The potential restriction on unfair political influence should not extend to individuals or organisations who, in the mere exercise of their freedom of expression, publish political information, whether true or otherwise distorted. In order for such a communication to be subject to restriction, there must be a demonstrable link of a clear, financial or organisational nature between the political actor benefiting from the information and the person who disclosed it. Organised or paid “trolls” would fall under this definition of possible regulation. Political influence can be linked to those actors – persons or organisations – who, in their own interest or that of the organisation they represent, deliberately seek to persuade voters to support them or their position in an actual or perceived election or referendum.

This includes registered parties, members of parties, persons and organisations standing for election to represent the people. Other actors relevant to political influence are those who can be shown to have a financial or organisational link with the aforementioned or who may be instructed by the aforementioned in any legal relationship, provided that they participate in the deliberate persuasion of voters.

Unfair political influence

The regulation of political disinformation is ultimately aimed at limiting unfair political influence practices. The scope of unfair political influencing practices can follow the logic of the definition of unfair commercial practices: a broad generic list, a definition of typical but not precisely defined abuses, and a blacklist. The regulation should take into account the risks posed by both traditional media operating under an editorial logic and social media.

In cases of unfair political influence, the general rule can also take two aspects into account. On the one hand, the communicator may be expected to act in accordance with the principles of good faith and fair dealing. In the case of political influence, this can be clarified and supplemented by the constitutional requirement that the communication must not hinder the free flow of information necessary for the development of democratic public opinion. This formulation allows for a consideration of the role and responsibility of the particular communicator in creating the conditions for freedom of information. The other pillar of the general clause is the impact on voters' choices. Following the logic of consumer protection regulation, it is unfair political interference which undermines the ability of the – average – voter to make an informed choice, in the knowledge of the necessary information, about the person to whom it is applied or to whom it is sent or who is the addressee, thereby inducing the voter to make a choice which he or she would not otherwise have made.

At the other end of the regulatory spectrum is the blacklist, i.e., the list of behaviours considered infringements in all cases. In the context of political influence, such a prohibition could be the failure to separate news and commentary in the media. Prohibitions may include failure to identify the publisher of a political advertisement or a social media post published as paid content, failure to provide accurate information about public advertising – whether by a governmental or municipal body or state-owned, failure to disclose funding received from political parties and used for political influencing, or the use of paid commentators or algorithms developed for this

purpose to disseminate political messages widely. In addition to the general clause and the blacklist, detailed rules can be developed for two typical cases of political disinformation: the dissemination of untrue statements of fact and biased, one-sided information. In the same way that the regulatory solution to misleading and aggressive commercial practices in consumer protection legislation can be highlighted among the means and methods of political influence, these can be highlighted as such. One possible case of communication subject to detailed regulation is the spread of untrue political information. In our view, a necessary restriction on freedom of expression and political communication is the restriction of untrue statements intended to influence policy. The aim of regulating against untruthful political information is, first and foremost, to ensure that truthful information correcting untruthful communications is also available, preferably through the same communication channels and with the same resources as the original untruthful information.

In our view, restrictions on freedom of expression are necessary to protect the public's right to full, objective and truthful information and the free exercise of the right to vote. This interpretation traces the restriction of political disinformation back to the objective, institutional side of freedom of expression.¹² In the words of the German Federal Constitutional Court, the freedom of expression is "constitutive of the liberal democratic basic order, in that it guarantees the intellectual struggle, the free debate of ideas and interests, which is vital for the functioning of this state order. Only free public debate on matters of general importance ensures the free formation of public opinion".¹³ Further, the means of mass communication have a decisive effect on the connection between the people and state organs, on their control, and on the integration of the community in all areas of life. They provide citizens with comprehensive information on current affairs and developments in the state and in society. They make public debate possible and keep it going by conveying knowledge of the various opinions, giving individuals and the various social groups the opportunity to form opinions, and they themselves represent a decisive factor in the

12 High Level Group on Media Freedom and Pluralism: A free and pluralistic media to sustain European democracy, 2013, https://ec.europa.eu/information_society/media_taskforce/doc/pluralism/hlg/hlg_final_report.pdf

13 BVerfGE 12, 113, 125

permanent process of public opinion- and will-forming”.¹⁴ Public opinion and will formation can lead only to undistorted results, and the will of citizens can be formed only on the basis of well-founded decisions, if the facts that shape will formation are real and if the real facts become known rather than the unreal ones. The proportionality of the regulation requires that the restriction defines as precisely as possible the restrictions to which it applies and that the legal consequences do not stifle free expression.

The other possible case of communication subject to detailed regulation is biased, one-sided information. Factual information can also be misleading and manipulative if it presents the issue in a one-sided way, omitting the views or interpretations of some of the people involved. The “balance” of information can be interpreted as a balanced presentation of differing opinions, but it can also be interpreted as a full account of an event or occurrence, with the facts selected and grouped in a way that does not favour one party. As in real communication situations, it is almost impossible to separate opinion suppression from fact suppression in the context of one-sided reporting. If one of the parties involved in a given case is not given a voice, not only is the subjective position on the case not made known to the public, but also the facts that the unrepresented parties would add to the information. Thus, the aim of impartial information is ultimately not to balance opinions but to present events and happenings as accurately as possible. If one of the parties involved in a given case is not given a voice, not only is the subjective position on the case not made known to the public, but also the facts that the unrepresented parties would add to the information. The requirement for balanced information in a digital, platform-based media system is increasingly unable to shape the audience’s orientation, but it is still an expected way of operating for public service media.

Conclusion

The aim of this study was to review and systematise the fundamental doctrinal issues of the regulation of disinformation and its different types. The constitutional law standards of necessity and proportionality of restrictions on freedom of expression and the role of freedom of expression in the establishment of a democratic public sphere continue to guide the

14 BVerfGE 35, 202, 219

development of regulation. A more robust response to political disinformation than is currently the case is necessary to protect democracy, but the proportionality of regulation will depend on the specific regulatory solutions. The regulatory approach outlined in this study, only as a thought experiment, can provide a flexible and effective solution.

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Between scepticism and adaptation: Rethinking mobile journalism in Hungary's constrained media system¹

ÖZGE SOMLYAI²

Abstract

This article examines how mobile journalism (MoJo) is being creatively adapted and professionally integrated by journalists operating in Hungary's increasingly constrained media environment. In a system marked by political interference, media capture, and shrinking institutional protections, MoJo has gained relevance not only as a flexible, low-cost toolset, but also as a form of journalistic resilience. Drawing on theories of hybrid media systems, professional field dynamics, and adaptation under constraint, the study explores MoJo's potential to allow journalists to remain visible, autonomous, and connected to audiences despite systemic obstacles. The analysis is based on original survey data gathered from 63 respondents with active journalistic experience, including freelancers, newsroom-affiliated professionals, and journalism students who also work in the field.

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While perceptions of MoJo's quality and professional legitimacy remain mixed, many respondents emphasise its practical advantages and alignment with mobile-first media habits. The findings suggest that MoJo's uptake in Hungary is primarily driven by bottom-up adaptation, especially among those working outside dominant institutional structures. Since this is an exploratory survey, the findings are based on self-reported responses and do not fully reflect how mobile journalism is used in everyday practice. To address this, a follow-up qualitative phase is planned, involving semi-structured interviews with working journalists across generational and institutional lines. Overall, the article argues that MoJo in Hungary represents not just a technological shift, but a professional innovation shaped by vulnerability. It reflects how journalists are reconfiguring their work in response to exclusion, uncertainty, and a rapidly transforming media landscape.

Keywords

Hybrid media systems, Hungary, media freedom, mobile journalism, resilience.

Introduction

Mobile journalism (MoJo) refers to the practice of using smartphones and mobile applications to report, record, edit, and publish journalistic content in real time. As both a technological innovation and a shifting mode of production, MoJo has gained increasing attention in global journalism studies – particularly for its ability to support low-cost, fast, and flexible reporting. While its use varies across different media systems, MoJo carries special relevance in environments marked by institutional instability, weakened press freedom, and economic pressure.

Hungary offers a particularly compelling case for studying MoJo under structural constraint. Over the past decade, the country has undergone a transformation into an illiberal democracy, characterised by systemic media capture, politicised regulation, and the erosion of editorial independence. Professional journalists face a growing array of challenges – from restricted access and digital surveillance to financial precarity and public

distrust – raising urgent questions about how journalistic work can adapt and persist under such conditions.

Rather than exploring citizen journalism or grassroots media, this research focuses on the perceptions and practices of professional journalists, including both freelancers and newsroom-affiliated reporters. The goal is to evaluate MoJo within a professional journalistic framework, paying close attention to how practitioners themselves assess its legitimacy, effectiveness, and future role in their work.

This article complements the study we are conducting together with my colleague Rita Glózer, whose work in this issue examines how mobile journalism (MoJo) is taught and understood within journalism education, particularly from the perspective of students and academic staff. By turning to the newsroom and field-level experiences of journalists, the current analysis aims to complete that picture and highlight the professional dynamics that shape MoJo's uptake and legitimacy in practice.

Two core research questions that guide this inquiry are as follows: How do professional journalists in Hungary perceive the legitimacy and utility of MoJo? What systemic or structural factors have the largest potential to influence its adoption or rejection?

These questions are addressed through original survey data gathered in Hungary. While the current analysis is based on quantitative findings, it also lays the groundwork for future qualitative research through in-depth interviews with practicing journalists across generational and institutional divides.

Journalism, professional identity, and technological change

Journalism today exists within a rapidly evolving digital environment, driven by platform dynamics, audience diversification, and new forms of visual storytelling. Reuters Institute's Digital News Report 2024 highlights how social media companies are rethinking their relationship with news. Platforms like Facebook and X (formerly Twitter) are reducing the visibility of news content in users' feeds, while visually focused platforms – such as TikTok, Instagram, YouTube, and WhatsApp – are becoming increasingly prominent spaces where people encounter news, particularly younger audiences. Especially regarding Facebook, the report notes that its role in news distribution is continuing to decline, with usage dropping by four

percentage points globally over the past year. In many countries – especially outside Europe and North America – users are increasingly turning to private messaging apps and video-based networks as alternatives (Newman et al., 2024, p. 10).

The Digital News Report 2023 had already observed similar developments. It identified Instagram and TikTok as the fastest-growing platforms for accessing news globally and marked a turning point in how people navigate digital information: for the first time, more users reported encountering news via social media than through direct visits to news websites or dedicated news apps (Newman et al., 2024, p. 11).

Building on this trend, the 2024 report shows that news engagement is becoming increasingly spread across multiple platforms. While only two services reached at least 10% of weekly news users a decade ago, six now meet that threshold. Among them, YouTube is used for news by 31% of respondents globally, WhatsApp by 21%, TikTok by 13%, and X by 10% – marking the first time TikTok has surpassed the platform formerly known as Twitter in weekly news use (Newman et al., 2024, p. 10). These shifts are closely tied to the growing importance of video in digital news consumption, particularly among younger demographics. According to the report, two-thirds (66%) of respondents access short-form video news each week, while longer videos attract around half (51%). Most of this video consumption happens on external platforms – accounting for 72% – rather than through publishers’ own websites, which represent only 22% of video viewing. This growing reliance on third-party platforms poses continued challenges for media organizations trying to retain audience relationships and secure sustainable revenue models (Newman et al., 2024, p. 10).

These developments form part of what the Digital News Report 2024 refers to as a broader “platform reset” – a reconfiguration of how journalism functions in relation to powerful intermediaries like TikTok, Instagram Reels, and YouTube (Newman et al., 2024, p. 10). This reset is not only technological but also professional: it affects how journalists reach their audiences, what kinds of content gain traction, and which actors are perceived as credible. In this new media environment, characterised by visual formats, algorithmic curation, and fierce competition for attention, the skills required to produce fast, adaptable, and mobile-first content are no longer optional – they are becoming essential for survival.

For journalists working in media systems already marked by structural challenges – such as limited resources, political pressure, or weak

institutional support – these changes present both risks and opportunities. These journalists risk being left behind if they cannot meet the demands of new formats and platforms. On the other hand, they have the chance to reclaim visibility and autonomy through the tools that became more accessible and scalable in today's hybrid media ecosystem with its online and offline components.

As digital platforms continue to shape how information is produced, shared, and consumed, journalism is undergoing a fundamental transformation. Scholars have increasingly drawn attention to how news is encountered in everyday life, with a growing emphasis on the dynamics of user experience and platform behaviour. Hendricks (2024), in a synthesis of recent research, identifies three interconnected shifts – or “turns” – that capture this evolution: the spatial turn, the emotional turn, and the audience turn. Each of these reflects how journalistic content is increasingly embedded in personalized, mobile, and affectively charged media environments.

The spatial turn refers to the dissolution of journalism's traditional delivery formats and fixed temporal rhythms. In earlier eras, news was closely tied to scheduled formats – such as the morning newspaper or evening TV bulletin – and distributed through media institutions that had control over timing, layout, and sequencing (Steensen & Westlund, 2020). In contrast, today's news appears in fluid and mobile spaces: on a smartphone screen while commuting, embedded in an Instagram Story, or auto-played between entertainment videos on TikTok (Peters, 2012; Reese, 2016; Hendricks, 2024). These environments encourage a fragmented and on-demand style of consumption, where news competes with a constant flow of content and must fit into fleeting moments of user attention. In these digital contexts, the news is no longer a self-contained product but part of an ever-scrolling feed.

The emotional turn highlights another important change: the growing centrality of affect, relatability, and personal resonance in journalism. While traditional professional norms often emphasized objectivity and emotional restraint, contemporary audiences increasingly expect journalism to be authentic, humanized, and emotionally engaging (Beckett & Deuze, 2016; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2020). This shift has been fuelled in part by social media platforms that reward emotional expressiveness and facilitate personal interaction between content producers and users. Stories that evoke empathy, anger, humour, or inspiration are more likely to be shared

and remembered. Hendrickx (2024) points out that journalists working in digital-first settings are now expected to adopt storytelling styles that tap into these emotional cues – sometimes even at the expense of traditional news values like neutrality or detachment.

The audience turn, finally, refers to the reconfiguration of the relationship between journalists and news consumers. Rather than treating audiences as passive receivers, contemporary journalism increasingly sees them as active participants in the news process. This shift is visible in the use of real-time analytics, interactive formats, and platform features that allow for direct feedback and engagement (Costera Meijer, 2020; Swart et al., 2022). In many newsrooms, audience data now plays a role in shaping editorial decisions, influencing not just what gets published but how stories are framed, timed, and distributed. The audience turn also recognizes a broader cultural change: people today expect media to respond to their values, preferences, and daily routines. As a result, professional journalists are required to not only produce content but to manage ongoing relationships with a dispersed, data-visible, and emotionally expressive public.

Together, these three turns offer a powerful framework for understanding the challenges and opportunities journalists face in adapting to a platform-dominated environment. They underscore that shifts in news consumption are not simply technological but involve deeper changes in professional practice, content form, and audience interaction. These dynamics are particularly relevant for emerging storytelling models – such as mobile journalism (MoJo) – that aim to bridge the gap between professional values and platform logics.

While Hendrickx (2024) and others focus on how users encounter and relate to news, Rita Glózer (2024) emphasizes how these same forces are reshaping the internal structure of journalism itself. She traces how the convergence of media technologies, accelerated by digital platforms, has disrupted long-standing boundaries between professional and amateur content, institutional and personal voice, and journalistic norms and commercial pressures. Drawing on earlier media convergence theory (Jenkins, 2006), Glózer argues that journalists today work in a hybrid environment where storytelling is no longer the exclusive domain of trained professionals. Instead, the roles of storyteller, editor, distributor, and community manager often converge in the same individual – particularly when operating on mobile or social media platforms.

One of the most notable outcomes of this transformation is the emergence of boundary work – the ongoing negotiation over what counts as journalism, who counts as a journalist, and which practices remain legitimate within the profession. Scholars have interpreted this as a struggle over both the external borders of journalism; how it is distinguished from activism, marketing, or user-generated content, and the internal borders; how genres, roles, and values are hierarchized and policed (Deuze, 2005; Carlson & Lewis, 2015; Boesman & Costera Meijer, 2018). These tensions have become more visible as newsrooms integrate new roles, such as social media editors or engagement coordinators, and as journalists adopt storytelling formats shaped by platform-specific features included but not limited to vertical video formats, ephemeral stories, interactive polls, or meme-like graphics.

Glózer also stresses that one of the central sites of this boundary negotiation is the participatory space created by digital platforms. Under the banner of participatory journalism, audiences now contribute not only as consumers or commenters, but sometimes as co-creators of journalistic content. Smartphone footage, social media posts, and personal stories submitted through comments or polls have become part of the everyday material that newsrooms draw on (Singer et al., 2011). While some of this participation is welcomed as a way to democratize journalism and enhance engagement, it also raises ethical, editorial, and professional challenges – particularly when contributors do not follow journalistic standards or when content circulates without adequate verification.

These shifts have been further complicated by the increasing centrality of user-generated content (UGC) and social media journalism, where the line between professional reporting and personal expression becomes blurred. Platforms like Instagram and TikTok reward visual appeal, relatability, and cultural fluency – qualities that have traditionally been seen as peripheral to journalistic authority. Yet, as Glózer notes, these attributes are now central to digital storytelling, especially when news organizations try to reach younger audiences. This reorientation forces journalists to adapt both their content and their identities. They are expected to be visible, responsive, and emotionally expressive – not just on behalf of their media organization, but as individual professionals cultivating a public-facing persona.

Underpinning all of this is a profound change in the concept of storytelling itself. Where traditional journalism focused on narrative structure, verification, and clarity, digital storytelling – particularly on mobile and social platforms – often privileges immersion, emotion, and interactivity

(Boesman & Costera Meijer, 2018; van Krieken, 2018). This includes everything from multimedia packages and visual explainers to augmented reality features and interactive timelines. For journalists, this means learning not only new technical skills but new ways of thinking about narrative, attention, and audience relationships. As Glózer notes, storytelling today is not simply about transmitting information – it is about creating an experience that feels timely, relevant, and shareable within the logic of the platform where it appears.

Taken together, the frameworks developed by Hendrickx (2024) and Glózer (2024) highlight that the transformation of journalism is not simply a matter of adopting new tools but involves rethinking the very foundations of journalistic identity, narrative practice, and professional legitimacy. Hendrickx's (2024) account of the spatial, emotional, and audience "turns" underscores that journalism today must respond to shifting audience behaviours and technological logics. At the same time, Glózer's analysis (2024) shows that journalists are no longer only reporters or editors but must also perform as digital storytellers, brand managers, and audience strategists. These overlapping pressures are particularly visible in social media environments, where content must be responsive, mobile-first, and emotionally resonant to compete for user attention. In such settings, professional journalists face increasing expectations to produce content that feels personal, platform-adapted, and visually dynamic – tasks that require new skill sets and an expanded understanding of what counts as journalistic work.

The need for this kind of adaptation is especially urgent in contexts where journalism is constrained by political, institutional, or economic factors. In Central and Eastern Europe, for instance, the uptake of mobile-native production techniques and platform-responsive storytelling remains limited, despite global momentum. This observation is supported by recent research conducted by Professor Gheorghe Anghel who teaches at the Faculty of Journalism and Communication Science at the University of Bucharest. In a comprehensive scoping review, Anghel analysed the academic output on mobile journalism (MoJo) across a ten-year period (2014–2024), focusing on articles indexed in the Web of Science and Scopus databases. Out of 69 publications that included the term "mobile journalism" in their titles – 17 indexed in Web of Science and 52 in Scopus – not a single one was authored by researchers affiliated with academic institutions in Central and Eastern Europe. Instead, the leading contributors came from the United States (15 authors), Spain (10), Portugal (5), and Germany (4). These countries represent

the only European contributors identified in the study, and all are situated in the more developed Western, Southwestern, or Southern parts of the continent. The complete absence of Central and Eastern European affiliations highlights a stark geographic imbalance and highlights the region's limited visibility in shaping global academic discourse on MoJo. (Anghel, 2024, p. 49).

This lack of academic presence reflects broader structural imbalances in media development. Anghel (2024, p. 50) attributes the gap to several inter-related factors: limited access to research infrastructure, insufficient institutional support, and a lack of investment in digital journalism education. His analysis suggests that while MoJo has become a topic of growing interest and institutional uptake in Western Europe, Australia, and North America, it has not yet gained significant traction either in newsroom practices or university curricula within Central and Eastern Europe. As a result, journalists and students in the region may be left without access to the training, theoretical grounding, or technological tools that are increasingly viewed as essential elsewhere.

Moreover, Anghel's thematic analysis of MoJo-related publications reveals that the global discourse is largely shaped by concerns about how technology is reshaping journalistic routines and business models. However, very few studies – particularly from the CEE region – engage with the practical experiences of journalists or educators who are trying to implement MoJo in constrained environments. There is also a lack of attention to the mobile applications and tools used by journalists, despite their centrality to MoJo practice. These gaps suggest an urgent need not only to expand research but to better integrate mobile journalism into both professional training and academic discourse in the region.

In this light, mobile journalism (MoJo) is not merely a set of tools or a niche technique; it is a strategic entry point for engaging with the broader structural and technological changes reshaping journalism today. For journalists working in countries such as Hungary – where media systems are increasingly marked by political centralisation, shrinking press freedom, and economic precarity (Bajomi-Lázár, 2014; Hallin & Mancini, 2012; Polyák, 2019; Urbán, 2018) – MoJo offers a means of regaining professional autonomy and responding to evolving audience behaviours. Its relatively low production costs, portability, and compatibility with digital and social platforms make it particularly valuable in environments where traditional newsrooms face financial or political constraints. MoJo enables

both freelance and newsroom-affiliated journalists to experiment with new storytelling formats, engage audiences more directly, and produce visual, mobile-friendly content aligned with current consumption patterns.

However, realising this potential requires a broader recognition of mobile journalism's value – not only in professional newsrooms but also across journalism education, institutional support systems, and national media strategies. As Anghel (2024) observes, the underrepresentation of Central and Eastern European scholars in international research on mobile journalism signals both a limitation and an opportunity: a limitation in terms of current knowledge production, and an opportunity to cultivate research and practice rooted in regional media realities. While this article does not focus on media education or curriculum development, that dimension is addressed in depth by my colleague, Rita Glózer (forthcoming), whose contribution in this same journal issue examines the state of journalism education in Hungary and explores how mobile journalism is currently positioned within academic training.

To better understand why mobile journalism occupies such a critical – and, in some regions, still marginal – position within these broader shifts, the following section defines MoJo in conceptual terms and maps its adoption across global journalistic contexts.

Defining MoJo and mapping global trends

Despite its increasing relevance in both media practice and audience behaviour, mobile journalism (MoJo) remains a relatively fluid and evolving concept within academic discourse. As López-García et al. (2019: 2) observe in their systematic review of the literature, “the phenomenon of mobile journalism has not yet been unanimously conceptualised in academia.” Initially positioned as a natural progression of multimedia journalism, MoJo has gradually emerged as a distinct field, characterised not only by the integration of various media formats but also, and more crucially, by the element of mobility (López-García et al., 2019, p. 2; Campbell, 2013, p. 10). This mobility creates new modes of both production and consumption, distinguishing MoJo from earlier iterations of digital or convergent journalism.

Beyond its technical dimension, mobile journalism embodies a paradigm shift in journalistic values and workflows. As Westlund (2012) argues, the mobile news landscape is defined not only by devices, but also by practices,

routines, and expectations shaped by mobile connectivity. Journalists are no longer tethered to newsrooms or bulky equipment; instead, they operate in real time, often from the scene, using smartphones as all-in-one tools for capturing, editing, and distributing content. This shift aligns with Pavlik's (2001) earlier theorisation of mobile news as a transformative development capable of personalising and decentralising news delivery.

Research highlights that MoJo enables individual journalists to carry out all stages of the news production cycle – gathering, editing, and distribution – on a single mobile device. According to Quinn (2009, p. 10), early adopters of MoJo in Asia “tend to work alone,” producing multimedia content (text, audio, stills, video) in a format suitable for multiple platforms. Canavilhas (2021) and Ekström & Westlund (2019) similarly emphasise the shift toward solo production as a defining feature of MoJo practices. This capacity for self-contained production is often presented as empowering, especially in contexts where speed, agility, and access are essential (Mills et al., 2012; Shaw, 2018). It facilitates real-time reporting from conflict zones, remote areas, or protests, while also lowering entry barriers for freelance and early-career journalists (Karhunen, 2017).

However, the academic debate over mobile journalism's boundaries also reflects wider tensions in journalism studies around convergence, professionalism, and technological agency. Studies by Goggin and Hjorth (2009) and Oksman (2010) offer two complementary perspectives: one centred on the production of mobile content, and the other on its dissemination and reception. These dimensions are deeply interconnected, as mobile journalism involves not only gathering and editing content on portable devices but also tailoring that content for consumption on similar platforms. As López-García et al. (2019, p. 2) note, the “element of mobility opens space for diverse interpretations,” making MoJo a hybrid practice situated at the intersection of field reporting, audience engagement, and digital storytelling.

From this hybridisation stems not only opportunity but also critique. Some scholars question whether MoJo's flexibility and autonomy may come at the cost of key institutional safeguards, such as editorial oversight and collaborative newsroom culture (Blankenship & Riffe, 2019; Pavlik, 2013). Journalism, after all, has long functioned as a team-based profession built upon checks, feedback, and shared accountability. When production is decentralised to the individual reporter, who may be publishing directly from the field, there is arguably less room for editorial review or ethical deliberation prior to dissemination. As such, MoJo's promise of

independence may come at the cost of diminished collaboration, and this potential trade-off deserves greater critical scrutiny, especially in research focused on professional identity and journalistic values (Pavlik, 2013).

In the context of our ongoing research, this raises compelling questions: how do journalists in Hungary perceive this individualisation? Do they view the autonomy of MoJo as empowering or isolating? Moreover, do factors such as generational cohort – whether early-career or more experienced journalists – or professional context – such as freelance versus newsroom-based employment – play a role in shaping how these individuals perceive the advantages and drawbacks of MoJo? These questions will guide subsequent sections of this article as it investigates the patterns, perceptions, and professional implications of MoJo in the Hungarian context.

MoJo in constrained media systems: Case of Hungary

The uptake of mobile journalism is shaped not only by technological affordances and audience behaviour, but also by the broader media systems in which journalists operate. In contexts marked by shrinking press freedom, concentrated media ownership, and growing state influence, MoJo can emerge as a pragmatic response to structural constraints. Hungary presents a salient case of such a constrained media system. Since the early 2010s, Hungary has undergone a steady erosion of media pluralism, driven by political centralisation, opaque regulatory practices, and systemic economic manipulation. Scholars and media observers have described the country as operating within a “hybrid media system” (Chadwick, 2017), where older, state-dominated media structures coexist with emergent digital platforms, though not always in democratic equilibrium. This is especially salient in Central and Eastern Europe, where the legacies of post-communist transformation have left media markets vulnerable to political capture (Dobek-Ostrowska & Głowacki, 2016; Curran, 2011).

Trajectory of mobile journalism in Hungary, as well as the trajectory of journalism education can be understood better when examined through the country’s evolving political and media environment. One of the most consequential turning points came in November 2018, when 476 media outlets were transferred – framed as “donations” – to the Central European Press and Media Foundation (KESMA) in a single day. This dramatic consolidation of ownership, exempted from antitrust scrutiny by a government decree,

placed a substantial share of Hungary's print, online, radio, and television media under a single pro-government entity.³ KESMA's creation marked a fundamental reshaping of Hungary's media structure, centralizing editorial control and curbing pluralism.⁴

This centralisation of ownership must be viewed alongside Hungary's institutional restructuring of media regulation, which paved the way for undermining media pluralism in the country. The 2010 Media Act (Act CLXXXV of 2010) established two key regulatory bodies: the National Media and Infocommunications Authority (NMHH) and the Media Council, both of which are dominated by political appointees affiliated with the ruling Fidesz party.⁵ These institutions wield broad discretionary powers, including the issuing and revocation of broadcast licenses, oversight of content, and regulation of public service media. While presented as neutral arbiters, their operations often disadvantage independent media outlets and reinforce pro-government dominance. Additionally, vague legal mandates – such as requirements for “balanced reporting” or the prohibition of “politically destabilising” content – create an environment conducive to selective enforcement and widespread self-censorship.⁶

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- 3 The Central European Press and Media Foundation (KESMA) was established in 2018 through the consolidation of nearly 500 media outlets, including national and regional newspapers, television and radio stations, and online platforms. The government issued a decree exempting the merger from antitrust oversight, arguing it was of “national strategic importance.” KESMA's portfolio includes the largest regional press group in Hungary, Mediaworks Hungary Zrt., enabling broad dissemination of pro-government narratives. See: Kovács et al. (2021); International Press Institute (2024); Bátorfy, A. (2018).
 - 4 On April 7, 2018, the day before the national elections, every regional daily in Hungary published the same interview with Prime Minister Viktor Orbán. The interview appeared in the same layout and design, highlighting the uniform editorial direction of these formerly local outlets. See: Czinkóczi, S. (2018).
 - 5 The National Media and Infocommunications Authority (NMHH) and the Media Council were created under Hungary's 2010 Media Act. Both institutions are closely aligned with the Fidesz government via the appointments of loyalists to key leadership positions. The NMHH controls licensing, while the Media Council oversees content regulation. For further context, see: Polyák & Horváth (2022); Kovács et al. (2021).
 - 6 The Media Act introduced legal standards that lack clear operational definitions, such as the obligation for broadcasters to maintain “balanced” coverage. These

Against this backdrop of centralised media ownership and restrictive regulatory frameworks, it should come as no surprise that Hungarians have the lowest⁷ trust rate (22%) in the news, alongside Greece (Newman et al., 2025, p. 25). The evolving news consumption habits of Hungarian audiences offer both a challenge and an opportunity for journalists operating outside the dominant pro-government media ecosystem. While television remains a prominent source of political information, internet-based platforms have gained substantial ground. According to the survey conducted with a representative sample for the 2023 Mérték Media Monitor report, 45% of respondents identified online news platforms or social media as the source they would choose if forced to rely on only one, while 49% selected television (Urbán et al., 2023, p. 7). Although this reflects a lingering attachment to traditional broadcast media, the close margin highlights the growing centrality of digital channels in shaping public discourse.

This trend is further supported by international data. The 2025 Reuters Digital News Report indicates that Hungary's internet penetration is now among the highest (92%) in Central and Eastern Europe, 84% of respondents reporting online access to news, and a substantial majority of 81% stating that they use mobile phones as their primary devices for accessing news online (Newman, et al., 2025, p. 87). Platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram play key roles in daily news consumption, particularly among younger audiences. These shifts are critical for understanding the strategic value of mobile journalism, which is inherently attuned to these mobile-first, platform-oriented habits.

At the same time, the context in which journalists operate in Hungary continues to be marked by severe and escalating structural constraints that go far beyond technological transition or generational media habits. In 2024, the Mérték Media Monitor's Soft Censorship Report documented a pattern of obstruction and intimidation targeting journalists who attempt to operate independently of state-aligned institutions. Among the most telling

ambiguous provisions allow the regulatory bodies to interpret content subjectively, often penalising opposition or investigative media. See: Bajomi-Lázár (2014); Polyák (2019); Urbán (2018).

7 The lowest among the countries that were included in the Digital News Report 2025 prepared by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism. See: https://reuters-institute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2025-06/Digital_News-Report_2025.pdf

incidents was the removal of The Guardian's journalist Flora Garamvölgyi from the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) Hungary, despite her valid registration; organizers later claimed that she was able to register to the forum due to a "system error" (Horváth, et al., 2024, p. 6). In another case, the investigative outlet Átlátszó was prevented from completing and publishing an interview at a prison facility. No justification was offered, effectively silencing the reporting. Further examples include the repeated denial of accreditation to staff from Magyar Hang and the exclusion of 444.hu's photographer Dániel Németh from Pope Francis's public events, allegedly due to "national security risks" (Ibid.).

Beyond these highly visible exclusions from physical spaces, independent media in Hungary are increasingly vulnerable to technical forms of repression. In 2023, a coordinated wave of Distributed Denial of Service (DDoS) attacks targeted a range of critical outlets, including Telex, Átlátszó, and 444.hu, temporarily disabling their websites and disrupting editorial workflows. These cyberattacks were condemned by the International Press Institute, which called attention to the lack of any formal investigation or state response (Ibid., 7). In parallel, the 2021 Pegasus spyware scandal – first reported by Direkt36 – exposed the use of military-grade surveillance technology against Hungarian journalists. Phones were compromised, encrypted communications accessed, and professional confidentiality effectively undermined. Despite international scrutiny, no transparent inquiry or political accountability followed (Panyi & Pethő, 2021; Szabolcs, 2023). Taken together, these developments illustrate a layered and systemic form of media control – one that operates not only through legal restrictions or market manipulation but also through intimidation, exclusion, and surveillance.

It is within this climate of repression that mobile journalism emerges as a particularly meaningful practice. MoJo offers journalists a way to continue working when traditional infrastructures – access to press events, studio equipment, editorial protection – are no longer available or reliable. Its low production costs, portability, and compatibility with mobile-first platforms allow journalists to produce and disseminate content in real time, often from the margins of public visibility. Crucially, MoJo enables reporters to bypass many of the institutional bottlenecks that restrict conventional reporting, including credentialing procedures, hierarchical editorial chains, and infrastructure-dependent workflows. It is not coincidental that this shift aligns with broader trends in digital news consumption and audience engagement:

in an environment where legacy media are politically captured and online news habits are increasingly mobile, MoJo offers an alternative journalistic model – one that is informal, flexible, and personally controlled.

Against such background, and informed by existing scholarship on media systems in hybrid regimes and journalistic innovation under constraint (as reviewed earlier in this article), the following sections present quantitative findings from an online survey conducted with journalists, journalism students, and media academics in Hungary. The data provide empirical insight into how mobile journalism is perceived by those working within the field – how it is evaluated in terms of professional legitimacy, quality, and future potential. In doing so, the article contributes to an understanding of MoJo not merely as a digital toolset or educational practice, but as a strategic adaptation to structural adversity, with significant implications for journalistic autonomy, visibility, and survival in constrained media systems such as Hungary's. For journalists constrained by exclusion from mainstream channels or public funding, MoJo represents not only a practical toolset but also a direct line to digitally engaged publics, capable of bypassing institutional bottlenecks.

Approach

This study draws on both theoretical and empirical approaches to examine how journalists in Hungary perceive and engage with mobile journalism (MoJo) in a media system marked by increasing political control, economic marginalisation, and institutional constraint. The research design is informed by a conceptual framework grounded in hybrid media system theory (Chadwick, 2017), literature on journalistic adaptation in the digital era (Hendrickx, 2021; 2023; 2024; Glózer, 2024) and under illiberal regimes (Dobek-Ostrowska & Głowacki, 2016; Polyák, 2019). These perspectives help situate MoJo not just as a digital technique, but as a socially embedded, professionally negotiated, and politically shaped strategy for working journalists.

The empirical component of the research is based on a quantitative survey conducted in Hungary between December 2023 and March 2024, as part of a broader comparative study on the status of MoJo across Central and Eastern Europe. The survey was designed to capture how MoJo is understood and

used by media professionals in contexts shaped by institutional pressure and evolving audience practices.

The study targeted three key groups – students, academics, and professional journalists – but the present article focuses exclusively on responses provided by those with direct experience in journalism. A total of 237 valid responses were collected. Of these, 33 respondents identified solely as professional journalists, while another 30 identified as student-journalists or journalist-academics. For this analysis, all 63 respondents with active journalistic roles were taken into consideration.

The survey was distributed online via university networks, mailing lists, and journalism-related social media groups. It was administered in English to ensure consistency across the transnational research project. The questionnaire combined closed and open-ended questions and covered five thematic areas: (1) familiarity with and use of MoJo tools; (2) perceptions of professional quality and credibility; (3) institutional and infrastructural support or limitations; (4) personal motivation or reluctance to use MoJo; and (5) future expectations concerning mobile journalism.

The analysis applies descriptive statistics to identify trends and recurring attitudes. Because this was an exploratory study using a self-selected group of participants, the goal was not to make statistical predictions or generalisations about the entire journalism field in Hungary. Instead, the aim was to identify patterns, shared perceptions, and recurring tensions in how journalists view and use mobile journalism.

Participation was voluntary and anonymous. Ethical approval was granted by the Research Ethics Committee of the University of Pécs. Respondents represented a broad range of journalistic roles, including freelance reporters, newsroom-affiliated journalists, and those working across print, online, and broadcast platforms.

Discussion of findings

This article examines mobile journalism's (MoJo) potential to provide a "way out" or an alternative for professional journalists in Hungary, who are navigating an increasingly constrained, politically influenced, and under-resourced media landscape. Based on survey data collected from 63 respondents with direct journalistic experience – including 33 full-time journalists and 30 hybrid-role participants (student-journalists

and journalist-academics) – the findings offer insight into how MoJo is being perceived, used, and evaluated by those actively working in journalism.

As outlined earlier in the Hungarian media context section, the conditions in which journalists operate have become increasingly hostile. Journalists have been excluded from official events, denied access to public information, blocked from publishing sensitive interviews, and subjected to surveillance and cyberattacks. In this environment, MoJo is not simply a stylistic or technological choice. It emerges as a tactical adaptation, offering journalists a way to continue practicing their profession despite the lack of institutional support and growing interference. The survey data presented here support this hypothesis, while also showing the limits of MoJo's current status within the profession.

Journalists' perceptions: Between professional values and practical necessities

The survey results reveal a deep ambivalence among journalists about the role and legitimacy of MoJo in their professional practice. When asked whether MoJo qualifies as a legitimate form of journalism, responses were divided: 36% agreed, 30% disagreed, and 33% were neutral. This tension reflects an ongoing negotiation over what "counts" as journalism in the face of technological change and institutional instability.

Concerns about quality also shape attitudes toward MoJo. Just 6% strongly agreed that MoJo content matches the quality of traditional reporting; 24% partially agreed, while more than 30% disagreed. The remainder were undecided. These concerns relate not only to technical standards – such as editing, sound, and image quality – but also to the perceived credibility of mobile-produced content in the eyes of editors and audiences. As discussed in the literature review, such doubts are common in environments where journalism is still tied to legacy formats and gatekeeping norms.

However, despite these concerns, journalists expressed notable optimism about MoJo's future. Over 60% believed it would become more widespread, and nearly 70% said it could improve journalism by offering more flexible and accessible tools. These responses suggest that even when MoJo is not fully embraced professionally, it is seen as a practical and necessary tool – especially for freelancers, independent reporters, and those working outside large institutional settings.

Hungary's media system is marked by systemic interference and the gradual erosion of press freedom. As detailed earlier in the article, 2023 saw multiple examples of journalists being blocked from access: reporters were removed from events, refused accreditation, and denied interview opportunities without explanation (Horváth et al., 2024, pp. 6–7). Dozens of independent online outlets also suffered coordinated cyberattacks, known as Distributed Denial of Service (DDoS) attacks, which overwhelmed their servers and temporarily disabled their websites.

These digital threats have been compounded by state surveillance. The 2021–2023 revelations about the use of Pegasus spyware against Hungarian journalists showed that mobile phones were being used as tools of surveillance, with selected targets placed under covert monitoring by government agencies (Direkt36, 2021; 2023). This significantly raises the stakes of mobile journalism, turning smartphones into both a production device and a point of vulnerability.

In this constrained environment, MoJo offers a strategic advantage. Journalists can film, edit, and publish content using mobile phones, without depending on newsroom equipment or studio access. Mobile content can be disseminated via social platforms, circumventing institutional bottlenecks and allowing journalists to report from spaces where formal access is denied. The high penetration of mobile news consumption – 81% of Hungarians access news via smartphones (Digital News Report, 2025) – makes MoJo not only practical but aligned with audience behavior.

Yet the survey findings confirm that MoJo is almost entirely unsupported by formal news institutions. Journalists reported that they do not receive equipment, training, or editorial guidance. Adoption of MoJo is largely self-initiated, based on informal learning or personal experimentation. This reinforces the view that MoJo is not part of a structured digital transformation strategy but a professional coping mechanism – an improvised response to political pressure, economic scarcity, and institutional abandonment.

Although all 63 respondents have journalistic experience, their employment status and institutional ties shape their views of MoJo. Full-time journalists, particularly those working in traditional media organizations, were more likely to describe MoJo as “developing” and less likely to see it as fully legitimate. Their concerns often reflected expectations of professionalism, including content verification, editorial oversight, and production standards.

By contrast, journalists in hybrid roles – those also involved in teaching, research, or studying – expressed greater openness to MoJo. Many reported

using mobile tools regularly, especially for real-time video reporting, social media content, or freelance assignments. These respondents often occupy marginal or flexible positions within the media economy, where institutional support is minimal and innovation is a practical necessity.

These differences point to an important insight: MoJo is not evenly distributed across the profession. It is more commonly adopted by journalists operating in independent, freelance, or hybrid environments – where professional identity is fluid, and where digital fluency is increasingly a prerequisite. MoJo, in this sense, is both a reflection of and a response to the precarious conditions of journalism in Hungary today.

Conclusion

This article has examined the role of mobile journalism (MoJo) in Hungary's increasingly constrained media environment, exploring its potential as a professional strategy for journalists navigating political pressure, economic precarity, and institutional exclusion. Grounded in theories of hybrid media systems and post-authoritarian media transformation (Chadwick, 2017; Dobek-Ostrowska & Głowacki, 2016), the analysis has positioned MoJo not as a universal technological fix, but as a situated form of journalistic adaptation – a resourceful means of maintaining visibility and autonomy when conventional structures no longer support independent reporting.

The Hungarian case illustrates how the strategic value of MoJo is shaped as much by systemic constraints as by global media trends. Patterns of press exclusion, the politicisation of access, cyberattacks on independent outlets, and the use of state-level surveillance technologies such as Pegasus have all contributed to a climate of intimidation and professional marginalisation. Within this context, MoJo emerges as more than a flexible format or budget-friendly toolset – it becomes a practical and creative response to the everyday challenges of doing journalism under pressure.

Findings from the online survey support this interpretation. While respondents expressed divergent views about MoJo's quality and legitimacy, a consistent thread of cautious optimism was evident. Many journalists, particularly those working outside the institutional mainstream, acknowledged the advantages of MoJo in terms of accessibility, speed, and alignment with mobile-first audience habits. These insights suggest a meaningful correlation between structural precarity and openness to

innovation, reinforcing the idea that MoJo is often adopted out of necessity rather than formal endorsement.

Although the data provide a valuable snapshot, they represent only one dimension of this evolving professional landscape. To build on these results, the next phase of this research will include semi-structured interviews with journalists from diverse generational and institutional backgrounds. These interviews will offer deeper insight into how MoJo is evaluated in daily practice, how ethical and editorial concerns are managed, and how professional identities are being redefined amid shifting journalistic norms.

Rather than viewing MoJo as a replacement for traditional journalism or a neutral by-product of technological change, this article argues that it represents a form of tactical professionalism. It is a practice shaped by adversity, resilience, and improvisation – an attempt to reclaim journalistic agency in an environment increasingly structured to suppress it. In Hungary, where press freedom has been curtailed not by outright bans but by more subtle forms of exclusion and control, MoJo may offer one of the few remaining paths to meaningful, independent reporting.

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Politicized, de-politicized, re-politicized: Comparing Taiwan to Hungary¹

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Abstract

Whereas the development of democracy in Taiwan since the late 1980s onwards exemplifies a joint evolution of political nation-building and civic consciousness, roughly the same period in Hungary is an instance for both the construction and the de-construction of a liberal democracy. In the first case the democratic development emerged from the outdated one-party military rule of the nationalist Kuomintang. In the second case we are dealing with the raise of illiberal political forces in the midst of growing social tensions which have gradually undermined the continuation of a still fragile liberal democracy. Whereas Taiwan exemplifies a typical grass-root evolution of emerging civic democracy, the short-lived Hungarian liberal democracy had been created by the “elites” of the post-state-socialist early 1990s and imposed by the alliance between the post-state-socialist reformists, and the emerging liberal and conservative elites. In this environment the grass-root element in Hungary after 1990 has ended up weak, and

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the democratization process has turned into an illiberal regime, explicitly proclaimed and carried out by the government that rules since 2010, winning three consecutive re- elections. The present paper raises the issue of comparing the role of apolitics and politically engaged citizenship in the evolution of political mentality in Hungary and in Taiwan since the early nineties onwards. The comparison consists of the mapping of concepts and phenomena related to the relationship between politicization, de-politicization and re-politicization in the process of democratization. As an interpretive attempt the paper offers a dichotomy between freedom as participation and freedom as escape as possible responses toward politics. We can also observe that the interplay of politics and apolitics is a dynamic one in so far as institutional politics may be interested to “colonize” civil politics, de-politicizing and re-politicizing it, and de-politicization also occurs on the international scale. The analysis embraces topics like collective memory, freedom of information as well political history and cultural legacy, all of them as fields where the instances of participation and escape are relevant.

Introduction

Taiwan represents one of the corners of the world where the chances of democracy to survive are intensively undergoing a test. The success of the Euro-Atlantic “free world” to defend peace and democracy in the Taiwan strait region will also indicate its capability to do the same in other parts of the world. Hungary is a similar laboratory. One of the main areas of this struggle is the free flow of information both in the sense of self-defense against disinformation and the protection of the media against attempts of interference primarily from the People’s Republic of China. Whereas some aspects of these pursuits don’t differ fundamentally from their presence in other regions of the world, the Taiwanese context also displays specific elements of research interest. In Taiwan the problem of disinformation and press freedom emerge in an environment where a liberal and an illiberal regime intersect on the overall media market, sharing the meantime common features of market, language and collective memory.

Uneven trajectories of social developments may be more indicative for the functioning of various interpretive models than any perfect match between developments and models aimed to explain them. Hence the importance of exceptions and of marginal cases in social science. An example is the claim

in the scholarship on Taiwan that the end result of a social development may be the outcome of modernization as imposed by external or internal political pressure rather than an organic cause coming from the society. Moreover, what one calls development may even show in the opposite direction, if it consolidates non-modern patterns (Gilley, 2008, pp. 9, 10, 18; Yun-cha, 2008, pp. 38–48). In the twentieth century modernization in Taiwan started as an imposed improvement of the state administration, public sector, economy, education and local government practices (first during the Japanese occupation), but later it was carried on as the self-development of an emerging grass-root democracy.

In case of Hungary the uneven trajectory has been the gradual de-construction since 2010 of a liberal democracy still in its infancy (emerging only from the late 1980s onwards), and its replacement with a self-proclaimed illiberal regime. Although the involution of liberal democracy has taken place in all post-state-socialist countries of Central- and Eastern Europe to different degrees, Hungary displays certain unique elements in this process. As the only functioning democracy in the overall Chinese political landscape Taiwan is also unique.

The present tract raises the issue of comparing the role of apolitical elements in the evolution of political mentality in Hungary and in Taiwan from the last three-and-half decades. The comparison consists of the mapping of narratives and phenomena which display the early overlaps and later the diverging evolution of the two political environments. The role of the dichotomy between politics and apolitics in the understanding of these parallel processes consists in the various patterns of participation and escape in attitudes toward politics. The concepts involved demand a brief overview of the related scholarship.

The conceptual clarification which focuses on the fundamental issue of the paper: political participation and its refusal, is first followed by a general presentation of the path of Hungary toward liberal democracy and its abandoning it, as well as by some major examples meant to illustrate Hungarian politics and its communication by the government abroad. General historical similarities between the two nations will also be identified briefly.

Conceptual clarification

To address the concept of the apolitical involves the addressing of the concept of the political too. As a self-relying concept, the political was influentially coined by Carl Schmitt ([1932] 1996, p. 53; Schwab, 1996, p. 7). The relevance of this concept for the present tract is that its central concept is the apolitical as well as related concepts like antipolitics, de-politicization, participation and escape from participation. The paper takes the complementary nature of the two basic concepts as well as the related ones for granted. The complementary, the two basic pairs of concepts also, appears in Schmitt's work ([1932] 1996, pp. 21, 22, 24, 25, 32, 35, 38, 62). The problem of the apolitical (and of the political) is applied in the present paper in a comparative analysis of political mentality.

Despite its fundamentally, negative stance toward politics the phenomenon of the apolitical is integral part of the political landscape of a society. It gains space inside politics, whereas it is fundamentally outside of it. The basic claim of this paper is that apolitical phenomena and narratives function as politically relevant elements of the overall political environment: apolitics is a political phenomenon. This claim can be supported for instance by the fact, that apolitical attitudes are also important in the development of alternative political movements (Jasper, 1997, p. 34). Similarly, in case of a major loss of electoral support of both the governmental and the oppositional side, critically apolitical agendas may become more important than any agenda offered by the party spectrum. Surveys testify the potential of apolitical masses in the emerging of radicalism (Reckwitz, 2019, p. 275). These phenomena indicate the dynamism by which apolitical attitudes function as parts of the overall political landscape.

In the scholarship on apolitics Hindess argues that no universal typology of the concept of the apolitical is possible, because all its understandings are only meaningful in relation to some specific understanding of the concept of the political in the first place. Hindess describes in this respect both orientations as suitable for a more or less autonomous range of action of a community, from which he deduces that apolitics and politics always appear in a mutually meaningful relation (Hindess, 1996, pp. 21, 23). The present tract follows this assumption by emphasizing the necessary correspondence between any specific understanding of politics, on the one hand, and an understanding of apolitics as related to it, on the other hand.

Schedler offers a typology which is more detailed than that of Hindess. He distinguishes between four types of these which describe the nature of what in his vocabulary is equivalent to the antipolitical: 1. instead of collective issues, the thesis identifies some self-orienting order; 2. instead of plurality, it identifies uniformity; 3. instead of accidentalism, it identifies necessity; 4. instead of political power, it identifies individual liberty. According to Schedler, each eliminates one fundamental political aspect: 1. the recognition of the interdependence among the individuals of a community by the constituting individuals themselves; 2. the recognition of the plurality of the constituting individuals; their capacity for joint action; 4. the possibility of the acceptance of a common rule. Schedler links the private sphere to the apolitical and the public to the political one, and claims that the primary code of politics always emerges from the opposition between the private and the public (Schedler, 1996, pp. 3-4). He describes the apolitical as non-cooperative and the political as cooperative enterprise. This brings us to the topic of the present tract: the understanding of the apolitical and its interaction with the political with special focus on the instances of participation and escape in the addressed comparative analysis between Hungary and Taiwan since the early 1990's onwards.

One of the possible ways of modeling the interaction between the apolitical and the political is to place them into a cooperative scheme. As Weller highlights, under certain conditions civil society may become interested to cooperate with the political power for a better realization of its own agenda. However, this strategy runs the risk of the weakening of the civil, society's potentially critical stance toward the government. This is what the author calls responsive authoritarianism (Weller, 2008, pp. 117-125).

This attitude implies the paradox of the turning of apolitical potentials into political ones: integrated into a cooperative scheme, civil actors may be interested to cease to remain political in their autonomous commitments and possible resistance to major political actors (government, parties, foundations etc.), and become in this way apolitical with regard, to their own goals. Major political actors can detect and use (or abuse) the civic politics against itself by inviting it for cooperation. This can take the form of offering of funds, assets, consulting, i.e. material and intellectual assistance that civil organizations might need. However, this cooperation might weaken the autonomy and ultimately the critical potential of civil actors. By diminished agenda, civil society may become virtually apolitical with regard, to its own initial purposes and loyal to the power agenda. Meanwhile the interest of

the power to invite for cooperation is to achieve more control and diminish civic autonomy and resistance.

Weller disregards however that the ultimate pattern of this interplay between major political actors (primarily the government) and civil society is what one could label as “de-politicizing by re-politicizing”. This means that by undermining autonomous civic commitments the power both de-politicizes their own politics and attaches them to its own politics: this is re-politicization.

The Hungarian and generally central-European understandings of the concept of the apolitical supply with starting points both for their implementation in other political environments and can be subjected to conceptual amendments themselves in light, of phenomena supplied by other environments. In the present analysis the space and time for this comparison is Hungary and Taiwan from the late 1980’s and the early 2010’s, with some of its aspects to the present. The closer Hungarian and Central-European scholarship of the concept of apolitics serves us the following considerations.

In his work *Antipolitics*, George Konrad distinguishes between antipolitics – as the civic rejection of the politics embedded in the core institutions of the state (regime or establishment) and apolitics – as the indifference toward politics as such (Konrad, pp. 227–233). Konrad describes antipolitics as a politically unbiased civic attitude which seeks distance from the establishment and protection of one’s own private life against politics. In his reconstruction of the history of political ideas of these state-socialist countries and of their development after the end of the state-socialist regimes in 1989, Miklós Tamás Gáspár elaborates that the post-fascist turn in these countries (with various degrees), emerged from the erosion of an earlier understanding of the of equality of rights in the 2000s. He argues that in this process of the disappearance of civic equality, citizenship has become apolitical and has led to an uncritical political environment (Tamás, 2014, p. 24; Tamás, 2015, pp. 28–42). With regard to the interpretations of apoliticism in Central Europe after 1989, Charles Fairbanks also identifies a connection between apoliticism and the development of these societies (Fairbanks, 1996, pp. 91–114, 103–105). He interprets this apoliticism as a grotesque outcome of the over-politicization of everyday life during the one-party rules of the pre-1989 period. The void left behind by those communist dictatorships has been filled up by nationalism inspired from a Jacobin understanding of the “people”, already inexistent in Western societies. Contrary to this, the Western version of apoliticism is to be found in the “single issue” movements (Fairbanks, 1996, p. 112). It worth

noticing that this Western-type of issue-based civic activism is in the present more typical for Taiwan than for Central- and Eastern Europe.

Kivisto and Scortino identify the power strategy of bargaining with citizen to obtain their political-civic passivity in an East-Asian context (Kivisto, Scortino, 2019, p. 290). The present paper underscores the global rather than regional and national character of this sought of deal as a road toward de-politicizing society. Their observation is consistent with the one from above, that there may be power interests in de-politicization of citizen undertakings, which can be seen as a form of “producing” apoliticism – “the politics of a politics”, triggered by the political power against the citizens.

What Tubilewicz reconstructs about the emerging relationships in the 1990s between Taiwan and Hungary, Czechoslovakia and Poland fall in this type of de-politicizing strategy. He highlights the repeated efforts of the leadership of the People’s Republic of China to press the leadership in Budapest, Prague and Warsaw to maintain a non-political character of their relationships with Taiwan (Tubilewicz, 2012, pp. 44, 52, 57). China had sent similar messages to the USSR to its opening relationships with Taiwan, already in the 1980s (Tubilewicz, 2012, pp. 35, 38). This Chinese pressure was by and large respected by the addressed leaderships and led to a slowing down of their building relationships with Taiwan. We can also learn from his work that although Budapest was the earliest partner of Taiwan, still in the late 1980s (Tubilewicz, 2012, pp. 28-30), only the president of Czechoslovakia, the veteran dissident Vaclav Havel had dared to disregard the Chinese ban on any public reception of the Taiwanese leadership (Tubilewicz, 2012, p. 63). It can be stated that the political relationship between Taiwan and Hungary (respectively, Czechoslovakia and Poland) had started under the pressure of denied political character of the relationships.

The self-restriction of various states to establish diplomatic relationships with Taiwan on the highest level has remained a major challenge ever since the late eighties and has resulted that Taiwan has a lot more informal than formal support by governments from all over the world. Therefore, China’s firm intention to keep Taiwan’s international relations as de- politicized as possible has been to, a large extent respected by the international community, both for self-interest and for the interest of Taiwan. The outcome is a certain de-politicization of Taiwan’s international relations. However, PRC can only achieve the de-politicizing of the official “establishment”-type of relationships, it cannot be equally efficient to undermine the informally maintained forms of political solidarity and cooperation with Taiwan.

Hungary and Taiwan – Similarities and differences

At first sight it is hard to find two more remote countries in cultural, social, geo-political and political sense than Hungary and the Republic of China. But as mentioned before, it is precisely the uneven trajectory of mapping a problem of social and political science, that might highlight special domestic traits of both sides. Whereas Hungary is usually subject to comparisons between the countries of the Central and Eastern European region, the Balkan and the European Union, Hungary and Taiwan is much rare as a topic of comparison. Similarly, Taiwan is routinely compared with the People's Republic of China, Japan, South Korea and occasionally with the Eastern Pacific region, but rarely with Central and Eastern European countries. A Hungary – Taiwan comparison is not obvious. However, there are similarities which deserve attention.

Firstly, both nations have a sense of being on island in some particular context. This is obvious in case of Taiwan, and not only because of its actually being an island in the south Chinese sea. But also, because although, it intersects with the Chinese nation, it has a different identity; it has emerged from a past that differs from the past of mainland China. Moreover, the threat of a hectic, even unfriendly relationship with the People's Republic of China sharpens Taiwan's insular consciousness (Ying-hsiung, 2004, pp. 254–255). For Hungarians the sense of being an island is caused by multiple motifs in historiography and in collective imagination. Firstly, the Nordic and Central-Asian roots of the Hungarian language, separates it from the neighboring nations, of which languages are partly of Slavic, partly of Latin origin. Secondly, after the closing treaties of the First World war in 1919 and 1920, from the nations of the dissolving Austrian-Hungarian Empire, Hungary has lost the most from its earlier territories which forced millions of native Hungarian speakers into ethnic communities of the neighboring countries to date.

Secondly, the effects and the memory of a foreign domination, both suppressing and civilizing the country, in both cases lasting a half century. This is the case of the Austrian- Hungarian domination between 1867 and 1919, and the case of the Japanese domination in Taiwan between 1896 and 1946. Beyond the differences of the two geopolitical constructions (Hungary was not colonized by Austria, but it was embraced into an uneven hierarchy of shared ruling), there is also a stunning analogy.

The Kuomintang domination in Taiwan and the communist rule in Hungary have shared the character of a one-party dictatorship (in case of Taiwan together with martial law) and again, the same length of time, almost exactly forty years (in Taiwan between 1947 and 1987, in Hungary from 1948 until 1989). Beyond the obvious differences between the anti-communist and nationalist military dictatorship of Kuomintang on the one hand and the Soviet-type of communist dictatorship in the Central European Hungary on the other hand, the anti-pluralist nature of the one-party ruling, with all its similar consequences in the spying, arrest and execution of citizens, also establish an analogy in the political memory of the two countries (Pan, 2023, p. 31).

Fifth, the 1990s and 2000s have been very similar in terms liberal democratic reform conceptions like free market, political pluralism, freedom of expression, religion and free press. For both regions this was the time of “transit to democracy” as labelled in the scholarship on the post-state-socialist Europe. Taiwan and Hungary had shared fundamental elements of the late twentieth century agenda of national liberations from various dictatorial regimes. In 1989, when Hungary had experienced such a moment of liberation, a similar attempt was crashed in the People’s Republic of China.

Sixth, the similar post-second world war history of the two nations has implied a further shared problem: collective memory. The consequences of the political repression and crimes that followed February 28, 1947, the instauration of the Chinese nationalist government of Kuomintang and the martial law as its weapon, are similar to the mental struggles of post-state-socialist Central-and Eastern Europe. The earlier building and the later removal of controversial memorials and statues of the glories and heroes of a fallen regime are the material symptoms of a split in the collective memory. Similarly, the unsettled controversies of justice to the victims are also a strong parallel.

The succinct overview from above of similar historical elements shared by the two nations sufficiently illustrates that a comparative analysis of certain aspects of their reality can be meaningfully anchored in space and time. The insular consciousness, the effects of a suppressing, but civilizing and more developed foreign neighbor, the quest for freedom from dictatorship, the experience of one-party rule, the opening toward liberal democracy and finally the split of collective memory are all aspects, which build bridges between the two nations.

Hungary

Between the late 1980s and early 2000s, Hungary had been at the forefront of emerging democracies among the post-state socialist dictatorships. The most successful laboratory of pluralism, freedom of expression, and civil society is nowadays the most successful regime in turning its earlier achievements into the opposite. Although Hungary is not alone in this process of illiberal backsliding, scholarship shows the highly contextual character of how this takes place in the different countries of the post-state-socialist region (Bochsler, Joun, 2020, p. 181; Cianetti, Dawson, Hanley, 2018, pp. 244, 248; Surowiec and Stetka, 2020, pp. 1–3). Whereas Hungary was contributing to the ending of communist dictatorships, in the present it both imports autocratic panels, ideas, and policies, as well as exports political and ideological content together with rhetorical instruments of spreading them (Bozóki – Fleck, 2024, p. 181).

The actual content supply of Hungary's political paradigm change is mainly reduced to an explicit national-conservative value agenda, even supportive of domestic and global far-right elements of white supremacy, homophobia and illiberalism.

To grasp, first of all the stakes of this kind of seemingly politically neutral framing of political communication activity, one should not underestimate the indirect political gathering potential of fundamentally non-political social activities (Couldry, 2015, p. 38), especially in environments of widespread apolitical attitudes (Reckwitz, 2019, pp. 106, 128, 275; Tamás, 2014, p. 24; Tamás, 2015, pp. 28–42; Laruelle, 2022, p. 308). Findings indicate that frequent news consumption which co-exists with a non-partisan, open-minded political attitude tends to display a relatively low degree of radicalization and mobilization. Contrary to this in the case of the joint presence of low interest in news and partisan attitude, the tendency for radicalization and mobilization is relatively high (Westerwick, Johnson, Knobloch-Westerwick, 2017, pp. 343–364). It can be assumed that in strongly apolitical environments in-direct political communication can bring political agendas closer to people, because it may be based on seemingly politically neutral issues of public preference. This fact may justify the importance of researching alternative and in-direct means of political communication, because in an apolitical environment such means may be more significant than in environments of higher level of political awareness and civic activity.

By making not just its political voice heard abroad, but also its methodology of disseminating it, the government can gain a special kind of power position on a regional or even global scale. This special power position tends to emerge from its strategy of political communication export. (For instance, on May 2022, Hungary was the first European organizer of CPAC – Conservative Political Action Conference, the largest conservative political forum in the world. [cpachungary.com])

The Orbán-regime has managed to retain the old-fashioned nationalist narrative, traditionally unfriendly toward the neighboring nations on the one hand but adjusting it to the new wave of the refusal of multiculturalism and the human-rights-based Euro-Atlantic stance on the other hand. It forms in this way new anti-Western alliances with neighboring powers (Enyedi, 2020, pp. 367–369). In the turmoil of its permanent conflicts with the European Union, the government needs international self-branding. It also needs foreign partners for its special European agenda, as well as for marching against Euro-conform and North American social liberalism and multi-culturalism on the international stage (Mos, 2020, p. 280). This regime has proved to function (especially since 2016) as a successful model in authoritarian backsliding for several countries of the Central- and Eastern European region and even beyond (Bochsler, Joun, 2020, p. 183; Enyedi, 2023), including more remote powers like Turkey and the People's Republic of China. This new front even cuts across party identities and party union borders (the Check Babis is liberal, the Slovakian Fico is socialist, the Serbian Vučić is affiliated with the EPP, the Romanian Dragnea is Social-Democrat, etc.) (Enyedi, 2020, p. 368), including even the Islamist Erdogan and the communist Xi. This success indicates the inclusive potential of the illiberal agendas from various countries and political formations.

Taiwan

The grass-root-type of social self-formation runs counter to the Confucian tradition of politics as described by scholarship on East Asia. It is often claimed that authoritarian politics can be well founded on Confucian values like family and hard work. Accordingly, top-down market formations against the Tocquevillian-type (rather Anglo-Saxon in application) of genuine market formations which are also consistent with grass-root civic formations can all be deduced from the political implementation of

Confucianism (Palmer, David A. and Alexander, C. Jeffrey, Sunwoong, Park and Agnes Shuk-mei Ku, 2018, pp. 5, 6). They also mention Kuomintang as relying upon this tradition in its efforts to de-politicize society's own political self-formation (Palmer, David A. and Alexander, C. Jeffrey, Sunwoong, Park and Agnes Shuk-Mei Ku, 2018, p. 9). This is what by 1987 seems to be reversed and replaced ever since by a grass-root-type of social self-formation.

Angle C. Stephen describes the theoretical and practical implementations of certain elements of the Confucian legacy as soft authoritarianism. He identifies the sense for one-party organization, traditional family, hard work, ethics of self-restriction and ritualism as politically meaningful forms of normative reasoning and justification of collective bonds. (Angle, 2012, pp. 12–13, p. 136).

As the political culture opposite to the above interpretation of the Confucian legacy, Ryan Dunch elaborates the way in which Taiwan's transition period took place from Kuomintang rule to democracy. One of his major findings is that the practice of democratization gave birth to the reification of the growing of the people into a nation (Dunch, 2020, p. 3–20). (By his vocabulary he clearly refers to the formation of a political nation.) Rwei Ren-Wu also underscores the grass-root character of the Taiwanese transition. Talking about voters rather than nation and people, the author observes the diminishing interest of the Taiwanese in political parties in contrast to the increasing dynamism of local and issue-based self-organization (Rwei, 2020, pp. 12–13). In later developments the stabilization of the civic political character of the society has resulted a generally active electorate, also interested in elections on nation level. Taiwan is an exception in the trend of declining interest toward politics among the developed nations (Esarey, 2020, p. 38).

Rwei also elaborates how the institutionalization of the nation state has contributed to democratization (Rwei, 2020, pp. 48–51). From a global perspective, this evolution is not obvious at all. The nation state, especially its founding ideology, nationalism, has often developed against democratization, and in the post-second world war Western Europe, in the era of globalization, has gradually become the opposite of the nation-state. Not so much in Taiwan, where the formation of the nation state has been parallel with the emerging civic consciousness and sense of self-determination. In his understanding the Japanese colonial occupation has contributed significantly to the creation of resistance, demos, and collective self-identification in general. In the meantime, whereas the Japanese administrative

reforms have taught the Taiwanese a lot about institutionalization, as a colonial power, it has also left behind the memory of suppression against any local agenda and collective pride. The next chapter in Taiwan's history, the Kuomintang with its forty-year-long martial law regime was not a fertile ground for elucidating the internal tensions of the past.

As Pan Tsung-Yi puts it, on the Tienanmen Square in Beijing, The Great Hall of People together with the Chinese Natural History Museum and the Revolutionary Museum are meant to unite the past, the present and the future of the Chinese people understood in the context of "one China". However, this unification is, shadowed by the crashed revolt on the same square in 1989 (Pan, 2023, p. 41). This brings us to the problem of collective memory.

Scholarship records collective memory as one of the fields of political mentality in Taiwan. Huang Han-yu highlights on the one hand the difference between the personal and the "exteriorised" memory, the singularity of the personal testimony (Huang, 2023, pp. 178–179). He raises the question of whether the personal injury, which is unescapably individual can be represented in, the form of public memory at all: experience is personal, representation is public. He states on the other hand that there is no politically neutral memory. In other words, personal memory itself is "constructed" in non-personal, public terms, it relates to the others, hence its political character (Huang, 2023, p. 174). Huang mentions shame as the link between personal experience and person's relatedness to the public (Huang, 2023, p. 183). He highlights that "The Compensation Act for Wrongful Trials on Charges on Sedition and Espionage during the Martial Law Period" revisited in 1998 and the still ongoing process of reducing transitional justice to ordinary judicial counting illustrates the national struggle with collective memory and its ethical and legal implications (Huang, 2023, p. 194). In 2024, seventy-seven years after the instauration of martial law in Taiwan and thirty-seven years after its ending, factual and normative clarity of the deeds committed and suffered is still an everyday challenge.

In Rwei's reconstruction the end result of the Japanese era was that it fueled the formation of the regional as well as national consciousness, and the understanding of the legitimacy of self-rule. This knowledge was based on the experience Taiwan had obtained from the highly developed, rational Japanese institutionalism. Ironically, this legacy was mobilized precisely against the Japanese rule. (Rwei, 2020, pp. 55, 56, 57, 58). It was in this context – so Rwei's argument goes – in which the civic – people – nation has

become the over-arching scheme (Rwei, 2020, p. 73). Ketty W. Chen argues in a similar fashion by highlighting in her essay, “Island Sunrise”, that the movement has united the Liberal-Democrats with the Taiwanese national identity, turning it into an all-inclusive identity. It became clear that there was a line of non-interference that the society didn’t allow to the power to cross (Chen, 2020, pp. 132–133).

If the possibility of the unification of the People’s Republic of China with the Republic of China is a highly controversial political and security issue, the overlaps of the media markets is a living reality. According to Jaw-Nian Huang, the economic influence of China in the Taiwanese media becomes palpable after 2008 (Jaw-Nian, 2020, pp. 87–88). The context of this influence is a paradox: Taiwan’s liberal economic policy cannot avoid the self-adjustment of the Taiwanese media owners to the Chinese demands to the media market. However, this fact has far-reaching political implications in terms of market influence and self-censorship of Taiwanese media professionals who want to sell their outlets in the largest market of the world, which is the People’s Republic of China. Moreover, the East-Asian hegemony of the mandarin language doesn’t stop at the border of any country, especially in the age of the internet.

We learn from the author, how the Chinese offers to advertise, sell and manage journalism produced in Taiwan becomes “domesticated” by formal and informal requests which all follow the central political line of PRC. For instance, he mentions the Tienanmen revolt in 1989 and the Falun Gong religious movement as banned topics for those who want to sell their stories on PRC platforms. These and other restrictive majors have the character of requested censorship, self-censorship, politically conditioned licensing and distribution permission as well as embedded advertising and news bias (Jaw-Nian, 2020, pp. 90–92).

Paradoxically, by its interference in the Taiwanese media the government of the People’s Republic of China obtains more influence on the Taiwanese media system than the Taiwanese government itself. Especially, because whereas Taiwan’s government applies a classical market liberalism of non-interference, PRC is a highly centralized regime where the embracing of the media into the communication policy of the government, is considered a natural process.

This framework of interference unescapably brings about the norm diffusion of PRC to the Taiwanese media production (Jaw-Nian, 2020, p. 108), often unnoticed.

The Anti-Media Monopoly Movement forged by DPP was an attempt to offer state level responses to the Chinese media interference. Although this attempt was, undermined by KMT, in 1998 the Budget Act was conceived to diminish media monopolies and excluded government embedded market creation. However, the fundamental problem of the attempts of the People's Republic of China to influence the entire Taiwanese media production system could not be, eliminated. Another area of general information interference of the PRC is disinformation in social media.

As mentioned above the lingua franca character of the Chinese language can easily be applied to reach out potentially every Chinese speaking community (and individual) world- wide, especially in case of the largest Chinese language platform, WeChat (Harold, Beauchamp-Mustafaga, Hornung, 2021, p. 120).

Although military experts concluded in 2021 that no disinformation cyber interference had targeted the United States yet, it seemed clear, that interferences that targeted Taiwan also served as “trainings” for their possible extensions to other countries (Harold, Beauchamp-Mustafaga, Hornung, 2021, pp. 119, 127). While Taiwanese disinformation combating platforms like CoFacts and Taiwan Fact Check Center are very efficient, it has been also observed that the disinformation efforts launched by PRC are becoming even more sophisticated. For instance they are applying smart methods of camouflage by using typically Taiwanese features of communication for not being recognized as PRC contents (Harold, Beauchamp-Mustafaga, Hornung, 2021, p. 132).

Finally, it worth remarking that the sunflower movement was opposing a planned economic treaty between the People's Republic of China and a democratically elected Taiwanese government: the democratic resistance was targeting its own government because of a particular policy. It seems that the Taiwan Strait doesn't only separate the mainland China from the Republic of China, but it also separates democracy from non-democracy.

Conclusion

Whereas the development of democracy in Taiwan since the late 1980s onwards exemplifies a joint evolution of political nation-building and civic consciousness, roughly the same period in Hungary is an instance for both the construction and the de-construction of a liberal democracy. In the first case the democratic development emerged from the outdated one-party

military rule of the nationalist Kuomintang. In the second case we are dealing with the raise of illiberal political forces in the midst of growing social tensions which have gradually undermined the continuation of a still fragile liberal democracy. Whereas Taiwan exemplifies a grass-root evolution of emerging civic democracy, the short-lived Hungarian liberal democracy had been created by the “elites” of the post-state-socialist early 1990s and imposed by the alliance between the post-state-socialist reformists, and the emerging liberal and conservative elites. In this environment the grass-root element after 1990 ended up weak, and the democratization process has turned into an illiberal regime, explicitly proclaimed and carried out by the government that rules since 2010.

The present paper is an attempt to compare the development of apolitical and politically activist attitudes and phenomena since the late 1980s in Hungary and Taiwan. The role of the dichotomy between politics and apolitics in the understanding of these parallel processes consists in the various patterns of participation and escape in attitudes toward politics. The comparison consists of the mapping of concepts and phenomena related to the relationship between politicization, de-politicization and re-politicization in the process of democratization. We can also observe that the interplay of politics and apolitics is a dynamic one in so far as institutional politics may be interested to “colonize” civil politics, de-politicizing and re-politicizing it, and de-politicization also occurs on the international scale.

The analysis embraces topics like collective memory, freedom of information as well political history and cultural legacy, all as relevant stocks of examples of participation and escape.

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Web of denial: Climate change denial discourse on Instagram¹

VIRÁG VÉCSEY²

Abstract

The chapter aims to provide insights into the climate denial discourse on social media, with a particular focus on its visual aspects. Using methods of multimodal critical discourse analysis and content analysis, the research examines content on Instagram tagged #climatehoax or #climate-changehoax. Results show that climate denial communication on the platform is characterised by a strong negative referentiality that embeds scepticism about anthropogenic climate change in a broad web of conspiracy theories, forming an incomplete and self-contradictory super conspiracy theory.

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- 1 This publication is a chapter of the book *Communicating Science, Climate Change and the Environment in Hybrid Media. Constructed Facts, Contested Truths* available to download at: <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/oa-edit/10.4324/9781003479550-4/web-denial-vir%C3%A1g-v%C3%A9csey>. To cite this article, please use the following format: Vécsey, V (2025). Web of denial. Climate change denial discourse on Instagram. In M. M. Roslyng, A. Rantasila, A.M. Jönsson (Eds.), *Communicating Science, Climate Change and the Environment in Hybrid Media. Constructed Facts, Contested Truths* (pp. 35–56). Routledge.
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Despite Instagram's primarily visual character, less than a fourth of the analysed corpus does pictorially formulate the issue. Content re-frames climate change-related visuals used and established by the media according to the denier narrative. Thus negative reflexivity is also manifest at the level of visual communication through the large-scale recycling of images. Rhetorically humour and irony are the main weapons of this communication, which helps far-right movements and groups to become dominant actors in internet culture.

Introduction

Although a strong scientific consensus exists on anthropogenic climate change (Cook et al., 2016), a not insignificant minority denies it. Previous research has examined the issue concerning various demographic indicators and found that political-ideological attitudes correlate most clearly with climate beliefs (Poortinga et al., 2019). Right-wing populist political forces in both the US and Europe are obstructing the mitigation of the consequences of climate change, as their leaders and followers are often climate sceptics (Gomes & Böhm, 2022; Kulin, Seva & Böhm, 2021; Lockwood, 2018). Fundamentally anti-elitist and anti-establishment populist rhetoric, nationalist ideology against global-scale political action, and biased critiques of capitalism are the main reasons for this. Clearly, the problems with climate change communication are related to a structural crisis in liberal democracies (Forchtner, 2019).

A shift towards social media can be observed concerning climate change and science communication in a broader sense (Treen, Williams & O'Neill, 2020). Certain features of social media, such as its openness and speed of information dissemination through user sharing, accelerate and facilitate the spread of misinformation and disinformation (Wu et al., 2016). In the case of Instagram, such features include fewer credibility cues due to the focus on visual content and rapid information processing with less time for checking veracity (Varga et al., 2020). In social media, disinformation is spread by algorithmic bias, malicious bots, spammers, individual users, organisations or astroturfers. The latter term refers to large groups of paid users hired to disseminate malicious information on social media (Treen, Williams & O'Neill, 2020). Research on climate change denial's appearance on social media has shown how scientific information is manipulated and falsified to

adopt the appearance of credibility (Anderson, 2017; Björnberg et al., 2017; Dunlap et al., 2016). Climate change is among the most important topics impacted by misinformation, which significantly affects public attitudes towards the issue (van der Linden, Leiserowitz, Rosenthal, & Maibach, 2017).

This chapter aims to provide insights into the climate denial discourse on social media, with a particular focus on its visual aspects. Thus using methods of multimodal critical discourse analysis and content analysis, this research examines the top 300 posts on Instagram tagged #climatehoax or #climatechangehoax. Combining qualitative and quantitative methodologies enables us to examine the communicative act as a whole, paying attention to textual and visual content, the ideological framework, and the underlying political and power structures in which climate denial is embedded. The main question of this study is: What ideological framework is climate denial discourse embedded in and how is the topic represented visually in social media? The way people think about climate change and their perceived role of responsibility determines public policies in relation to climate change mitigation and adaptation. In the age of social media this is increasingly being communicated visually. The web of diverse conspiracy theories linked to climate denial identified in this research is being effectively exploited by the far right to obstruct environmental policy making on climate change mitigation and adaptation, one of the biggest and most pressing issues of our time. The findings of this research will contribute to understanding the patterns, ideologies and power structures behind the communication of climate denial, and could help to develop strategies to counter them.

Interestingly, even though every content analysed was tagged #climatehoax or #climatechangehoax, less than half of the posts related to climate change and its denial, and only 22 % did so visually. This is because climate change denial is presented in social media as an element of a well-defined set of conspiracy theories that are politically and ideologically associated with the far right. These conspiracy theories can be linked to the denial of basic scientific facts, the questioning of political elites and organisations of military, economic or social power (e.g. NATO, UN), the rejection of liberal values and hatred of certain religious minorities. Based on my findings, I argue that even if climate denial is formulated pictorially on Instagram, it is mostly through the reuse and recycling of well-known imagery of climate change, such as memetic versions of Greta Thunberg, pictures of weather events and images accompanying articles from news media. Thus visual communication is not creating and using an original iconography,

and contains climate denialism only in captions or other added textual elements.

Before introducing the case, selection process and research methods used, I will briefly address previous research findings on climate scepticism, its relation to political forces and ideologies, and its communication through social media.

Climate scepticism and the (far)right

Climate sceptics are not a homogenous group. Various studies group climate sceptics differently according to their attitudes to the scientific arguments, the political and economic implications of addressing the issue, and the severity of climate change. According to Poortinga and colleagues (2019), scepticism can be related to climate change's trend, attribution or impact. Björnberg (2017) adds to this the fourth category of consensus, which labels the radical group of climate deniers, who simply question the existence of climate change. In this corpus, the latter predominates, arguing that climate change has no anthropogenic causes or does not exist but is merely the fabrication of alarmist environmentalists and an elusive political elite.

Research has shown that conservative activists are less engaged with the topic of climate change and much more likely to share climate scepticism than liberals (Carvalho, 2007; Dotson, Jacobson, Kaid & Carlton, 2012; McCright, Dunlap, & Marquart-Pyatt, 2016; Painter & Gavin, 2016; Barkemayer et al., 2017; Han et al. 2017). Examining the climate sceptic communication of conservative think tanks, Boussalis and colleagues (2016) found that it has grown exponentially in the 15 years studied and goes beyond questioning the scientific consensus to challenging the legitimacy of policies. When exploring the roots of right-wing populist forces' climate scepticism, the structuralist approach and the ideological explanation are considered (Lockwood, 2017). Research examining the significance of nationalism in the political ideology of the right concludes that a doctrine that emphasises national sovereignty is fundamentally opposed to taking transnational action against climate change as a global issue (Huber, 2020; Kulin, Johansson & Dunlap, 2021). In Western countries, research has found that people's political affiliations primarily determine public perceptions of climate change. In Anglophone countries, the Democrat-Republican, or right-left divide on climate change is more potent than in Europe, where a

milder polarisation of this type mainly pertains to Western Europe (Kulin, Johansson & Dunlap, 2021). In the US in particular, but also in other Anglo-phone countries, climate scepticism is the flagship of science scepticism and science denialism, which is promoted by politically motivated groups with powerful financial support (McCright & Dunlap, 2011, Van der Linden, 2017). This network of actors, also called the denial machine (Elsasser & Dunlap, 2013) and the Merchants of Doubt (Van der Linden et al. 2017), is divided by Björnberg(2017), into six partially overlapping categories, namely scientists, government, media, industry, political and religious organisations and the public. The anthropogenic causes or mere existence of climate change is denied by a small group of scientists, who are typically not part of the scientific community, often not belonging to scientific associations but working for think tanks. Unsurprisingly, science questioning anthropogenic climate change is propagated by industrial actors interested in coal and oil mining and car manufacturing (Björnberg, 2017). This campaign-like tide of misinformation is also prominent in online social media, contributing to the depoliticisation and polarisation of climate change opinion and hindering the increasingly urgent action to mitigate its consequences.

Previous research on social media communication of climate change has disproportionately focused on platforms centring around textual information, particularly on Twitter (Pearce et al. 2019). These studies examined communication sources and the phenomena of polarisation, echo chambers and climate scepticism. They concluded that although there has long been concern that social media is reshaping the media structure in such a way that the role of professional news sources is diminishing, mainstream news sites remain the most dominant sources in climate change communication when considering external sources cited on Twitter (Newman, 2017). When considering the sources of re-shared posts within Twitter, the picture changes and laic users (i.e., users unrelated to science or media) are in the majority. Research by Williams and colleagues (Williams et al., 2015) used network analysis to examine the spread of five climate change-related hashtags on Twitter. It concluded that the most active Twitter users tend to be both climate activists and sceptics, with a tendency to form solid opinions and cluster in like-minded groups, leading to the polarisation of communication. By analogy, the corpus analysed presumably belongs to a vociferous minority on Instagram.

Cases, data, and methods

Case selection & data

My research aims to explore the communicative acts used by climate sceptics on Instagram. Visual content consumption, production and sharing is common on social media. Despite this, there are but a few examples (Allgeier, 2019 in the case of YouTube; Hermann, Rhein & Dorsch, 2022; Vraga et al., 2020 in the case of Instagram) when researchers investigated YouTube and Instagram content in the field of climate change communication (Björnberg et al. 2017; Pearce et al. 2019; Treen, Williams & O'Neill, 2020) and none have focused solely on climate scepticism or denial. Gibbs and colleagues found that while there are many similarities between platforms in social media (e.g. use of hashtags, sharing and following features, ability to create user accounts, etc.), there is a specific grammar, style and logic unique to the platform. The notion of platform vernacular extends the characteristic features of social media, such as self-representation and culture of participation described by Burgess and colleagues (2006), to the possibilities of creative expression. The platform binds Creative expression; thus, vernacular can be considered an extension of focus from the platform's policies and politics to the user language. The vernacular language of the platform is defined by the software and hardware that ensure the functioning and use of the social media platform, but the communication habits and practices of the users also shape it. Initially, the platform was associated with thematic and aesthetic determinants such as the dominance of selfies and influencers and the staging aesthetic and use of photo filters (Rogers, 2021). However, we will see that neither of these features of the platform vernacular is present in the subculture of Instagram studied here. From a technical point of view, Instagram differs from other social media platforms in that it is designed specifically for mobile use, both in the case of the recipient and the content producer, which, together with the dominance of images, implies a fast, relatively superficial reception. Content for Instagram is designed for fast scrolling due to the vertical orientation of the platform's design. These characteristics can influence the way users perceive information and misinformation. The factor of credibility plays a different role in superficial, fast and primarily visual communication than in verbal information. The former does not leave room for intellectual reflection, but rather communicates

on an emotional basis, which in our case is effectively achieved through humour and satire.

As a visual social platform that has become extremely popular since its launch in 2010, Instagram had 1.21 billion active users in 2021 (Dixon, 2023). Its popularity provides reason enough to consider the content shared here when considering the spread of misinformation. Research on political communication has shown that during the 2016 US presidential election, this platform and other social media sites were involved in the Russian disinformation campaign. This makes it clear that content spread here goes well beyond aestheticising images, for which the platform initially was created (Howard et al., 2019) and has become a visual political marketing tool (Highfield & Leaver, 2016). In addition to influencers, brands and individual users, Instagram now features media organisations with institutional accounts. When designing this research, I have chosen not to filter users to include views and communication practices of far-right individuals who are sceptical towards larger right-wing media organisations (e.g. FOX News, Breitbart, Prager u) and these professional content creators. Thus, I filtered hashtags for explicitly climate sceptical content (e.g. #climatescam, #climatehoax, #climateagenda, #climatechangescam, #climatefraud etc.) and looked at the two most commonly used hashtags: #climatechangehoax and #climatehoax.³

These tags led to content mainly uploaded by individual users and thus provided diversity in the production site of communication. However, the network analysis of content producers was not part of this research. Data was collected manually on 22.04. and 24.04.2023. I analysed the first 300 posts of the top results of each hashtag (n=600). Instagram offers the “top” hashtags alongside the most “recent” content and “reels”. Since 2016, Instagram, like many other social media platforms, has shifted from displaying posts chronologically to displaying them in an order sorted by the algorithm. This makes the underlying logic to rankings, such as the top feed, unintelligible, but this option was the most appropriate for the research as a default setting, which users most likely encounter. Algorithmic rankings like this are not without human input, and they are formed according to the intentions of many actors. Ranking culture (Rieder et al., 2017), characteristic of social

3 13158 posts were found using the #climatechangehoax and 8633 using the hashtag climatehoax on 17.04.2023.

media, reinforces popularity and, in this sense, is descriptive, performative and affirmative.

Research methods

To gain a deeper understanding of climate sceptic communication, this research combined quantitative content analysis with the qualitative methods of multimodal critical discourse analysis. This research method enables us to examine the communicative acts in their complexity as it seeks to explore how discourse sustains, counters or rebuilds social and political power relations within which it appears (Fairclough, 2015 [1989]). As we shall see, this proves particularly useful for investigating the ideological embeddedness of this community, tying together climate denialism with conspiracy theories circulated by populist right-wing political forces. When dealing with the highly politicised topic of climate change, it is essential to investigate underlying power structures shaping the discourse around it. Hence despite being a global-scale problem, climate change unevenly impacts society. The multimodal approach was necessary to examine the content, including visual, textual and aural elements. Even though Instagram centres on visual communication, images are always accompanied by tags and often captions. The latter depends on the time, interests and preferences of the users, but it can be said that the verbal context of the shared image cannot be ignored, as well as "aural" features such as the configuration, functions and design of the platform, which I have already addressed concerning the platform vernacular. This multimodal ensemble collectively shapes meanings (Domingo et al., 2020).

First content analysis was used to code the posts into the most frequently occurring categories according to their formal and semantic features and the source of the content.

Differentiating content along formal features meant distinguishing posts with no pictorial elements (i.e. text only (12%), memes (17%), other posts with images (65 %) and the variety of videos (6%). The latter was not included in the analysis any further as this first step of coding as it would have required a different research method.

Communicative sources-built the following categories: re-shared news (10 %), social media materials from another platform (7%) and content

that has not been added from another source (i.e. original content: 82%⁴). Considering communicative sources was essential to understand how main actors of power structures, such as the media industry, affect structures in discourse. Accounting for these is crucial from the perspective of critical discourse analysis (van Dijk, 2002).

It would not have been possible to categorise the posts based solely on their iconography, as many of them could only be interpreted in conjunction with their caption or textual elements on the image. In terms of the results, this means that the platform specialised in pictorial storytelling is frequently being used to share text messages in this case. Thus semantic features of posts built a set of categories (see Figure 1) such as pictures of the sky with kerosene strips (i.e. chemtrail category), posts about a flattened globe or an artificial, “fake” space (i.e. flat earth category). Posts that, in line with populist narratives, draw attention to the machinations of a money-hungry elite that is attacking the lives of ordinary citizens, changing the weather, feeding the people bugs etc. were tagged anti-establishment, posts which were explicitly against socialism or communism or democrats (i.e. the political party in the US) were tagged anti-leftist and content humiliating, ridiculing or attacking environmental activists and their issues (e.g. use of renewable energy, electric vehicles) were tagged anti-environmentalist. Content claiming climate change doesn't exist because of certain weather events (e.g. it's cold or snowy) can be considered a subcategory of posts labelled climate denier. The latter label was used for content which centred on climate denial as opposed to posts which barely touched on it on the level of hashtags.

4 It is important to note that the latter category includes posts by an NFT artist, a self-proclaimed Dutch artist who has flooded one half of his sample (i.e.: the one tagged #climatehoax). The images uploaded by him, which on average receive 20-35 likes are portraits with infantile aesthetics. With one exception, they do not address climate change in their visual content or description, and the hashtags also only include the one: #climatehoax in relation to the topic of climate denial. The one exception mentioned above makes it clear however that the use of the climate denial tag is not applied by mistake or misunderstanding. Despite their overwhelming number, posts by the NFT artist are not a relevant part of the sample in terms of substance, which is why I did not include them in the research any further than this step as they were predominantly related to the art sphere and self-promotion.

Multiple images added to a single post were treated as one image in case of homogeneity, otherwise as many as the number of categories they belonged to. For posts that could be classified in multiple categories simultaneously the most characteristic category was chosen.

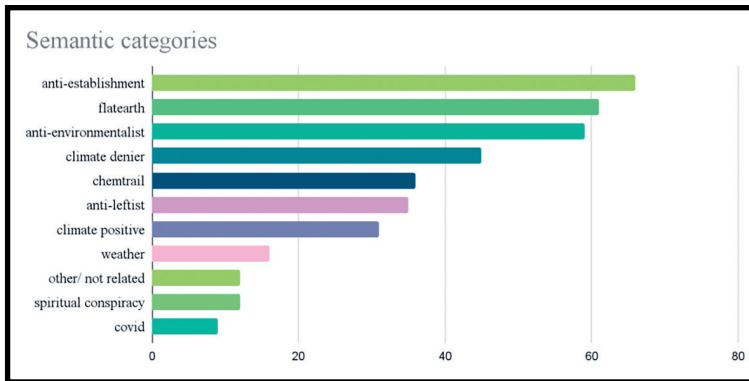


Figure 1. Semantic categories of the top 300 posts tagged either # climate-changehoax or #climatehoax, (excluding videos and content created by the “NFT artist”)

Second, the content analysis of hashtags associated with the posts tagged #climatehoax was based on an analogous principle, where hashtags with similar meanings were grouped into a single code category to make the results more readable. For example, the tags #stopspraying, #fuck-chemtrails, #toxicsky, and #chemsky all fell into the chemtrail category. I set up a total of 70 categories, of which Figure 2 represents the 14 categories with at least 20 hashtag occurrences. Here it is important to note that some uploaders add long lists of hashtags to all their posts, regardless of their visual content, to increase their posts’ views. Thus, a purely quantitative analysis of the tags shows distorted results, all the more so because hashtags are used in a way that is both ironic and informative, with many posts being tagged #climatehoax and #climatechange at the same time or, by analogy, #fossilfuels:D and #greenenergy etc.

Climate-positive posts,⁵ dominated by vegan activist content and accounted for 6% of the sample analysed, were not included in the further analysis.

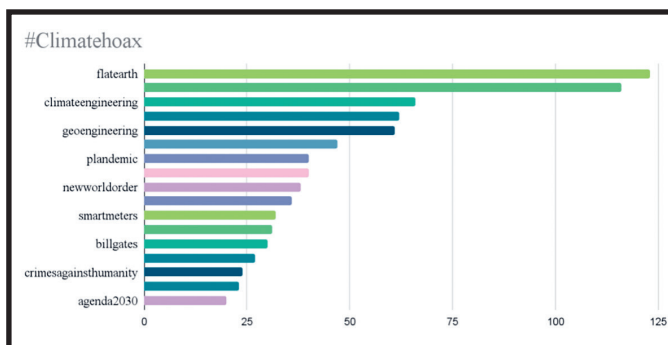


Figure 2. Most often used categories of hashtags accompanying the top 300 post results tagged #climatehoax

After coding and carefully reviewing the sample, it was striking how many posts do not address climate change beyond one or two hashtags, either visually or textually. Thus, as a third step, I categorised each post according to whether it was related to climate change denial (scepticism) beyond the two hashtags analysed and whether it was purely textual or visual (see Figure 3). This analysis didn't include videos and climate-positive content in line with the above. To get precise results here, I have grouped each post into a single category, typically the most relevant in terms of content.

Posts that were visually related to climate denial constituted less than a quarter of the sample (see Figure 3.)

In addition to reconstructing the meaning of mediatised representations, critical discourse analysis examines the social, political and power relations embedded in their production, dissemination and reception (Fairclough, 2015; Stahl & Salam, 2015). Accordingly, linking the semantic, ideological and communicative elements helped me explore the underlying power structures of the climate denial discourse and investigate questions such

5 A term I use to address communication which conforms to the reality of anthropogenic climate change.

as: Is the uploader's country of origin deductible? Is there any indication of political ideology or even party-political preferences? If content from a news media platform is being re-shared, to which political side is it attributable? Which economic, political, and ideological forces are the public figures and politicians in the image associated with? The starting point of critical discourse analysis is that both visual and verbal discourses are social constructs that shape society and at the same time are being shaped by society (Machin & Mayr, 2012). Behind seemingly neutral language and taken-for-granted assumptions, power interests can be revealed. In our case, according to the populist rhetoric of conspiracy theories, such self-evident forms are the juxtaposition of the powerful "them" and the well-aware "us". Nowhere in this paranoid theory of global intrigue, however, is the place in the power structure of those who share the theory, or even the media platform they use, called into question.

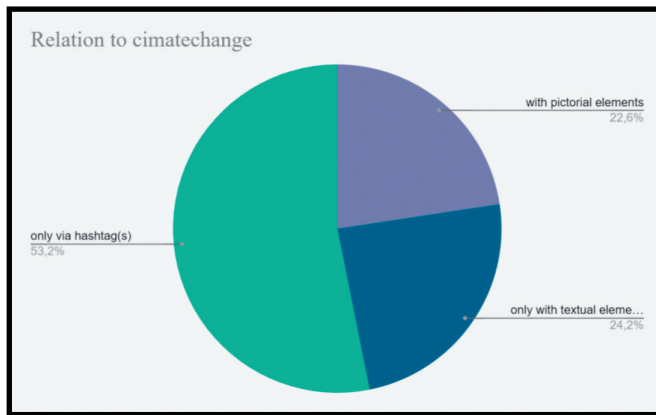


Figure 3. Posts relation to climate change (videos and climate-positive content excluded)

Analysis

Considering hashtags and visual semantic features (see Figure 1 & 2), it is clear that the empirical sample is embedded in a broader set of conspiracy theories alongside climate change denial. In social media, hashtags mark

the content of posts and act as searchable and connective elements to embed the given context in a network of ideologically, content-wise or network-wise related posts and posters. All 14 hashtag categories (e.g. chemtrails, flat Earth, depopulation, globalist agenda etc.) used at least by 20 posts are linked to far-right conspiracy theories. In addition, as Figure 3 shows, less than half of the empirical sample refers to climate denial more directly than through the use of a few hashtags, which is a sign that climate denial is often just one in a series of conspiracy theories that users attach to their posts as a matter of course. In line with these findings, the first part of the analysis will focus on the web of conspiracy theories drawn by the corpus, and the second will examine the minority of the corpus, which visually represents climate denial.

Negative referentiality – the web of conspiracy theories

Conspiracy theories are attempts to explain significant social and political events, factors and circumstances by the covert plotting of some ill-intentioned group. The conspirators can be lead politicians and any other group with perceived or actual power (Douglas et al. 2019). Besides the government, Bill Gates' name appears most frequently in the sample studied, but also organisations of global importance such as the UN, its sub-organisation, the WHO (World Health Organisation) and the WEF (World Economic Forum). It is worth noting that the latter three tags appeared mostly together, forming one category. The malevolent "they" of conspiracy theories hardly seems present in the visual language of the posts, except for Greta Thunberg and Klaus Schwab (WEF President), whose face occurs in a small fraction of the sample. Thus, the binary opposite categories of the powerful elite, "them" versus "us," which define populist rhetoric, are illuminated by references in the form of hashtags. Conspiracy theories relate to populist politics and ideas (Butter, 2022). In addition to organisations of the UN, conspiracy theories embedded in the sample examined also named Bill Gates (see figure 4.), liberals, democrats, big pharma and better-known Jewish stakeholders such as Rockefeller and George Soros in line with well-known antisemitic, far-right populist narratives. Global in nature, these theories have a national dimension only in the case of the US and Canada. Among politicians, Donald Trump is the most frequently mentioned, usually referred to as a positive character (e.g. #bringbackTrump, #DonaldTrumpisourPresident, #Trump2024). Joe Biden and Justin Trudeau are also frequently mentioned

but with negative connotations (e.g. #Trudeaumustgo #traderjoe #bidenflation #notmypresident).

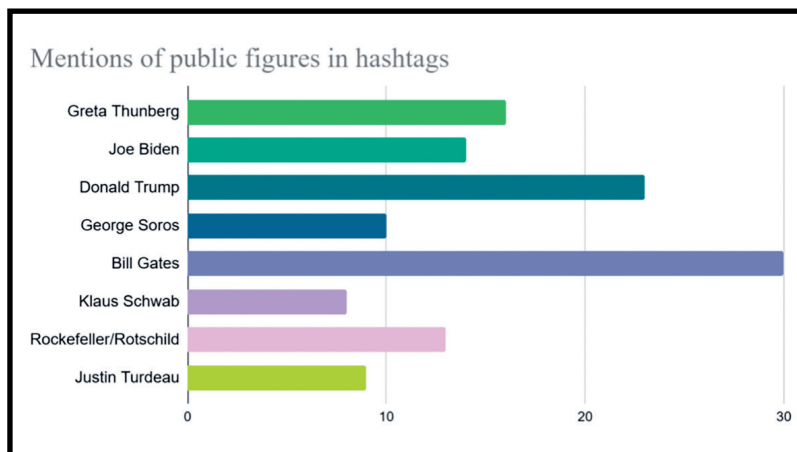


Figure 4. Mentions of public figures in hashtags

Also linked to the US is the Democrat-Republican dichotomy, of which the former appears, always demonised (e.g. #democratsshateamerica, #decmonratsdestroyamerica, #democraticcorruption), whereas the #makeamericagreatagain type of tags is linked to Donald Trump. It is important to note that the word Republican does not appear in the tags, but conservative does. The focus on the US of these hashtags can be due to the worldwide use of the English language, but the international nature of the chemtrail posts with a large number of Slovenian and British uploads suggests that mainstream international interest in US domestic politics may be driving the corpus. Therefore if the evil other has a nationality, it must be American, but most often, it is an undefined actor of the global political and economic elite. It can also be argued that ideologically, the uploaders identify themselves as conservative, opposing liberalism, globalism and environmentalism.

Consequently, minority identity politics is also being attacked (e.g. #homosexualagenda, #wokeagenda) and occurs in the web of conspiracy theories defined by tags among posts whose subject is unrelated to this. Sometimes socialism and communism appear in the corpus, either as tags or a few times in the form of images, always with negative connotations. In one post,

even the symbol of the sickle and the hammer is depicted; in another, Marx occurs as a meme, which pictures the idea of climate hysteria as the tip of the iceberg of Marxist ideology. However, these historical and philosophical references are rare as outsiders to the mainstream of popular culture. The general distrust of experts and politicians is a peculiarity of conspiracy theories, and far-right ideological groups often propagate conspiracy theories to promote their views (Fuchs, 2021; Ekman, 2022; Butter & Knight, 2020).

Recently, conspiracy theories have drifted from the media periphery into the mainstream (Butter & Knight, 2020). Reasons for this include the transformation of the media landscape, i.e. the rise of social media and the weakening of the traditional gatekeeper role. In the online space, social media platforms legitimise conspiracy theories discursively and interactively through likes and shares and technically through algorithmic processes (Ekman, 2022). However, as Fuchs (2021) points out, social media is not a generator of conspiracy theories, merely a carrier of symptoms of a highly exposed society prone to these. This, he argues, stems from the negative dialectic of capitalist society. Content uploaders in the sample examined are not organisations but individual account users. However, due to a lack of resources, this research did not include a network analysis of the users, so it cannot give an idea of whether there are any and, if so, which interest groups are behind the distribution of misinformation and disinformation. The corpus as a whole suggests that anthropogenic climate change deniers do not only deny science in this respect but also reject the existence of gravity (*#gravityisfake*), the sphericity of the Earth (10 % of visuals, 15% of hashtags, i.e., *#flatearth # itsflat*, etc.) and do not believe in the existence of space (*#spaceisfake*). Contradictory denying scientific facts is often coupled with seemingly rational counterarguments, a phenomenon Fuchs calls irrational rationality (Fuchs, 2021: pp. 72), a marker of conspiracy theories. This is also evident in the 2% of posts that use some data visualisation for the sake of credibility. An example of this is a graph showing the composition of air, which is intended to show that since there is much more nitrogen and oxygen in the air than carbon dioxide, there is no carbon emission-induced climate change.

Mostly, memes popularise the flat-earth theory and the “chemtrail” conspiracy. Flat Earth memes recycle the globe, one of the most commonly used visual elements in climate change communication and environmental communication in general, albeit with sceptic captions or in a flattened form. Under the chemtrail conspiracy (6 % of visuals, 14% of hashtags),

a primarily unspecified “they” inject aerosols containing various metals from planes into the air that obscure the sun, are toxic and cause vitamin D deficiency. The theory is illustrated in the sample examined with images of slightly cloudy skies or skies with a kerosene streak from an aircraft, but it also takes a surprisingly diverse form in the meme version (see Figure 5). Even though the sample is politically leaning to the (far) right, there is ambivalence about the political nature of chemtrail conspiracy. While fears of a new world order and overly powerful governments are indeed associated with the right, environmental concerns and objections against corporations are more tied to the political left (Cairns, 2016).

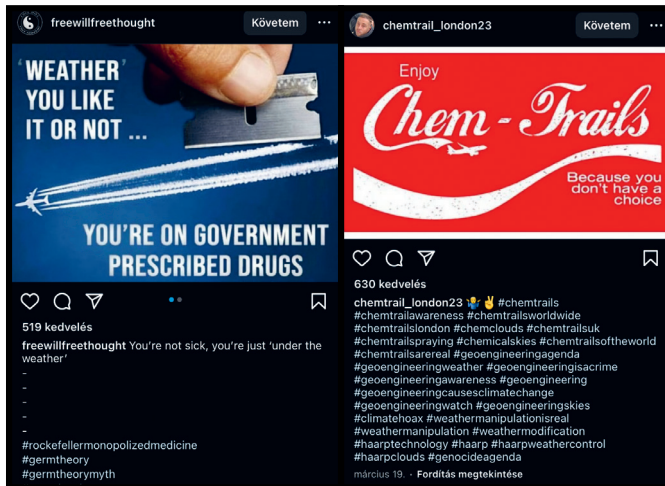


Figure 5 Left: [@freewillfreethought] (2022, December 11). You are not sick, and you're under the weather. Meme[Screenshot by author]. Instagram. <https://www.instagram.com/p/CmAe0-INb4S/> Right: [@chemtrail_london23] (2023, March 19). #chemtrails #chemtrailawarness #chemtrailsworldwide. Meme[Screenshot by author]. Instagram. <https://www.instagram.com/p/Cp-nMEdtqA7/>

It is not only the accompanying texts appearing on memes that are necessary to decode their meaning, but also the contextualising web of meanings defined by the accompanying hashtags. Analysing hashtags reveals how users connect the purpose of the post to other popular points

in conspiracy theories. Thus, for example, the meme that primarily denotes fears about technology describes not only 5g-related conteos but points to climate denial, mandatory bug eating as part of an environmentalist agenda, the communist world conspiracy and even the plan to exterminate humanity (see figure 6).



Figure 6 [jesus_murphy306]. (2023, March 4.) #digitalslavery #eatthebugs #worldgovernment [Meme][Screenshot by author]. Instagram. <https://www.instagram.com/p/CpYI78AOsYS/>

The sample is characterised by a robust negative referentiality, which stems from the fact that although conspiracy theories promote an ideology and world explanation, they primarily take a countering position. They oppose scientific facts and the social, political and economic institutions. In the case of climate change, this means, in addition to the scientific position, they oppose and query the whole scientific society, the environmentalists and politicians and other actors of the establishment making climate-related laws and enforcing these.

The role of the media is also controversial among the deniers because although at the level of denotation, hashtags only make the media appear in the part of the conspirator (#mediagenda, #mediacorruption, #mediapropaganda,

#fakenews), a high percentage (10%) of the posts contain news from media organisations, which themselves are appearing on a platform of (social) media. In this context, it is essential to note that the snippets taken from the news media are often print screens of texts, which reinforces the verbal focus of climate-denier content on Instagram. The source of news shows a high diversity, with CNN and CNBC appearing as well as (far)-right outlets such as Fox News, Breitbart or PragerU. However, the former are not presented as fake news but are used to justify the exposure of various agendas.

The issue of masks and lockdowns, i.e. linking climate denial to COVID-19, is an excellent example of how social media pseudo-news and conspiracy theories incorporate current phenomena. This connotation begins with the demonisation of the green agenda, fear-mongering against climate change policies and culminates in the dystopia of a climate change lockdown (#climatelockdown). The coronavirus epidemic was accompanied by a proliferation of conspiracy theories (Bierwiazzonek, Gundersen & Kunst, 2022) that formulated and disseminated theories about the origin of the coronavirus (#plandemic), control policies and vaccines. The list of conspiracy theories about SARS-CoV-2 (Fuchs, 2021) includes that Israel, the Jews, the Rothschild family or George Soros developed the virus to take over the world. Among these, George Soros, the Rothschilds and the Rockefellers are also repeatedly mentioned in posts tagged #climatehoax. Bill Gates is one of the central figures of conspiracy theories on COVID-19 and the most frequently cited person on the level of hashtags in the sample analysed. There is also an overlap in the fear-mongering around 5G, which is blamed for the COVID-19 outbreak and occurs in 4% of the hashtags in the corpus. According to COVID-related conspiracies, the deliberate manufacturing of the virus aimed to create a new world order in which people everywhere are monitored and tracked with microchips (Fuchs, 2021). Although microchips rarely appear in the content analysed, the new world order is among the frequently occurring hashtags and is regularly mentioned with other prominent hashtags such as population agenda, globalist agenda, and conspiracy theory. The latter is used both ironically and seriously, i.e. it is both an awareness of their stigmatisation and ironic rejection of it and a form of self-stigmatisation, signalling identification with the group of conspiracy theory believers. From a discursive point of view, fear-mongering, in-group victimisation and out-group demonisation characterise this set of conspiracy theories. The corpus is imbued with a sense of outsidership and excellence, indicated by the rhetorical terms wake

up, awaken, when will you wake up and its sheep counterpart. Claiming oneself as awakened is a common mode of identification in the narratives of conspiracy theories. There is even a group calling themselves We Are Awakening (Harambam, 2020). Barkun (2013) distinguishes three types of conspiracy theories: systemic, event-related, and super. Climate denial is a systemic conspiracy theory associated with conspiracy theories about COVID-19, 5G, smartmeters, Bill Gates, government intrigue, leftist evil, malicious pharmaceutical companies, chemtrails, and the rejection of the sphericity of the Earth. These systemic conspiracy theories are randomly combined along the hashtags forming an incomplete and self-contradictory super conspiracy theory whereby the left and the governments of the day are harming people with chemicals and viruses to create a new world order, and the scientists paid by the depopulation agenda are spreading lies about anthropogenic climate change and spherical Earth. The conspiracy is motivated by money and power, but the theory does not address how the extermination of humans would serve these ends.

Articulating climate denial visually on Instagram

Since this research aimed to explore the visual language of climate denial communication as part of the discourse on Instagram, I will focus on the posts that visually articulate climate denial in this part of the analysis. As an analogy to the most iconic object of climate change communication, one could ask: What's their polar bear like? Does this group even have its iconography, and if so, how does it appear on Instagram, one of the least researched but prevalent social media platforms?

As aforementioned, 77% of the corpus is only textually related to climate denial; thus, less than a fourth of the canon does visually formulate the issue, which might indicate that denying this global phenomenon visually is just as tricky as claiming its existence. Climate-denier iconography in the analysed sample tends to reuse and rewrite the imagery used by climate-positive visual communication. The majority of visual climate change denialist posts use existing social media (8%) and news media (15%) images or rewrite internet memes (27%). Research on climate-positive imagery found that media uses a small number of sources, primarily images from commercial image agencies (O'Neill, 2017). Climate change results in a well-defined iconography, e.g., melting glaciers, polar bears,

globe, smoke stacks, deforestation, melting ice, glaciers etc.(O'Neill, 2017, Wang et al., 2018). It is also indicated that a common argument among climate sceptics is to deny the existence of climate change by referring to actual weather events such as snow storms occurring in seasons or locations where it's supposed to be warmer (Lawrence & Estow, 2017; Pearce et al., 2019). Accordingly, a proportion (8%) of visual-climate denier messages in the sample analysed were also pictorially based on weather phenomena. From this data, it can be concluded that, on the one hand, climate denial on Instagram is articulated through textual rather than visual messages. On the other hand, negative referentiality is also manifest at the level of the climate denial imagery in the corpus.

Climate sceptics re-frame the climate change-related visuals used and established by the media according to their narrative. Accordingly, the topos and personalities of a mediated, global iconography of climate change re-appear in the visual communication denying climate change, which is not surprising given that this communication itself takes place on a global social media platform. This is illustrated by the fact that —with the exception of two posts showing Al Gore— posts that depict climate denial visually with a public figure (4% of the whole corpus) feature Greta Thunberg. The Swedish activist who has become an iconic figure since the 2019 climate protests is being viciously attacked by climate deniers on Instagram, not only visually by committing virtual violence by disfiguring her face but also verbally. Her persona is identified with climate change as a whole. That is, by portraying her as an incompetent and ridiculous child, the climate change phenomenon is ridiculed. The rhetorical device of impersonation seems to help visualise the otherwise abstract climate change phenomenon. Thunberg's face often appears distorted (e.g. as Gollum or as an old lady or blended with the face of right-wing political influencer Ben Shapiro, etc.) and embedded in a meme. Meme versions of her often make fun of her speech which she held in 2019 at U.N.'s Climate Action Summit in New York City, in which she repeatedly asked world leaders, "How dare you?" i.e. take away the future of generations for the sake of profit. Her anger, young age and solid facial expression are being ridiculed as she is depicted as a character of *Game of Thrones*, a pop cultural reference and, at the same time, part of climate change's iconography (i.e. weather events, snow).

Memes recycle, parody and paraphrase elements of visual mass culture. They are also characterised by easy reproducibility, humour and, from an

aesthetic point of view, a lack of sophistication (Rowan, 2015; Zhang and Pinto, 2021, Shifman, 2013). In the latter context, it is essential to note that the corpus uses language which differs from the platform vernacular of Instagram in every aspect. There is no documentary value to the images; they are not aestheticising and do not refer to the 'now' but convey knowledge – albeit false knowledge. Their communication is not about aesthetic pleasure or capturing a moment but conveying information and persuasion. Aesthetics is wholly subordinated to their rhetorical function, so they often work with memes or texts superimposed on posts.

Despite their apparent lightness and humour, memes often express criticism, concern and messages aimed at challenging the hegemony of the status quo. The subversive quality of memes is also prominent in the corpus under study as they critique the establishment in this context (see Figure 7). Conspiracy theories born digitally often expand from one issue to another, such as the theory of the Great Reset, often used as a tag in the corpus. The latter approach initially alleged that the evil elite deliberately engineered Covid 19, but later on, it expanded to climate change, inflation related to renewables, and the economic measurements taken against Russia since its war on Ukraine, etc. The second print screen of Figure 7 illustrates how a single post can communicate central ideological, public policy and economic guidelines and preferences with a well-known meme character. This post ties together conspiracy theories related to covid 19, climate change, the war in Ukraine and inflation; simultaneously, it opposes leftist ideology. The latter is visually formulated through a mohawk hairstyle associated with the punks belonging politically to the far left, whereas its caption reads "Climate-socialism!". The anti-leftist message is made even more explicit by hashtags such as #liberalismisamentaldisorder, and the political affiliation of the uploader is made more concrete by hashtags such as #makeamerica-greatagain and #trumpismypresident. The figure with glasses blinded by the Ukrainian flag, with the caption "War with Russia!" is a clear statement in favour of the Russians. It reinforces the official Russian narrative that the West is at war with Russia and that they are not the aggressors against Ukraine. This post functions as both a world explanation and an ideological creed in the meme section and also contains a clear party-political statement at the hashtag level. In addition, the uploader who takes a pro-Trump and strongly anti-Biden and anti-Democrat stance (i.e. #bidensucks #democrats-destroyameirca) identifies himself with the hashtags #blackconservative and #blacksfortrump. The echoing of climate denialist, anti-vaccination, and

anti-mask-wearing, pro-Russian narratives by a Trumpist user illustrates the radicalisation of mainstream right-wing politics and the prevalence of previously marginalised conspiracy theories along populist narratives.

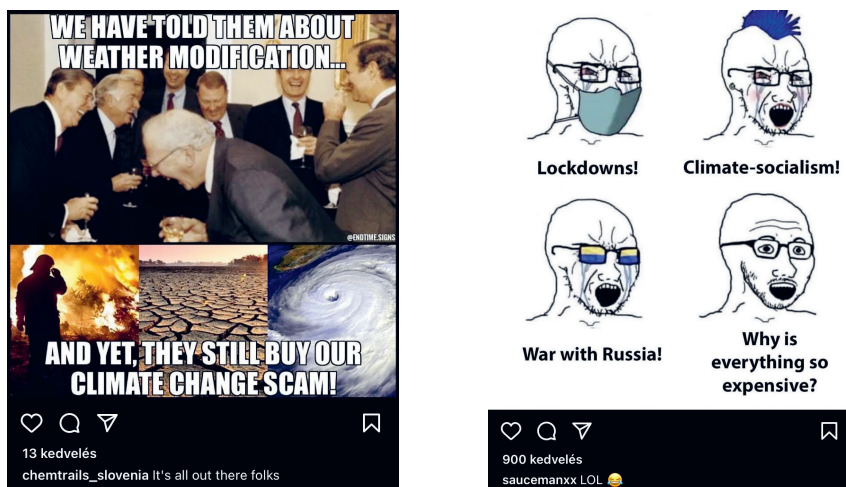


Figure 7 from left to right: [*@chemtrails_slovenia*] (2022, November 15). *It's all out there, folks. Meme*[Screenshot by author]. Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/Ck_Lx6SNU4E/
 [*@saucemanxx*] (2022, November 8). *LOL. Meme*[Screenshot by author]. Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/Ckrn_pxNlL2/

Conclusion

Climate denial communication on Instagram is characterised by negative reflexivity that embeds scepticism about anthropogenic climate change in a broad web of conspiracy theories. Among these, science-denying flat Earth theories and the chemtrail theory linked to the depopulation agenda are dominant and have already defined the spread of misinformation in relation to COVID-19 (Fuchs, 2021). These logically flawed conspiracy theories, linked to far-right populist ideology, culminate in a super conspiracy theory, through the use of hashtags. In contrast to previous research on climate scepticism on Twitter, the content here is not event-driven but abstract and systemic.

Climate sceptic content on Instagram is unlike the platform vernacular in that it is not aestheticising and does not aim to capture a moment in time. Instead, it is text-centric and aims to be informative – be it fake information. Texts appear as part of memes, as re-shared news from media outlets and Twitter posts, in the form of image-less textual posts, captions, hashtags, and images. The extensive use of the latter often gives the base a surplus meaning beyond the visual content, placing it in an ideological framework. These groups of hashtags point to the terrain of systemic conspiracy theories. The platform's internal logic indirectly helps promote these as hashtag aggregation is done to achieve greater reach and popularity. The verbal nature of climate denial communication on Instagram (77% of the corpus is only textually related to climate denial) is reinforced by the re-sharing content from news media sites (10% of the sample) and other social media sites (7%) which draw on a variety of sources. Besides news organisations representing right-wing ideology, such as Fox News and Breitbart, other more objective news sources are also used (e.g. CNN, BBC). The latter's content is redistributed in a revealing way, not to challenge the veracity of the news but to point out and oppose the measures they describe. Despite the frequent citation of professional news sources, concerns about traditional media losing its gatekeeper role must be acknowledged, as laic users generate the vast majority of content.

Results show that climate denial is hardly visualised (less than a quarter of the corpus). Still, if it is, it is rarely through original imagery but rather through the distortion or re-framing of particular visual elements of existing climate communication accompanied by textual information. Thus negative reflexivity is also manifest at the level of visual communication through the large-scale recycling of images. Image recycling includes memes and the re-framing of familiar images of climate change in the news media, such as depictions of weather events, photos of sea level rise and arctic ice melting, politicians and other public figures, most prominently Greta Thunberg. The Swedish activist has become an impersonator of climate change in climate-positive as well as climate-denial communication. Functioning as a condensed symbol, in the latter, her gestures, face and messages are viciously attacked and ridiculed in the form of humorous memes. The imagery and the hashtags applied also indicate that climate deniers are using a globally usable, sufficiently general and accessible language, compatible with social media, which recycles mainstream media's climate communication to suit their own purposes.

Humour, irony and mediatisation are now the primary weapons of radical right-wing movements in communication. According to Jenkins et al. (2013), humour and parody are among the most critical factors that help a given content to spread in a networked culture because they create a community among those who understand the joke. This light-hearted tone marks a significant change from using national socialist ideological symbols which presupposed historical knowledge. This use of mass culture as a message carrier, a medium and a point of reference has made far-right movements and groups dominant actors in internet culture.

Further research exploring the visual communication used by climate sceptics on different social media and news media platforms could shed light on the reasons for the presence of image recycling as well as add more detail on the source of this type of misinformation.

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Platform-based technological determinism as an extralinguistic component of the digital language¹

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Technological developments and innovations are constantly affecting and changing the way users communicate in online spaces. This way technological determinism can be considered an extralinguistic factor of language development. In this work the model of technological determinism is presented for the use in the field of linguistics, presenting the three main affecting levels and covering the level of software related determinism in a more detailed context, illustrated with examples in which forms can an online platform change the language.

Technological determinism (TD) is a multifactorial phenomenon studied in various fields of science, including sociology (Schroeder, 2018), philosophy and economics (Bimber, 1990). The development of technological tools has a continuous impact on progress, including linguistic processes, as well as the directions and forms of changes in linguistic stock. In this research I attempt to prove that the growing popularity of online platforms and their active integration into everyday interpersonal communication plays an active role in individual language use. The goal of this research is to demonstrate the significant impact of technology and technological possibilities on the language by examining the influences of technological innovations

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- 1 Based on: Veres, B. (2025). Platform-based technological determinism as an extralinguistic component of the digital language. In Gy. Rágyanszki (Ed.), *Fiatal Szlavisták Budapesti Nemzetközi Konferenciája X.* (pp. 138–143).
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(human created intellectual or physical tools, devices, or platforms) on internet users' ways of communication and their linguistic expressions. I intend to create a model for illustrating the different levels of TD.

In media and communication studies the scientific use of the term "technological determinism" first appeared in the works of Canadian communication researchers Harold Innis and Marshall McLuhan. In McLuhan's works, the developmental process of humanity is divided into several epochs, each defined by a communication-enhancing technology: 1) the age of tribes; 2) the age of literacy; 3) the age of printing; and 4) the age of electronics. According to McLuhan, the development of these epochs does not appear as a continuum with transitions but is clearly disrupted by the emergence of different innovations. McLuhan names writing, the invention of the printing press, and the first telegraph as the most important technologies, which laid the foundation for modern telecommunications and later became the basis for the development of mass media and modern communication. However, it must be noted that these inventions, both in their time and today, have had a significant impact not only on the media and language itself but also on the organisation of society as a whole, and this is where their importance lies (McLuhan, 1964). The impact of technological inventions on social changes was noticed earlier by Innis, when he pointed out that larger infrastructural changes in less populated areas (in this case, the construction of connecting railway networks) were accompanied by significant expansion of the cultural development and opportunities of local societies, just as technological developments also influence the linguistic and communicative expressions of users (Innis, 1951). One of the byproducts of TD can be considered digilect (from the words digital+dialect), that is, the emergence of a specialised online language variant with its own rules and common features, which I will discuss in more detail later. The internet, its digital spaces, and their continuously expanding content and service offerings should be used as a comparison to the technological innovations of the previous historical eras, particularly the key invention that facilitated global information dissemination: Gutenberg's invention of the printing press. Based on the views of McLuhan mentioned earlier, the global expansion of digital space, or any information technology innovation, has become an indicator of a paradigm shift extending across all levels of society. This is supported by the many examples of TD observed in everyday life, such as the use of digital linguistic realities in analogue language, or any form of online real-time information dissemination. Of course, other

communication tools such as video chat solutions, home office workspaces, or the continuously evolving methodologies of digital education can also be included here. Professor Jose Luis Orihuela from the University of Navarra mentions in connection with e-communication paradigms that compared to traditional media and its tools, the most significant changes lie in the relationship with users, i.e., interactivity (which can be attributed to Web 2.0), “new languages” such as online language use (digilect), and new grammar (hypertexts linking and leading to one another), and he also emphasises the importance of the fact that the changing communication paradigms also expand the audience of accessible information (Orihuela, 2004, p. 126).

The emergence of books facilitating broad information access brought a cultural paradigm shift which was similar to that of the late 2000s when the rise of smart devices made internet access available to everyday people almost constantly (Bory, 2020). In my view, the most significant difference between these two forms of communication today lies in their accessibility. Reading a book requires obtaining it, along with all the associated production and acquisition costs. While internet access also comes at a price, once paid, it grants practically unlimited access to information (excluding paid or restricted content), allowing users to freely upload and download information, thereby realising all the possibilities described by Web 2.0 (Murugesan, 2007; Guld, 2021, p. 51).

At the moment when a user establishes a web presence (by creating any form of content), they themselves become part of the media, an active member and driving force of the digital community. Moreover, every content creator becomes a source of information. The produced content can be referenced – either through direct copying, linguistic adaptation, modification, or in the strictest sense, as citations in comments, images, articles or videos through hypertextual elements such as hashtags, links, and embedded links. The types and modes of published content have expanded significantly over the past decade, coinciding with the widespread adoption of smartphones and constant internet access. The primary paradigm shift revolves around audience- or user-centeredness, which enables the realisation of Web 2.0 (Orihuela, 2004, p. 126).

Just as literary texts across genres provide material for philological analysis, so do digital texts. Although they appear in much larger quantities, their fundamental structures have not changed drastically compared to printed literature – aside from trends within various subcultures or conventions affecting broader social groups (localised, national, or platform specific

norms). However, a major difference lies in the complexity of media content representing communication. Traditional media primarily use either text or images, whereas modern internet platforms predominantly publish multimedia content, blending different elements to create new modes of information transmission. Orihuela argues that digital presence is inherently multimedia, as most online communication incorporates multiple expressive tools simultaneously (Orihuela, 2004, p. 126).

Beyond evolving trends and digital fashions, another key aspect of the paradigm shift in communication is its temporal placement (Orihuela, 2004, p. 128). Traditional means of media, e.g. newspapers were published weekly or daily, TV programs followed fixed schedules. The internet changed this, allowing content to be produced and consumed in real-time, both locally and globally. A prime example of this is the concept of “live” coverage, whether through live news articles from media outlets or individuals instantly posting videos from events (such as concerts), making them accessible to other users at the same moment across multiple platforms (Guld, 2021, pp. 37-45).

Following McLuhan, several researchers have emphasised that technological advancements alone do not drive cultural, social or linguistic evolution; rather, humans and innovations develop in constant interaction. Gábor Polyák discusses this in his study, highlighting that entities regulating communication are often forced to adapt their rules based on technological developments (e.g., when a social media platform introduces a new feature, and users begin posting content that does not comply with community guidelines or media law regulations). As a result, the communication system continuously reacts to its own evolution within a complex supply-demand-driven social framework – both in analogue and digital environments, though the latter exhibits these changes more visibly and rapidly. This phenomenon can be explained by the fact that as soon as a segment of communication becomes regulated, new user demands arise, driving the need for further technological developments. Polyák formulates an essential thesis regarding the integration of new technological tools into communication: regulation – the introduction of innovation and its normalisation within user frameworks – is essentially the social adaptation of a given technology (Polyák, 2015, pp. 183-190). This adaptation is then reflected in the language, forms of expression, and symbolic systems of the affected social groups.

Technological determinism, of course, cannot be identified solely as a rule- and society-based change, as different online platforms, applications, and virtual spaces all manifest in the digital or analogue linguistic personality and vocabulary of their users. Determinism is mentioned from this perspective by Ágnes Veszelszki, who in her monograph presents numerous examples collected from the internet. During their analysis the author draws attention to words adopted into Hungarian, such as *fotosoppol* (to Photoshop), *posztol* (to post), and *lájkol* (to like), all of which are neologisms for indicating commonly used functions from online platforms into spoken language. Another characteristic feature of online spaces and internet language use (or as Veszelszki defines it – *digilect*) is the significant presence of the English language, as demonstrated by the examples (Veszelszki 2017).

Thus, TD can occur due to external influences (such as legal frameworks, developer constraints, business strategies or differences between devices), but it can also emerge from internal developments, such as user-generated linguistic and communicative innovations. These can lead to entire online societies forming accepted rules and etiquette systems based on them.

Based on my research, TD as a system has not yet been extensively studied. Therefore, I aim to systematically model its applicability within linguistic studies. In constructing the model, I intend to create the most universal system possible and to present its elements in a manner that aligns closely with modern linguistic research methodologies.

According to the current state of my model, TD can be approached from multiple dimensions. One of these is the layer of external factors beyond TD, such as economic, geopolitical, or cultural influences, which exert their own effects on every element of the TD system. Important note on the external elements is that in my researches these elements are defined as the ones that cannot be directly changed by human interventions, at least not immediately, such as intercultural relations, traditions, political views and economic qualities of a state, etc.. However, I do not examine these factors in detail in this work.

The internal elements of TD, on the other hand can be affected by humans directly, and are analysed on three levels, which can be interpreted and studied both collectively as a complex system and independently as separate internal structures. These levels, as previously mentioned, are:

1. Regulatory determinism
2. Hardware determinism
3. Software determinism

In the following, I will focus on the third level.

The third form of TD is software determinism. This level can be characterised by properties similar to those of hardware determinism, as the softwares running on specific technological devices – along with the websites accessible on the internet and downloadable applications, including social media platforms and their apps – are also the result of development teams' work and undergo continuous improvements over time. The definition of software technological determinism is essentially the influence on communication methods and linguistic tools that occurs due to the characteristics or changes of an online platform (including applications) or an operating system. At this stage of the research, the model of software determinism is as follows.

The uniqueness of describing software determinism, according to the current state of modelling, lies in the fact that the two subcategories influencing factors that directly affect users are not positioned in a parallel relationship but rather in a hierarchical one. These two categories are:

1. The set of developer-driven software determinative factors
2. The set of user-driven software determinative factors

Developer-driven factors include elements that the average internet or device user (excluding users with system administrator-level privileges) cannot access and does not have direct control over. This category encompasses internet platforms, including applications downloadable on mobile and desktop devices, whose appearance, layout, and user design cannot be modified by anyone except authorised developers.

The elements within the developer category encompass those of the user category, which directly impact users' language use and linguistic toolkit. This category includes audiovisual, textual, and hybrid polycoded communication and language expression-supporting features found on platforms (such as websites and applications). Examples of this include the ability to send text messages on most social media platforms or within their associated applications, often embedded with visual elements like emojis. Additionally, users can send images or videos, which, they themselves, can be polycoded and contain both textual and visual elements. Furthermore, users have the option to send voice messages, initiate video calls, transfer files, and in certain applications, even share posts or other types of content directly.

The current state of technology actively influences the use of online communication tools. For example, inserting an emoji from one text into another may encounter a software related limitation if the target text is displayed on an older software version than the source. In such cases, instead of the intended visual element (an emoji or graphical character), the target text will display a placeholder symbol like “[?]” or a similar “error message” character. This indicates that the version does not support the display, thereby altering the original message’s intended meaning. This can be a significant disadvantage in Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC), meaning, that the interaction is performed via two or more non-human, networked technical devices (McQuail 2005; Veszelszki 2013). The problem is, that such visual elements – especially emojis – often serve as substitutes for nonverbal cues, intonation, and emotional intent associated with spoken communication. In some cases, they even represent entire speech acts. If these elements disappear or become distorted, the intended message can be lost or misinterpreted. Another ongoing example of software-based technological determinism is the way social media platforms and applications dictate self-expression options for users. As of 2025, for instance, Facebook allows users to react to a post with six different emotional responses beyond the basic “like.” In contrast, on other major platforms like Instagram and TikTok, only a single type of reaction is available. The same limitation applies to reactions on comments under posts across these three platforms. Other researchers have also published works on the topic and came to similar conclusions regarding the social media platforms’ impacts on the ways of communication. One form of the impact is when social and cultural concepts are made on certain platforms which are typical to that site or app. For example, on Instagram, the prefix “insta-” is used frequently in neologisms such as “instagramming”, “instafriend”, “instafamous”, “instagramable” (Gotto, 2022). Another example for a platform-typical effect is from Tiktok, where content duration is of an average 35-40 seconds (Statista 2024). This means that the content of the verbal material found in these videos are also adapted to the shorter format that is expected and offered by the platform (Vera et al., 2024). Meaning that the way of expression and the preferred linguistic tools used are also altered in favour of the shorter time for transferring the message for the audiences.

In my work I have shown how the constantly evolving telecommunication devices and global Internet access can influence the online language use of everyday users, and how the language varieties used in online spaces can

have an active impact on the spoken language and communication practices of these users. I conclude that TD is a phenomenon that can be modelled from the point of view of linguistics, it can be used universally, and it can also help the development of modern linguistics as an auxiliary science for further linguistic research (sociolinguistics, Internet linguistics, historical linguistics, language technology, psycholinguistics, and the border areas between these). I have found that TD (as the model currently stands) can be divided into three main levels, which are subordinate to each other and actively interact with each other. The examples provided show how software technology actively shapes language in different aspects and since these interfaces are in a constantly evolving state, it is of paramount importance to study the impact of these new features' effects on the language.

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