

FAR-RIGHT ACTIVISM ON CROATIAN MAINSTREAM NEWS PORTALS: CONTRIBUTING TO (AND CHANGING) THE PUBLIC DEBATE ON THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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Abstract. *This paper analyses online user comments on two mainstream Croatian portals, Index.hr and 24sata.hr regarding the COVID-19 pandemic, global conspiracies, and fake news in the context of decreasing media trust. Three-tier coding was conducted on 12.910 comments (2.194 from the portal 24 sata and 10.716 from the portal index.hr) and a thematic analysis was carried out. The findings showed that the main themes capture global conspiracy theories, including fascism as one of the main themes, as well as a lack of belief in the reality of the pandemic and negative views of the mainstream media seen as intertwined with the Government and as promoting one-sided views. Since the findings were unexpected, particularly regarding the extensive criticism of the media, and due to a large amount of conspiracy-related content on two portals neither of which is normally associated with the far right, an abductive analysis was conducted. The results revealed that the majority of content in the user comments regarding fascism and slavery as features of the COVID-19 policy in Croatia was posted either by a far-right political party (on Index.hr) or two unidentified users (on 24sata.hr) (likely far-right activists), and in both cases, comments were copy-pasted, including grammar mistakes. This signals an attempt of the far right in Croatia to not just contribute to but also manipulate public opinion and debates as well as give a false impression to an inattentive reader of the views of the Croatian public regarding the COVID-19 pandemic.*

Key words: *audience, fake news, post-truth, Croatia, public opinion, media trust, far-right activism, manipulation, COVID-19 pandemic, coronavirus, news portals, conspiracy, online behaviour.*

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. COVID-19: Contradictory Meanings and Social Consequences

Throughout history, infectious diseases (as well as wars) had a strong influence on shaping human societies and social organisations (Delanty 2021, 2, 3). Turner called epidemics and pandemics, “world-changing events” (Delanty 2021, 3). However, when it comes to the COVID-19 pandemic, this was not just a global public health problem but “an event of considerable significance”, which affected the functioning of global and local systems by causing resistance, arguments and discussions, which have intensified existing phenomena as well as various forms of preexisting inequalities (Delanty 2021, 1–2; Wassler and Talarico 2021). During the pandemic, and particularly during various lockdown phases, the use of the internet and social media channels intensified, and the Internet, for many, became a platform for socialising, education, fun and information-gathering (Kutscher 2022, 143).

Apart from the risk brought by the COVID-19 pandemic, the WHO warned about the other form of the pandemic, which started to unfold in parallel and intensified during global lockdowns, the infodemic one. The latter happened as a result of digital space being overwhelmed with the circulation of information, many of which was false/fake/misleading, and this resulted in confusion, resistance towards the pandemic measures, risky behaviour, decreased trust in public and health authorities, etc. (Romer and Hall Jamieson 2021; Luo, Cai and Cui 2021; Parmet and Paul 2020).

The infodemic context needs to be analysed in the wider context of phenomena that happened before the COVID-19 pandemic. This is because modern society was built on secularism and the institutionalisation of science as a primary authority and the “basis of progress” (Delanty 2021, 4), which helped in developing medicine as a science as well as establishing the public health service as a health authority. The COVID-19 pandemic can thus be analysed within the context of an ever more present post-truth culture which, in the last years, undermined modernist ideas of the production of knowledge whilst the influence of populism and authoritarianism also led to the undermining of democratic values (Malcolm 2021, 1064).

Epidemics and pandemics are not neither “objective realities” nor social constructs but concurrently “pathological realities as well as social constructions in that they are mediated by social and political conditions” (Delanty 2021, 8). These are realities, which are “culturally mediated by being interpreted in particular ways in specific times and places” (Delanty 2021, 8). The pandemic undermined the old pre-COVID-19 social order and introduced a regime of the new normal so as to systemically resolve insecurities, dangers and challenges. Beck argued how the risks are socially constructed because they are open towards social defining and constructing so they can be enlarged, dramatized, minimised as well as denied (Beck 1996 according to Zeman 2004, 221). The social actors (science, media, legal institutions, etc.) that define risks take key social and political roles and the knowledge of risks has a political connotation; nevertheless, risks are “politically explosive” (Beck 1996 according to Zeman 2004, 221-222).

Since the beginning of the pandemic, COVID-19 was associated with contradictory meanings depending on the perspective and the context where the meaning was produced (Delanty 2021, 8). In real and virtual spaces alike, there is a whole set of narratives and counter-narratives that question and negate each other (Kutscher 2022, 146). This paper, therefore, looks at the infodemics in the context of the post-truth society. By drawing

from sociological, philosophical and communication research, this paper focuses on post-truth in the context of the meaning assigned by humans to phenomena such as COVID-19 and conspiracy theories, as well as views of the Croatian public towards the mainstream media. The latter is relevant due to the prominence of fake news as well as attempts from those who spread fake news to accuse the mainstream media of misinformation and fake news. The phenomenon of fake news, disinformation and conspiracy theory is characteristic of a post-truth culture, which in this paper, is analysed through the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The analysis presented in this paper is founded on the analysis of online comments of readers of articles related to fake news, disinformation, and conspiracy theories published on the news portals 24sata.hr and Index.hr, both from Croatia. The analysis concentrates on identifying main themes and making sense of the audience's debate on the COVID-19 pandemic, and the results are analysed using thematic analysis and then using an abductive analysis to uncover hidden meanings.

In the subsequent part of the paper, we summarise the literature on the post-truth society and media trust, and then we present the method and findings of our study including a discussion of the findings. The conclusion summarises the main findings and limitations of the study, and offers suggestions for further research. The paper contributes to the debate on post-truth and information manipulation from the Croatian perspective.

1.2. Truth and Lies in Post-Truth Society

In recent years, the concept of *post-truth* has been extremely visible and present in the media and the academic community. Moreover, it is often claimed in the literature that we live in post-truth societies (Malcolm 2021, 1063). When writing about this concept, many authors remind us that in 2016, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, the word post-truth was voted "Word of the Year" thanks to the referendum on the United Kingdom's membership in the European Union, which resulted in "Brexit", and the presidential elections in the USA, won by Donald Trump (Campa 2016; Mooney 2018). Of course, the question inevitably arises as to what the popularity of this concept is based on and what it actually means. The Oxford English Dictionary gives the most general definition of post-truth as "an adjective defined as 'relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief'". Fridlund (2020, 216) points out that post-truth is a broad term that covers various "events and attitudes frequently perceived as a threat, particularly to science and politics" (e.g. lies, exaggeration, misinformation). Fuller (2017) also warns that the word post-truth "pejoratively refers to those who refuse to listen to reason and evidence but instead resort to emotion and prejudice". Malcolm (2021, 1063-1064) determines the ideas that establish post-truth: 1) attributing more importance to emotions than to objective facts; 2) the "relativisation of truth"; 3) the absence of shame in situations where a person/group who publicly made factually incorrect claims was exposed; 4) polarization of views; 5) "manipulation of knowledge and the polarization of views tends to fuel 'conspiracy' theories". Fuller (2017) makes a distinction between "the truthers" and "the post-truthers", which is based on the attitude towards "the rules of the current knowledge game" – truthers "play by the current rules, the post-truthers want to change the rules". From the post-truth position, what is considered the truth is relative and dependent on the knowledge game and the power

relations between the actors participating in the game (Fuller 2017). One of the fundamental specificities of post-truth is the “shift from debates over specific facts, to questioning the structure or rules of the broader debate”, and it is precisely this debate about “rules or premises... rather than 'facts'” that sheds a positive light on post-truth as “the growing pains of a maturing democratic intelligence” (Fuller 2018 cited from Malcolm 2021, 1066).

Bufacchi (2021, 348) presents a critical analysis of post-truth, calling it “a murky concept” that should not be considered through the binary dichotomy of truth–post-truth because both members of this dualism have the same genesis. Bufacchi (2021, 350) proposes the following definition which, in relation to the Oxford English Dictionary definition of post-truth, takes into account: 1) “epistemic injustice”; 2) delegitimizing of scientific truth claims:

“Post-Truth is a deliberate strategy aimed at creating an environment where objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion, where theoretical frameworks are undermined in order to make it impossible for someone to make sense of a certain event, phenomenon, or experience, and where scientific truth is delegitimized.”

Some authors highlight the inflationary use and vagueness of the post-truth paradigm (Kutscher 2022), and the lack of consensus about whether it is an old or a new phenomenon. Renner and Spencer (2018 according to Fridlund 2020, 216) believe that it is a recent phenomenon, while others claim that post-truth (just like fake news) is an old phenomenon present both in totalitarian regimes and in liberal democracies (Bufacchi 2021; Campa 2016; Cervera-Marzal 2019 according to Fridlund 2020, 216).

According to Bufacchi, the peculiarity of post-truth is that “it uses the arsenals of truth against truth itself”, with the aim “to undermine the Truth” (Bufacchi 2021, 354). Bufacchi (2021, 357, 358) suggests that it is necessary to go beyond the discussion about the post-truth phenomenon through the problematic optics of the binary opposition truth–post-truth and the idea of consensus, and therefore suggests an alternative approach based on: 1) reintroducing the Correspondence theory of truth; 2) refraining from the concept of truth “where it is not necessary” because “the concept of truth is often abused, inappropriately utilized, being called upon in contexts where truth is not the issue”. Bufacchi concludes that “Truth needs to be deflated, and deflating truth will also deflate Post-Truth” (Bufacchi (2021, 358).

Malcolm (2021, 1064) also points to the need for more adequate ways of dealing with the post-truth phenomenon, while critically rejecting previous analyses that advocate solutions such as a “return to traditional ways of evaluating knowledge” or “the re-assertion of the primacy of truth”. According to Malcolm (2021, 1064), such solutions are not sociologically valid because: 1) they “invoke abstract and essentialist concepts such as 'truth' as 'reality'”; 2) they insist on “the ontological primacy of objectivity over subjectivity”; 3) they observe knowledge and the process of knowledge production decontextualized and independent of social processes. Malcolm (2021, 164) believes that the sociological approach gives insight into the social context within which certain forms of knowledge are created, which ultimately leads to more adequate/efficient solutions to the challenges created in the post-truth society.

Mooney (2018, 4, 5) also pleads for the activation of sociological imagination as “critical consciousness” to understand fake news as a social problem that can be “categorized within a dual epicentre composed of underlying concepts of the *post-truth* era and *information disorder*”. Due to the complexity and far-reaching nature of the post-truth phenomenon, it is certainly necessary to develop and strengthen interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary

approaches without favouring the knowledge of one discipline. For example, communication studies indicate the connection between post-truth and the development of digital technology, which has resulted in the increasing popularity of social media and the reduced influence of traditional (mainstream) media, which threatens the current position of journalists and the media as “arbiters of truth” (Malcolm 2021, 1065). Due to the development of digital technologies and digital communication, “a greater fluidity of public communication... represents a 'new chapter' in the old struggle over the definition of truth” (Waisbord 2018 cited from Malcolm 2021, 1065). Research in the field of science and technology studies focused on the relations between science and society, more specifically on 1) “public responses to scientific knowledge”; 2) “epistemic democratization” (Collins and Evans 2007 cited from Malcolm 2021, 1065) which is a consequence of “unbridled social constructivism” (Jasonoff 2003 cited from Malcolm 2021, 1065), which in turn caused the “relativisation of truth in societies” and generated questions of scientific expertise and anti-expertise, but also questions of boundaries between politics and scientific knowledge (Malcolm 2021, 1065, 1066). It is the post-truth phenomenon that is linked to the undermining of scientific authority and criticism of scientific expertise (Collins et al. 2017 according to Malcolm 2021, 1066). Wikforss (2017 according to Fridlund 2020, 218) points out that “resistance to facts” is actually “resistance to knowledge” or “anti-intellectualism” which is often recommended by politicians (for example, it was constantly done by former US President Trump, who questioned information and facts and marked them as fake news or alternative facts [Fridlund 2020, 220] or by the former German Chancellor Angela Merkel who said “we should trust experts less and trust *common sense* more” [Block 2019 according to Fridlund 2020, 218]).

The development of digital technology and the great importance of social media have enabled the construction and dissemination of different narratives that claim to be true and fight for legitimacy (Kutscher 2022; Malcolm 2021). This fragmentation of the truth is also fueled by increasingly frequent cases of persons in positions of power (e.g. politicians) or persons extremely visible and recognizable in the global (and local) public space (e.g. celebrities) making unfounded or unverified claims in virtual space, causing strong emotional reactions and responses (Kutscher 2022, 145; see Zeman, Geiger Zeman and Topić 2022). In recent years, the problematic nature of the post-truth state and its threat to democracy have been highlighted, because democracy (among other things) is based on a common sense of reality and “basic consensus of facts and concerns” (Kutscher 2022, 145). Alternative narratives of truth do not base their legitimacy on public institutions and epistemic communities, moreover, they deny and question formal authorities, encouraging mistrust and insisting on “emotional, unfounded truth-claims” (Pala 2019 according to Kutscher 2022, 145).

Iyengar and Massey (2019, 7656) identify the causes of declining trust in epistemic communities and their expert knowledge not only in insufficiently efficient communication between the scientific community and the public but also in the fact that the media environment is decisively characterized by polarization and fragmentation and the proliferation of misleading and biased information. In the virtual universe, alternative news platforms have significant power that is “amplified by Internet trolls and bots”¹, and

¹ The term trolls denotes actors who use social networks and the Internet with the aim of starting a fight, creating confusion or causing upset among other users due to the spread of false information, and the term bots denotes “automated accounts pretending to be humans” which, among other things, can be programmed to disseminate false and misleading narratives through online networks (for example, it has been estimated that there are about 60 million trolling bots on Facebook) (Iyengar and Massey 2019, 7657). It is important to mention that some trolls can be bots.

the confusion is further enhanced by “algorithms written to select and recommend additional content for users based on past choices” (Iyengar and Massey 2019, 7657). The spread of false and contradictory information in virtual space (especially social networks) generates and maintains an atmosphere of chaos and mistrust, deepening political polarization, the primacy of emotions and personal opinions over “objective facts” and general “resistance to facts” and knowledge (Fridlund 2020, 218). Such a situation especially intensified during the pandemic caused by the COVID-19 virus, which Parmet and Paul (2020) called “the first post-truth pandemic”. Fridlund (2020) adds a new component to reflections on post-truth – unlike authors who reflect on post-truth by focusing on objectivity, truth, facts, etc., and trying to answer the question “Is it true?” Fridlund advocates a different approach focused on the question “What happens as a result?” (2020, 215).

1.3. The Pandemic and Infodemic: COVID-19 and the Communication Crisis in Post-Truth Society

One of the basic functions of journalism and the media in democratic societies is “providing a setting for a deliberative ‘public sphere’” (Habermas 1989 according to Harjuniemi 2022, 271), a critical attitude towards processes and events in society, encouraging and supporting rational discussion, informing citizens, etc. It has already been pointed out that one of the fundamental characteristics of post-truth is a “fundamental shift in the epistemic nature of society”; the expression of deep scepticism and mistrust, and “disrupting institutions that have sought to construct accurate representations of the world” (Harjuniemi 2022, 271). Conspiracy theories, as well as fake news, misinformation and rumours, are crucial for post-truth discussions (Harambam, Grusauskaite and de Wildt 2022). Long before the advent of mass media and the Internet, fabricated and false information, rumours and conspiracy narratives were constructed and disseminated and had “real social consequences” (Enders 2005 according to Zeman, Geiger Zeman and Topić 2022, 121). The Internet and the development of digital technology have provided new, exceptionally large opportunities for the production, dissemination and spread of fake news, rumours and conspiracy theories. Fake news is a complex and ambivalent phenomenon, so it is not surprising that there is no unique definition of it in the literature – moreover, there are disputes over the term itself (e.g. instead of the term fake news, the term disinformation is suggested, as a more neutral term) (Molina et al. 2019 according to Zeman, Geiger Zeman and Topić 2022, 123). Mooney (2018, 5) points out that fake news is an “umbrella term for various issues that are broadly related to the creation and spread of false information”. Molina et al. (2019) classify several types of online content under the heading of fake news: “false news, polarized content, satire, misreporting, commentary, persuasive information, and citizen journalism”. On the other hand, De Coninck et al. (2021 according to Zeman, Geiger Zeman and Topić 2022, 123) differentiate fake news into the following categories: 1) misinformation (for example, the publication of false/wrong information without a political purpose) and 2) disinformation or conspiracy theories (for example, tendentious manipulation for political purposes). Champion-Vincent (2005, 103) points to the long history of conspiracy theories, which can also be interpreted as “a folk science or folk history” whose goal is to give meaning and explanation to certain phenomena/states/events in “a rapidly changing world”. According to Champion-Vincent, these are interpretations that, by using “mechanical and linear causality” (2005, 105), try to deal with the “uncertainty” and “complexity” (2005, 104) of social and historical reality, and

are characterized by “a set of cognitive attributes” (Campion-Vincent 2005, 104, 105): 1. identifying and naming a specific agent (person/group) who has/have a clear motivation; 2. the agent (person/group) is evil, and his/their goals are destructive; 3. the evil agent (person, group) has the ability secretly and in partnership with other powerful allies to organize a large event in which no one can stop them; 4. “conspiracies sometimes do happen, and everyone agrees that they have at times”; and 5. conspiracy theories are promoted by ignorant persons of marginal status, but also by prominent and publicly known persons.

The pandemic situation caused by COVID-19 and the infodemic, or “disinfodemic” situation indicated a deep crisis of the public communication system (Robie and Krishnamurthi 2020, 180).² The lockdown, social distancing and wearing masks as preventive measures prescribed by public health authorities in many countries caused great political debates and resistances that were articulated along ideological lines (for example, conservatives adhered less than liberals to prevention measures) (Silveira Pereira, de Silva Silveira and Pereira 2020, 1), and the advent of vaccines further intensified the debate. The crisis situation filled with fear and uncertainty was followed by fake news about COVID-19 and conspiracy theories about COVID-19 (Kutscher 2022, 152; Silveira Pereira, da Silva Silveira and Pereira 2020, 1) which were increasingly produced, disseminated and consumed. One of the particularly popular conspiracy theories was the one that claimed the connection between 5G technology and the spread of COVID-19, which appeared in early 2020 and soon became viral and visible among Twitter users. Soon after that announcement, videos and news articles appeared on social networks claiming that 5G causes COVID-19 or accelerates its spread (Ahmed et al. 2020, see Zeman, Geiger Zeman and Topić 2022, 126). However, these untrue and unfounded claims had real social consequences, for example, vandalising and burning 5G masts (Ahmed et al. 2020). Fake news and misinformation related to COVID-19 was a global public health problem during the pandemic due to the refusal to practice everyday prevention and protection measures, thereby endangering one's own health as well as the health of other people, as well as self-harm due to the consumption and practice of scientifically unapproved and unproven substances that are promoted as a cure against COVID-19 on social networks by certain celebrities and politicians (Melki et al. 2021, 2).

A special incentive for the proliferation of production, dissemination and consumption of fake news and conspiracy theories was given by social isolation during the lockdown period (for example, during the first months of the pandemic, the number of members of the Facebook QAnon group increased by about 600%) (Kutscher 2022, 152). Contradictory information presented in the mainstream media as well as uncertainty in the scientific community has influenced the increase of distrust in scientific expertise, media and political bodies (Parmet and Paul 2020). Official knowledge, based on scientific principles, “is distrusted by various people resorting to alternative (conspiratorial) explanations” (Harambam, Grusauskaite and de Wildt 2022, 784). Such circumstances lead to a challenging situation in which it is very difficult for an everyday person to distinguish fiction from verified and fact-based information.

Due to the lack of traditional gatekeeper control mechanisms, social networks enable the rapid spread and dissemination of misinformation, but also their prompt denial (Ahmed et al. 2020; Melki et al. 2021, 2), which of course does not completely solve the problem because fake news spreads faster and is more far-reaching than the factually based and verified kind (Zeman, Geiger Zeman and Topić 2022, 125). The virality of fake news and conspiracy

² The term “disinfodemic” denotes “‘falsehoods fuelling the pandemic’ and its impacts because of the ‘huge viral load of potentially deadly disinformation’” (Posetti and Bontcheva 2020 cited from Robie and Krishnamurthi 2020, 180).

theories is greater if they are disseminated through social networks by celebrities (Zeman, Geiger Zeman and Topić 2022). Melki et al. (2021, 8) studied the relationship between exposure to news on social networks and belief in COVID-19 fake news and found that: 1) people who trust official information sources and have higher education believe less in COVID-19 myths and false information; 2) people who trust the news from “social media, interpersonal communication, and clerics are more likely to believe in COVID-19 myths and false information”; 3) women slightly more than men believe in COVID-19 myths and false information; 4) trust in COVID-19 myths and false information affects reduced critical verification of content shared on social networks; 5) the importance of media literacy as a type of training that affects increasing criticality towards content disseminated on social networks is highlighted.

Graham et al. (2020 according to Silveira Pereira, de Silva Silveira and Pereira 2020, 1) state that one of the first conspiracy theories about COVID-19 as a “laboratory-engineered bioweapon created by the Chinese” began in January 2020 and was spread on Twitter “by mostly right-wing and conservative profiles”. Peren Arin et al. (2021, 2) conducted a large-scale survey (18.581 respondents aged 18 to 70) in four European countries (France, Germany, Spain, and the United Kingdom) with the aim to 1) “investigate the determinants of the right- and left-wing misperceptions as well as fake news exposure and sharing”; 2) determine “how the COVID-19 pandemic influenced both misperceptions and fake news”. The results of their research are as follows (Peren Arin et al. 2021, 19, 20): “women, married low-income and low-educated individuals tend to have the largest misperceptions”; “men as well as married, young and, higher educated respondents are those more exposed to fake news and also spread it (intentionally or not) at a higher frequency”; high-income respondents “share fake news less often”; “right-leaning respondents showed the greatest misperception in both right-wing concerns (immigration and Muslim population)”, “left-leaning participants exhibited the greatest misperception on the income share of the richest”; “ideologically polarized individuals showed both greater exposure and sharing”; “only right-leaning respondents reported a higher willingness to intentionally share fake news”. Peren Arin et al. (2021, 2) concluded “the COVID-19 pandemic increased fake news sharing and amplified right-wing misperceptions” (immigration issues and Muslim populations). Vosoughi, Roy and Aral (2018) analysed 126.000 stories that were tweeted more than 4.5 million times by about three million people between 2006 and 2017. They found that “Falsehood diffused significantly farther, faster, deeper, and more broadly than the truth in all categories of information” (2018, 1146, see also Zeman, Geiger Zeman and Topić 2022, 125). They also found “that false news was more novel than true news, which suggests that people were more likely to share novel information” (2018, 1146).

Fake news and conspiracy theories are recognized as a “social problem” (Mooney 2018, 5). In the UNESCO policy brief (Posetti and Bontcheva 2020 according to Robie and Krishnamurthi 2020, 181), key topics were identified (false information about the origin, spread, infection and mortality rates, symptoms and methods of treatment of COVID-19, attacks on journalists and proclaiming published news in the mainstream media as fake news), and formats of disinformation dissemination related to COVID-19 (“highly emotive narrative constructs and memes; fabricated, fraudulently altered, or decontextualised images and videos; bogus websites, data sets and sources; and disinformation infiltrators and orchestrated campaigns”). Various responses to the infodemic situation have been suggested in the literature, and according to Posetti and Bontcheva (2020 according to Robie and Krishnamurthi 2020, 181) it includes monitoring and fact-checking to expose identified

COVID-19 disinformation; “governance-based responses” (law and policy); “technological, and economic response”; normative, educational, ethical and empowering responses. In conclusion, it should be mentioned that research has shown that some people consider the post-truth media environment, more specifically “media sensationalism and ‘fake news’” as bad/negative for their mental health, so they give up consuming media content due to “media burnout and physical and emotional responses to media” (Ravenelle, Newell and Kowalski 2021, 2).

1.4. Media Trust

The rise in the accessibility of information and social media led also to a lack of trust in mainstream media. For example, in the UK, trust in TV newsreaders and journalists in general to tell the truth has significantly decreased. In the latest available data on the Press Gazette, a national survey showed a major decrease in trust in media with journalists being among the top five least trustworthy professions with only 26% of participants seeing them as trustworthy, as opposed to, for example, nurses who are trusted to tell the truth by 96% of the survey respondents (Tobitt 2018).

Similarly, in Croatia, citizens express more trust in the Catholic Church, scholars, and educational institutions whereas media are not trusted and are seen as too reliant on influence from their owners whereas journalists are seen as inclined to manipulate, create tension, sensationalise and emphasise negative news (Kanižaj 2020).

This finding of a national survey conducted in 2020 is not new. Previous research has shown a decline in trust in the media and journalists. In 2008, the GfK polling agency conducted a survey and the findings showed that Croatian citizens trust doctors, judges, solicitors, programmers, IT experts, architects and engineers ahead of journalists, teachers, professors, agricultural workers and politicians (GfK 2008, cited from Kanižaj and Skoko 2010). Interestingly, in this study, younger people expressed more trust in journalists as well as people aged 65+ whereas when asked which are the most honourable professions, respondents said engineers and economists, doctors and legal experts, professors, politicians, programmers, agricultural workers, architects and salespeople. Journalists came in last as the last honourable profession.

In a further study on the image of journalists in Croatia, two years later, Kanižaj and Skoko (2010, 33) demonstrated that Croatian citizens see journalists as inclined to manipulate, create tension in their writing, emphasise negative news and sensationalise coverage. In the same study, characteristics least likely to describe journalists were “analytical, meticulous, precision and in-depth approach”.

2. THE METHOD

One of “the most controversial topics in the media” in recent years were Internet comments (Duhaček 2016). Readers commenting on articles is a form of an argumentative debate that enables readers to react promptly to an article, ask additional questions, and point towards errors and two-way communication between journalists (the text creators) and readers as consumers of the text (Gardiner et al. 2016). However, in practice, readers’ commenting on newspaper articles turned out to be an activity marked with conflict, threats, insults, and extreme hate speech. This prompted, as early as 2014, some American media, including the most famous ones, to cancel or limit the reader's

comments on their content thus directing the debate to social media (Duhaček 2016). This practice was followed by other media organisations. For example, the British Guardian (Gardiner et al. 2016) conducted an analysis of online reader comments published on its news portal and found out that there are gendered and ethnic differences in readers' comments, i.e., women and members of ethnic and religious minorities as well as LGBTQ community were faced with the most negative and abusive comments: 1. "articles written by women attract more abuse and dismissive trolling"; 2. "the 10 regular writers who got the most abuse were eight women (four white and four non-white) and two black men. Two of the women and one of the men were gay. And of the eight women in the 'top 10', one was Muslim and one Jewish"; and 3. the least abused were regular male writers.

According to the Law on Electronic Media (Article 94, Clause 3), providers of electronic publications in Croatia (owners and editors) are responsible for the "whole content published on the electronic publication, including the content generated by users if they fail to register users or they fail in plainly and clearly alerting users to their commenting rules and violation of the order in clause 2 of this article".

For several years, the news portal 24sata.hr has been the most popular and the most read portal in Croatia that also allows readers' comments to its articles. This news portal is from a "left-populist tabloid daily newspaper" (HR portali 2022). In addition to that, Index.hr is according to HR portali (2022) labelled as the most famous Croatian left-wing portal. Some commentators could label Index.hr as neoliberal and not exactly left-wing; however, they are famous for conflicts with far-right organisations and populist politicians, and they never claimed their editorial policies were impartial when it comes to Croatian politics. The portal has previously expressed strong views in favour of left-wing political candidates because of which this portal is considered notoriously and obnoxiously left-wing in far-right circles in Croatia. For example, their famous activism includes the presidential election battle between Professor Ivo Josipović and Mr Milan Bandić, the former being the candidate of the Social Democratic Party and the latter a former member of the Social Democratic Party who turned to right-wing populism and ruled Zagreb (the capital city) by developing a crony network, which eventually put him under investigation of the anti-corruption agency USKOK that was ongoing until his sudden death. Index.hr labelled these presidential elections as a 'civilisational question' and supported Ivo Josipović whilst also questioning whether he is the right candidate or just a matter of a vote opposing Milan Bandić (Index.hr 2016). In one article, Index.hr also wrote "Index is, and we are proud of this, against Milan Bandić (Ezadar 2014)". Therefore, given the prominence of this portal as well as the fact it is often criticised by far rights activists, it was relevant to include them in this analysis alongside the most read one, 24sata.hr.

The focus of this analysis was online readers' comments published on 24sata.hr and index.hr from February 1, 2020 until May 31, 2021 regarding fake news, misinformation, and conspiracy theories. The news portal websites were searched using the following keywords, and we used some terms in both English and Croatian (e.g., the term fake news as well as the Croatian translation *lažne vijesti*) and this was relevant because of the colloquial use of the English term fake news in Croatian society: 1. Fake news, korona, 2. Lažne vijesti, korona, 3. COVID-19, dezinformacije, 4. Korona, dezinformacije, 5. COVID-19, teorije zavjere, 6. Korona, teorije zavjere.

For 24sata.hr, a total of 65 articles were identified and after selection, a total of 38 articles were included in the analysis, with 12 articles were duplicates and 15 did not meet the topical requirements for inclusion. The total number of comments was 2875 (906 comments, 1965 sub-comments, 4 comments on the sub-comments). A part of the total analysed comments and sub-comments was 2194 comments – 721 comments, 1469 sub-comments, and 4 comments of sub-comments of readers.

For index.hr, a total of 514 articles were identified, 89 articles were included in the analysis, 52 articles were duplicates, 258 did not meet the topical requirements, and 115 articles did meet the topical requirements but did not have comments. The total number of comments was 11158 (4813 comments, 6009 sub-comments). A part of the total analysed comments and sub-comments was 10716 – 4707 comments and 6009 sub-comments of readers.

The aim of the research was to explore how Croatian audiences make sense of fake news and whether they are prone to disseminate it, as well as how they see mainstream media based on their response to articles on COVID-19 and conspiracy theories. In other words, we particularly targeted articles written about disinformation and fake news to explore to what extent Croatian audiences agree with conspiracy theories and fake news and potentially challenge mainstream media as truthful.

All comments, as well as discussion comments posted under main comments, were copied into a Word document and coded individually. This means that each article title and its comments and sub-comments were copied into a separate document, coded individually (each comment and sub-comment) and then a thematic analysis was carried out on each document. After that, all these documents were coded together based on the media outlet (24sata and Index.hr, respectively) and thus a general thematic analysis for each media was generated (figures 1 and 2). After that, a final thematic analysis was conducted on both media outlets and the findings were analysed and thematically combined (figure 3).

The coding approach was a three-tier coding method, according to Morse and Richards (2002), which was applied to each document, then a full analysis of each media outlet and then a final analysis. Open coding was done first, which helped to identify initial codes in all the user comments found on websites. This also helped to identify critical themes that emerge from the data and axial coding, which was done next, helped in analysing pieces of data against each other. In other words, different sections of data (in this case different articles and comments underneath them) were analysed against each other to explore whether there are commonalities in the comments. Selective coding then helped in identifying the most relevant themes that emerged from the dataset and these were related and applied across the whole dataset and informed an overall thematic analysis.

After the coding was completed, a thematic analysis was carried out to identify codes using the approach of Braun and Clarke (2006). A thematic analysis is “a systematic approach to the analysis of qualitative data that involves identifying themes or patterns of cultural meaning; coding and classifying data, usually textual, according to themes; and interpreting the resulting thematic structures by seeking commonalities, 16 relationships, overarching patterns, theoretical constructs, or explanatory principles” (Lapadat 2010, 926).

Thematic analysis is a sensemaking method meant to reduce and analyse large datasets such as this one, to capture main trends in data, make sense of them, and suggest future research. It is a pragmatic approach to research and a qualitative method most

similar to positivist research due to its systematic character. However, it is not the intention of the thematic analysis to offer a generalisation of the findings but to point towards obvious trends in data that can be used to inform future research and point to trends, and it is also not meant to be used for theory building as with grounded theory. In the presentation of findings, a guide from Braun and Clarke (2006) was used, and thus findings are visualised and then analysed against the literature, using direct quotes to illustrate the findings. The initial research questions were set as follows, 1. What are the views of Croatian audiences about the COVID-19 pandemic?, 2. What are the views of Croatian audiences of mainstream media? and 3. What are the views of Croatian audiences on conspiracy theories and fake news in the context of the media trust crisis?

After the thematic analysis was conducted, an interesting finding emerged. As the results below will show, Croatian audiences do not seem to have the same views as the media and tend to express severe criticism of media coverage and opposition to the coronavirus pandemic as well as vaccination. Since the Croatian public expressed extremely negative views of the media coverage, with quite significant extremism in the user comments, related both to the Croatian and global Governments as well as the pandemic, we thus also analysed the data abductively to explore where this is potentially coming from. The abductive analysis is a process “required when you encounter surprising, anomalous observations” (Tavory and Timmermans n.d.). Tavory and Timmermans (2013, 684) proposed this method of analysis arguing it provides a ground for causality in qualitative research because it enables “temporal generalization anchored in actors observed meaning-making process”. This approach does not imply that researchers should explain what the participants said but “their actions, (whether verbal, cognitive or otherwise) (...) from the bedrock of the analysis” (Tavory and Timmermans 2013). Even though the abductive approach was originally developed in ethnography (ibid), we found it useful for this study because it helped us explain where the views of the Croatian audiences come from. In addition to that, another reason for using the abductive analysis was the unusually high number of comments of far-right content on both portals, neither of which is normally associated with the far right, and Index.hr in particular, which is sometimes seen as left-wing and is often the focus of criticism in far right circles. It instigated our interest to ask how come there is so much far right content, especially since there is a history of conflict between far-right and Index.hr for example.

The approach of the abductive analysis has found its use in media and communication scholarship previously. For example, in the study on women in the media using qualitative interviews with 20 women journalists, Topić and Bruegmann (2021) used it to explain differences in communication and behaviour of interviewed journalists, which they linked to their socialisation process where women who grew up with boys demonstrated more masculine characteristics than women who grew up with girls; thus looking back at the data helped in identifying causality. In this case, looking back at data provided insight into the views of Croatian audiences as well as the actual reason for such extreme negativity, which is the activism of the Croatian far right on news portals distorting Croatian public opinion and attempting to disseminate their own views and ideologies.

In the remaining part of the paper, we first present the initial findings that include far-right views that found their way into the analysis due to excessive re-posting of comments, and then the abductive analysis. We first present the results for each analysed media outlet and then a final thematic analysis of both news portals.

3. RESULTS

The findings show a central feature of the COVID-19 debate is centred on global conspiracy and seeing the pandemic as a means to enforce a form of global fascism and impede personal freedoms across the globe (figures 1, 2, 3).

3.1. *Index.hr*

When it comes to Index.hr, the main theme that runs through the data is one of conspiracy theories, which range from media conspiracy theories, global conspiracy, the pandemic as a conspiracy as well as media manipulation as fake news for the purpose of bias and invention of the pandemic (figure 1).

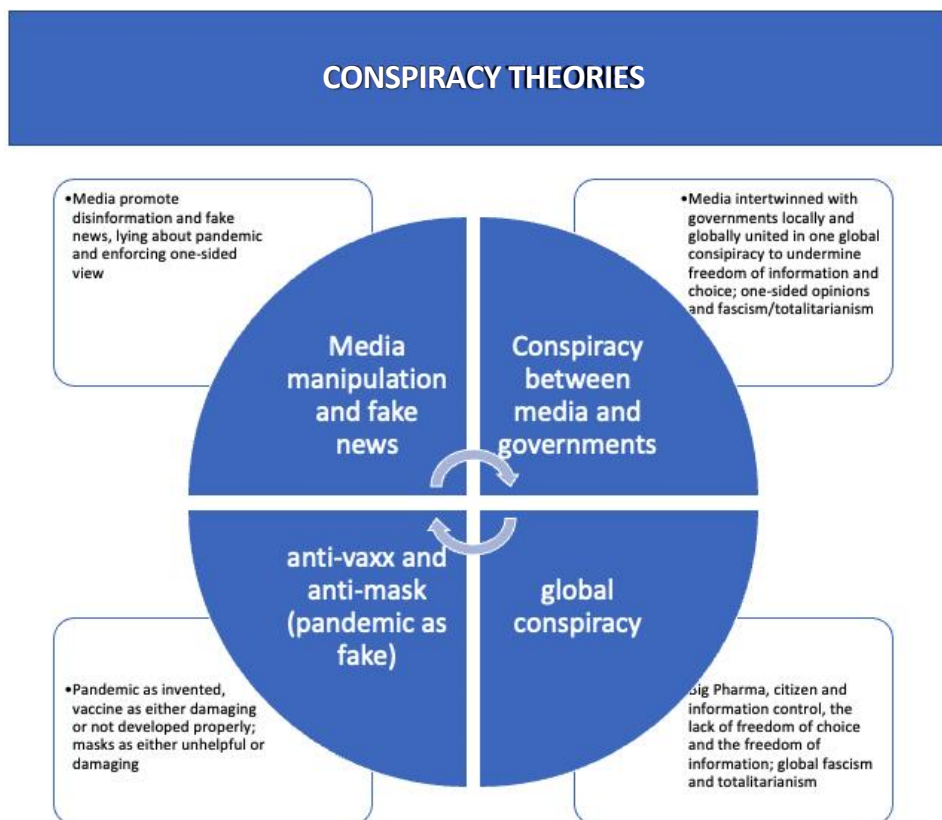


Fig. 1 A Final Thematic Analysis - Index.hr

The audience accuses the media of spreading disinformation and fake news, an attribute normally assigned to various organisations and grassroots initiatives that promote fake news to foster particular/ideological goals. The media are seen as a part of the larger machinery, intertwined with the Government to enforce a one-sided view of the pandemic, lies and manipulation for the purpose of inventing the pandemic with anti-vax

sentiments strongly present in the sample. This is allegedly done, according to the user comments, to force people/countries to unite into one global regime of totalitarianism and fascism for fulfilling the interests of Big Pharma, which will then require enforcing information control, undermining the freedom of choice, speech and information and impose global fascism. What is particularly interesting is that these themes and sub-themes are intertwined in the responses from audiences, and thus vaccines and the pandemic are used in the context of multi-layered conspiracy theory. For example,

“...cure against COVID-19 is needed by several hundred thousand of infected whilst the vaccine is intended to be administered forcibly to billions of healthy people. The difference in numbers is evident, and with this, differences in profits too. You do not have to be a Doctor of Economy to make your own conclusion on which product is more dear to corporations. Kudos to Sinčić and Kolakušić for showing a middle finger, with their bare hands and no institutional support to the info-cartel and their cheerleaders” (Index.hr, 15th June 2021).³

This example simultaneously uses global health conspiracy by mentioning the pharmaceutical industry and a link to profit along with anti-vax views and the suggestion that the media are intertwined in a global conspiracy. This is just an illustrated example of hundreds of such comments that enforce the same view, thus suggesting the proneness of audiences to engage in conspiracy theories. As argued by Malcolm (2021), one of the main characteristics of a post-truth society is questioning structures and debates, as well as engaging with rules or premises instead of facts, and this seems to be one of the central features of audience engagement on the news portal where people do not discuss facts but question them and bring about questions of scientific discourses and institutions.

However, an abductive analysis showed that the prominence of fascism as a theme, which has a significant presence in the sample, appears through one party activist, right-wing party Živi Zid, which continually reposted (copy-pasted respectively) one identical comment,

“This is just one more reason for all of us to vote for Živi Zid! When Dr Sladoljev and Dr Nogalo enter the Parliament this fake pandemic ends and you will no longer have to tolerate fascism imposed from the side of the crisis committee imposed by the Croatian Democratic Union that violates the Constitution and limits human rights and freedoms (...) The second very important thing is children’s health, which is destroyed by invasive vaccinations. Autism is not here because of an accident” (multiple comments on Index.hr).

This activism shows an attempt of the far right to pander to the fear of the public and engage in populist views by nominally attempting to present their political candidates as experts by using their scholarly titles. This presents a similarity with the West where many far-right politicians attempted to do the same by challenging the media coverage of the pandemic as well as pro-vaccination attitudes and campaigning of national governments. As argued by Bufacchi (2021, 350), “Post-Truth is a deliberate strategy aimed at creating an environment where objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion, where theoretical frameworks are undermined in order to make it impossible for someone to make sense of a certain event, phenomenon, or experience, and where scientific truth is delegitimized.” In this particular case, truth is not relevant and through a presentation of

³ The two surnames mentioned in the comment refer to two conspiracy theorists who were also the topic of the article where the comment was posted. All translations of comments in the article are the work of the authors.

alleged expertise and qualifications, an attempt to build credibility is promoted, likely attempting to play into general low institutional and media trust in Croatia (Kanižaj 2020; Kanižaj and Skoko 2010).

What is also relevant here is the prominence of the far-right activism on Index.hr, which is famous for having conflicts with far-right and populist organisations and politicians in the past, as already explained in the methods section (Index.hr, 2016). Given the fact Index.hr previously labelled not electing right-wing politicians or populists as a civilisational issue, and fiercely opposed their election, whilst also expressing pride in not being impartial in their editorial policy, the activism of the far right in their user comments opens the question if the far-right political candidates are trying to build support for their policies and candidates by directly targeting readers of portals they normally consider oppositional?⁴

3.2. 24sata

When it comes to the 24sata portal, the situation is similar to the Index.hr with the main theme being fascism and slavery, and with sub-themes including media disinformation (including sensationalism and commercialism), and government disinformation (including complete control and deprivation of freedom) (figure 2).

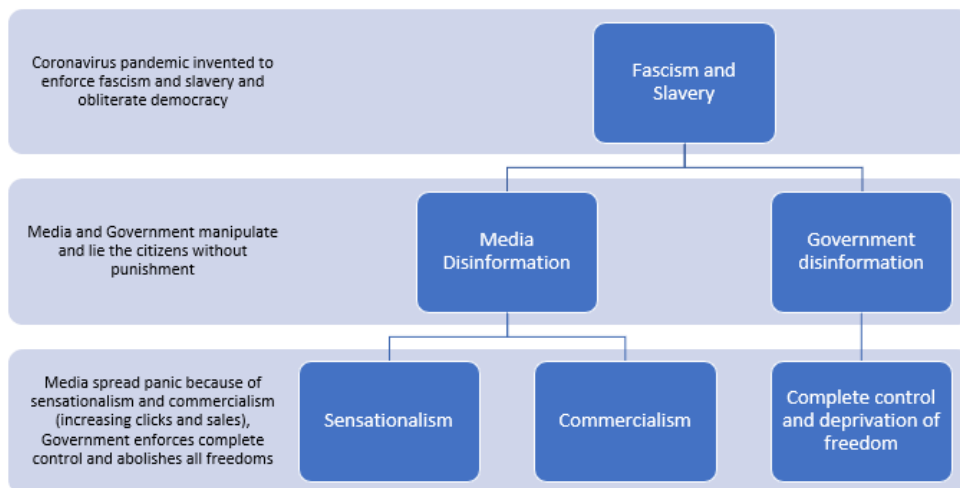


Fig. 2 A Final Thematic Analysis - 24sata

Whilst the two sets of themes, of each portal respectively, are on the same lines and engage in distrust and criticism of the mainstream media, it seems that the audience of the 24sata portal is even harsher than Index.hr and considers the alleged media manipulation as a form of fascism and slavery, thus suggesting the media are a part of not just a larger

⁴ It needs to be noted that some years after Index attacked M. Banić and essentially prevented him from becoming president of Croatia, M. Banić started to give them donations for their work, which opened an investigation of the Government's anti-corruption agency. M. Babić, the owner of Index.hr, then said that Index received a minor donation compared to its status (Ezadar 2014).

conspiracy machine to enforce fake news but also to enforce slavery and fascism. Fascism and totalitarianism are also mentioned in Index.hr, thus the audience is engaged in a similar discourse across both portals; however, the prominence of this theme is more visible in 24sata where it formed a major theme, whereas at Index.hr this is one of the minor sub-themes, but it appeared often enough to be included in sub-theme data.

When it comes to fascism, interestingly, an abductive analysis disclosed that there are again just two members of the commenting community who are posting these comments, albeit it is not always the same one, but this points towards members of the far right again possibly trying to influence the debate and place the COVID-19 pandemic on the public agenda as a form of fascism. In these comments, the content is repeated but different,

“...that is that fascism that people talked about 20-30 years ago Total censorship, total slavery, total control ... you cannot express your opinion anymore Singlemindedness does not allow for it” (multiple comments on 24sata.hr)

Therefore, whilst fascism is imposed as a discourse on the public agenda and falsely presented as a view of the Croatian audience, it is done so in a skillful way that makes it look, to an inattentive reader who does not pay the attention to nicknames of commentators always being the same, as a genuine opinion of the Croatian public. These two commentators also enforce the notion of slavery by repeatedly using this term along with fascism, in their comments, thus also extending fear of slavery. At 24sata.hr, commentators do not engage in promoting any political party, and thus it is not clear whom these two commentators copy-pasting the same comment (including grammar mistakes) would be, but the tone and information shared points with far-right activists at least. As argued by Malcolm (2021, 1063, 1064), post-truth includes attributing greater significance to emotions than to objective facts and this is what comes out of these comments where commentators are attempting to appeal to the emotions of people and their fear of the pandemic whilst also “relativising the truth” by suggesting that people do not have a voice during the pandemic even though, for example, the Constitution of the Republic of Croatia clearly states it is the duty of the Government to look after the health of the people (The Constitution, Article 70) and thus, one could see the actions of the Croatian Government in enforcing the pandemic rules as constitutional especially since all the countries of the world reacted the same. Thus not enforcing them would likely cause international reputation damage to Croatia. In other words, one does not have to agree with the measures imposed by the Government; however, interpreting them as slavery and not giving people a voice whilst the Constitution asserts the responsibility of the Government to act, opens the question of manipulation posted in the user comments to appeal to public opinion and distort the views of the public.

3.3. A Comparison of the Two Portals

What appears from both sets of data, from both portals, is that they are attracting far-right activists who are trying to falsely portray their agenda as the agenda of the Croatian public and attempting to place fascism and slavery on the agenda. It is worth noting that neither of these portals is normally associated with the far right and in the past, they have been the subject of criticism by far-right organisations, Index.hr in particular. However, what is relevant is that far-right activism is responsible for placing fascism and slavery as themes on the agenda, whereas the rest does seem to come from the Croatian public due

to various nicknames and names left in the comments. The more diverse themes that appear from comments are indeed fake news and manipulation of the media and questioning of the pandemic including the vaccine. Therefore, the final thematic analysis excludes far-right content. It appears that the Croatian public enforces conspiracy theories and challenges the media and Government as untrustworthy, seeing them as manipulating and spreading fake news about the pandemic to control information about the pandemic being fake (figure 3).



Fig. 3 A Final Thematic Analysis - Index.hr & 24sata

This means that the central theme of the analysis of user comments is the lack of institutional trust in Croatia with citizens expressing a lack of trust in both mainstream media and the Government, the latter being a serious issue, particularly in the context of the global pandemic that necessitated restrictions. In other words, it seems that the major concern of the Croatian audiences, at least when this sample is concerned, is seeing the media as intertwined with the government, supporting Big Pharma. The tools used to do this include the dissemination of fake news and manipulation by the mainstream media, information control, and the invention of a pandemic, which is seen as a fake occurrence happening because of one-sided news reporting. Thus, the debate on the COVID-19 pandemic is framed within a larger debate on the global conspiracy, the latter being logical since COVID-19 was indeed a global pandemic.

This also means that Croatian audiences do not trust the mainstream media and challenge their coverage when they experience cognitive dissonance and/or fail to find a confirmation bias. This goes in line with a general lack of trust in the media in Croatia where citizens continue to express negative views of media and journalists, including their inclination to tell the truth and provide an in-depth analysis (Kanižaj and Skoko 2010).

However, it is not possible to know, despite the diversity of nicknames and personal names in comments, who is a far-right activist, but given the sheer number of comments, it is logical to expect a substantial amount comes from the public, but certainly not as much as it would if one was to read comments without an in-depth analysis. What can be discounted from the current analysis is the notion of global fascism, which is placed on the agenda through far-right activism, but the rest appears to come from a more diverse set of sources and opens the question of the extent to which the Croatian public believes in these conspiracy theories about the COVID-19 pandemic. To what extent is the lack of trust in institutions becoming an issue and what can Croatia expect in the future if citizens do not trust the media or their own Government?

4. DISCUSSION AND FURTHER RESEARCH

As already emphasised, the COVID-19 pandemic was more than a global public health problem. Since the beginning of the pandemic, COVID-19 was associated with contradictory meanings and could be analysed within the context of post-truth culture (Malcolm 2021). The development of digital technology has provided new opportunities for the production, dissemination and spread of fake news, rumours, and conspiracy theories, which has especially intensified since the beginning of the pandemic caused by the COVID-19 virus. The dissemination of false/fake and contradictory information in virtual space (especially social networks) generates (and maintains) an atmosphere of mistrust and deepening political polarization.

In terms of research questions set for this study, it appears that the Croatian public largely engages in conspirator views of the COVID-19 pandemic (RQ1) with views being that the media and the government combined their efforts to manipulate the public for their own interests, including the interests of the so-called Big Pharma. This signals a serious lack of institutional trust in Croatia that naturally can present a fertile ground for the rise of the far right. The latter might be the case why our findings disclosed the large activism of these individuals and organisations, as it would not be illogical to think that people who distrust their own Government and the media system could be prone to seeking information elsewhere, as well as confirming their own opinion bias, the latter then being something these organisations tried to achieve. The mainstream media news not doing well regarding trustworthiness (RQ2) is not new as citizens regularly rate the media low in polls, as we have argued earlier in the paper (Kanižaj 2020; Kanižaj and Skoko 2010). But, the intertwined view of the media and the government is a cause for concern because the media in Croatia are mainly privatised and as we have mentioned, often engage in directly opposing political candidates no matter how influential. Whilst much can be said about various policies in Croatia, controlling or censoring media directly has not been the policy of any Croatian government since the fall of the authoritarian regime of dr Franjo Tuđman who led the independence movement from former Yugoslavia. However, even during his authoritarian rule, there were public protests against attacks on the media (e.g., famous protests in Zagreb to save a critical radio station, Radio 101) and thus even then the media dared to criticise, and people dared to protest to defend them (Večernji list 2021). The media often do express activism against far-right options and there are plenty of famous conflicts where various organisations attempted to remove certain news organisations or journalists from their press conferences. Thus the suggestion that the Croatian media is somehow intertwined with the government is largely unfounded. Finally, Croatian audiences certainly engage in conspiracy theories and are shown to be more prone towards believing fake news and conspiracy theories than the mainstream media or the government; however, this does not come as a surprise given the views of the government and the media in general, as explained above. Therefore, future research needs to look further into trust and the reason for this. In addition to that, it seems painfully obvious that Croatian institutions are failing in their public relations efforts; thus, public relations researchers should conduct analyses of government campaigning and then assess what a more effective way of communicating might be in Croatia.

Despite its interesting findings, this study is not without its limitations. Firstly, this is a qualitative study using a systematic analytical method such as thematic analysis, which provided trends in data to inform future research but has not and cannot provide a

generalisation of the findings. In addition to that, one obvious limitation is the fact some themes (e.g., fascism) appeared as themes in the analysis only through excessive reposting of the same comment by a far-right party, which was noticed during the third round of coding. Equally, in another analysis two commentators (presumably far-right activists as well) re-posted the same comment, including grammar mistakes. One option was to remove those comments once the abductive analysis showed where they come from; however, due to the fact that audiences responded to these comments, we decided to leave them and let them skew the initial analysis (figures 1 and 2) to enable us to analyse sub-comments from the audiences. In addition to that, we also reported it because this presents important research findings on the prominence of far-right activism in Croatia, which was arguably not the focus of this paper but it opens the question of whether closing down comments, which many international news outlets already have done (Gardiner et al. 2016), is a way forward to minimise the influence of extreme ideologies who aim to build an agenda and ascend to power by playing to people's fears and populist views whilst denouncing science and reason. In other words, if far-right activists are willing to post the same comment so many times, on so many portals and multiple times a day, along with their general canvassing and own publications disseminating fake news, this testifies to the enormous power of this movement. Thus, this paper contributes to the current knowledge by identifying this activism, which has not been noticed before, to the best of the authors' knowledge. What is more, it signals a potential attempt to build an agenda, and thus further research should look into the agenda-building activities of the far-right activists further.

Whilst the findings are novel and somewhat extraordinary, particularly respective to the abductive analysis, this study also revealed the weakness of studying public opinion by analysing user comments. Future research needs to study the attitudes of the Croatian public using a reliable polling agency and a representative survey to fully capture the actual views of the Croatian audiences. In addition to that, future research should look into media consumption in Croatia in more depth to explore whether it is a peculiar characteristic of the Croatian far right to target all media randomly or whether, perhaps, the Croatian public consumes online news content more extensively and reads news portals of various political orientations, which would also mean that the Croatian public does not engage in 'echo chambers' but consumes media content more diversely, which on the one hand presents a good attempt to be a critical thinker and form one's own opinions; however, given the extent of the debate in comments and manipulations from the far right, this also presents a danger, as an inattentive reader can falsely conclude that the majority of the public, in the case of this study, sees the coronavirus pandemic as a fake event meant to create new global fascism.

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KRAJNJE DESNI AKTIVIZAM NA HRVATSKIM MAINSTREAM PORTALIMA: DOPRINOS (I PROMJENA) JAVNE RASPRAVE O PANDEMIJI COVID-19

U radu su analizirani online komentari korisnika na dva glavna hrvatska portala, Index.hr i 24sata.hr, o pandemiji COVID-19 te globalnim zavjerama i lažnim vijestima u kontekstu pada povjerenja u medije. Kodiranje na tri razine provedeno je na 12,910 komentara (2,194 na portalu 24 sata i 10,716 na portalu index.hr) te je provedena tematska analiza. Nalazi su pokazali da glavne teme obuhvaćaju globalne teorije zavjere, uključujući fašizam kao jednu od glavnih tema te nevjericu u stvarnost pandemije i negativne stavove mainstream medija koji se smatraju isprepletenima s Vladom i promiču jednostrana stajališta. Budući da su nalazi bili neočekivani, posebno s obzirom na veliku kritiku medija i zbog velike količine sadržaja povezanog sa zavjerama na dva portala od kojih niti jedan inače nije povezan s ultra desnicom, provedena je abduktivna analiza. Rezultati su otkrili da je većinu sadržaja u komentarima korisnika koji se tiču fašizma i ropstva objavila ili ekstremno desna politička stranka (na Index.hr) ili dva neidentificirana korisnika (na 24sata.hr) (vjerojatno ekstremno desničarski aktivisti) i u oba slučajeva, komentari su kopirani, uključujući gramatičke pogreške. Ovo signalizira pokušaj krajnje desnice u Hrvatskoj da ne samo pridonese, već i manipulira javnim mnijenjem i raspravama te nepažljivom čitatelju da lažan dojam o stavovima hrvatske javnosti o pandemiji COVID-19.

Ključne riječi: *publike, lažne vijesti, Hrvatska, javno mnijenje, povjerenje u medije, ultra desničarski aktivizam, manipulacija, COVID-19 pandemija, koronavirus, novinski portali, zavjere, online ponasanje.*