

A SERIES OF COLLECTIVE WORKS

KNOWLEDGE - COMMUNICATION - ACTIVITY

THE NEW COMMUNICATION REVOLUTION

edited by

Małgorzata Winiarska-Brodowska

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A SERIES OF COLLECTIVE WORKS
KNOWLEDGE - COMMUNICATION - ACTIVITY
INSTITUTE OF JOURNALISM, MEDIA AND SOCIAL
COMMUNICATION
JAGIELLONIAN UNIVERSITY

THE NEW COMMUNICATION REVOLUTION

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MAŁGORZATA WINIARSKA-BRODOWSKA



KRAKÓW 2023

Publikacja sfinansowana przez Uniwersytet Jagielloński
ze środków Instytutu Dziennikarstwa, Mediów i Komunikacji Społecznej
Publication financed by the Jagiellonian University from the funds of
the Institute of Journalism, Media and Social Communication

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Mediów i Komunikacji Społecznej

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Publishers:

Uniwersytet Jagielloński – Instytut Dziennikarstwa, Mediów
i Komunikacji Społecznej
ul. Łojasiewicza 4, 30-348 Kraków

Wydawnictwo ToC Marcin Kulig
ul. Szaflarska 85, 34-400 Nowy Targ
www.toc-editions.com

Edition 1

ISBN 978-83-965995-2-0 (digital edition)

ISBN 978-83-66492-25-7 (printed edition)

Typography design, typesetting, digital edition, printing:

Wydawnictwo ToC

This book is published in Open Access and available for download:

<https://media.uj.edu.pl/wydawnictwo>

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

ABSTRACT

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

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

METHOD

THEMATIC ANALYSIS

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

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

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

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

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

COUNTRY CONTEXT

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

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

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

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

THE THEME OF THE STUDY

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

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

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

RESEARCH GOAL

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

RESULTS

THE FORMAT OF THE POSTS

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

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

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

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

THE SUBTOPICS

Four main subtopics could be identified after the research:

- Mood
- International meetings
- Governance
- Rules

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

MOOD

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

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

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

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

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

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

INTERNATIONAL MEETINGS

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

- V4
- EU
- Other

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

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

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

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

GOVERNANCE

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

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

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

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

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

RULES

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

- Border
- Closure
- Laws/decrees

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

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

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

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

DISCUSSION

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

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

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

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

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