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The Affinity of the Former Czech Prime Minister Andrej Babiš Towards Alternative Media on Facebook¹

Abstract: There was found just one preference for alternative or controversial sources that Babiš designated as permanently liked media sources on FB. Surprisingly, Babiš did not even “like” permanently any of those media that he purchased a few years earlier and put into the governance of a special foundation while acting like a politician. Babiš preferred quality economic business magazines and journals. He liked only one media source that could be considered alternative media – Internet TV XTV. However, not even this online TV can be seen as a traditional alternative/disinformation medium, but rather as a borderline case. Andrej Babiš on FB also liked pages of NGOs, cultural institutions, and some other rather unusual non-political activities.

Key words: Babiš, ANO, Czechia, populism, alternative media, social media, Facebook, button like

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Introduction

Allegedly, the link between populist politics and the media landscape, including social media, was never so close and intertwined in the Czech Republic as it was during the government of Andrej Babiš (2017–2021) and his political party ANO (Action of Dissatisfied Citizens, in the Czech language, this abbreviation means “YES”). Some observers labelled this connection as a threat to the “Berlusconisation” of Czech politics (Hornát, 2013) or, in general, searched for similarities with Italian politics (Buras, 2016). Others saw more general trends of the personalisation of politics, and in particular, the ‘presidentialisation’ of politics as suggested by Poguntke and Webb (2005) or as discussed in the example of the Czech Republic and Slovenia by Cabada and Tomšič (2016). Buščíková & Guasti (2018) suggest that the ascendancy of ANO and its chairman Andrej Babiš was enabled by the lack of regulation and the departure of the Western European media owners from the Czech Republic after the economic crisis of 2008/9. It is probably not a coincidence and certainly worth mentioning that also the social media use (or Web 2.0) tools have gradually been on the rise in political communication since that time (with first experiments with social media noticed among political parties already before the 2006 general elections), i.e., during and after the 2010 general elections (Císař, Štětka, 2016; Eibl, Gregor, 2019). Election campaigns on social media have been the key to electoral success in the last years in Czechia (Šlerka, 2021). Within this context, especially Facebook (FB) facilitates impact on potential (undecided) voters. It also provides feedback for the party’s efforts and manifestos and makes them known, while at the same time, social media allow targeting specific audiences for a relatively low cost (Šlerka in Burda, 2021). Online sources, including social media, have become top news sources, with an 87% share in 2020. Although TV broadcast was the second most popular source of news with 74%, social media reached the 50% threshold as a source of news. Among social media, 42% of FB users found it useful as a news source (*Reuters Institute*, 2021, p. 73).

Moreover, the Czech Republic is an interesting case from a political science perspective since it is arguably one of the “least-likely cases” for populism to succeed due to – for example – the presence of the strong middle class (Buščíková, Guasti, 2018, p. 303). However, the population with populist attitudes can be estimated at a rather high 60% rate (Fletcher, 2019).

The Czech media landscape is highly concentrated, with a few local media owners (Vojtěchovská, 2017). For example, in 2020, there were

three strong media groups in the TV sector (including PSM), three dominant groups in the print sector and four strong groups in the radio sector (Mediaguru, 2021). Therefore, it can be assumed that social and alternative media may form a balancing, indeed alternative feature in this media ecosystem. We tried to find out how this interaction of alternative or legacy media works in the online world – specifically on FB. This contribution aims to determine whether, in the case of Andrej Babiš, there were more permanent preferences given for alternative media on FB than the traditional mainstream ones, based on the hypothesis that alternative media will be closer to then Prime Minister Andrej Babiš. In short, the article focuses on the use of the FB button „like” used for a more permanent designation of “liked” journalists and media organisations in the case of the then (and still) chairman Andrej Babiš (FB page created in January 2013, followed by over 260,000 followers and with over 221,000 likes in early 2020) of the Czech political party ANO (FB page followed by 97,814 followers and with 104,098 likes). This research was carried out with a new methodology never used before in this country’s case or elsewhere. The research methodology is described in a separate article published in this volume. It allows for a more in-depth contextualisation of our study.

First, the examination of the social media and political communication in the country is followed by a discussion about the definition and the roles of alternative, usually seen as fake news media in the country. The local definitions that are used are not quite consistent. Furthermore, a brief overview of political party composition may be useful for international readers, not that much familiar with the local party politics. This overview is useful for clarifying what is meant by a “populist” politician in a local context. It allows putting rather surprising findings in a broader media and political system context.

The Social Media and Political Communication in Czechia

During and after the general elections in 2010, more political actors started to reach out to marketing professionals to gain support among voters (Hanley, 2012; Eibl, Gregor, 2019). It included turning to social media, too. For example, the Public Affairs party (VV) was the first business-driven party that adopted Web 2.0 tools for their campaign communication in 2010 (Císař, Štětka, 2016), although Eibl and Gregor (2019, p. 105) argued that it was TOP 09 that was more proficient in communicating on FB and other

social media during the 2010 general elections. However, another study claims that parties at that time and a few years later were, by and large, targeting their traditional voters on FB rather than specific segments of voters (Klupal, 2016). ANO might be among the first political parties that adopted highly professional political marketing campaigning, also on social media. During the 2013 general election campaign, the staff of ANO implemented and formulated an electoral strategy, used internal market research, classified the electorate, and identified the key segments of the voter. This professional targeting helped ANO successfully mobilise the segment of disgruntled voters in the 2013 general elections (Kubánek, 2016).

Macková (2017) offered a detailed overview of social media usage by Czech politicians and citizens in 2013–2015. The majority of the MPs did not seem to be very successful in attracting more significant attention from potential voters. In her conclusion, social media may be seen as a supplement or synergy with the traditional media in political communication. Nevertheless, Babiš has used social media to style himself as a straight-talking politician or one from the crowd who can interpret the complexities of EU policies without losing the down-to-earth manner, while his Twitter and FB feeds frequently featured “first-hand” stories from high-profile meetings at the EU level (Sybera, 2019). His regular Sunday FB stream, called “Čau lidi” (“Hello People”), gained enormous popularity and a high level of engagement from his followers. This case, once again, proves that Babiš’s PR and communication team is highly skilled and could professionally address a gap in the communication between the state and its citizens (Tvrdoň, 2019b). The regular Sunday shout-outs brought a mixture of personal and work-related messages combined with announcements for the future (Tvrdoň, 2019a). The Sunday briefs were typical for their emotional character, inconsistency, manipulation of information, and not giving context to information (Tvrdoň, 2019a). The then Czech Prime Minister also spoke several times about esoteric and astrological signs as well as horoscope projections and praised the natural powers for keeping the Czech safe during the COVID-19 pandemic (Malát, 2020), which he initially tried to downplay (Moláček, 2020). Babiš, as the head of the Czech government, listened to the advice of his Swiss astrologist and spoke at length about the historical precedent when famous leaders followed such advice (Hovorková, 2020).

One could wonder what was then the role of alternative media in this communication mix? However, we must first discuss the local understanding of alternative media, which is not such a clear-cut concept.

Alternative Media in Czechia

It needs to be specified what is meant by alternative media in Czechia. The Czech Republic belongs to those countries where alternative media are usually perceived in the mainstream discourse as spreading mainly fake news, conspiracy theories, or disinformation. Sometimes, even published studies do not differentiate between these sources and use the term “alternative and tabloid media” (Smolík, Đorđević, 2020). However, academically and historically, their operationalisation is more complex. Alternative media are usually understood as those using various types of alternative content. According to this explanation, alternative media played an important role as voices of relatively marginal opposition, including politics or society. Unlike the legacy mainstream media, the alternative media tend to be non-commercial projects that pursue the interests out of the mainstream, such as the poor, political and ethnic minorities, etc. Thus, alternative media help social groups strengthen their identity and spread their views among the general public. There are some lists of alternative sources, by default mostly or exclusively online, such as *British Letters* (www.blisty.cz), independent (online only) TV (www.video.aktualne.cz/dtv/) or newspaper *Alarm* (<https://a2larm.cz/tema/publicistika/>) and newspaper *Deník Referendum* (<https://denikreferendum.cz/>)².

The project “Mapa médií” (Media map project) works with its own methodology and divides the Czech media scene into eight different categories, among them – for example – mainstream media, yellow press or market-driven and analytical-investigative projects (Šlerka, 2018). The project would label the selected media as “Názorové deníky” (Op-Ed newspapers) and draw a line between them and the so-called “anti-system webs” (by others also called pro-Russian or disinformation media) (Sawiris, 2020). Among the latter group, Media Map includes the following online news sources: bezpolickekekorektnosti.cz, AC24, aeronet.cz, zvedavec.org or vlasteneckenoviny.cz, and a number of others (Šlerka, 2018). Ultimately, the Media Map finds three basic groups of the media in Czechia: the anti-system, tabloid and mainstream. The alternative media sometimes fight back against negative public or expert labelling. Thus, Parlamentnílisty.cz (Parliamentary Newspaper – unfortunately, a misleading name that has nothing to do with the Parliament), is one of these outlets that are usually put into the disinformation or anti-system

² <http://www.ceskyrozhled.cz/odkazy-altermedia>.

category (Smolík, Dorđević, 2020) (yet for the Media Map it is seen as a “political tabloid” that is part of the anti-system group media sources), launched court cases first with the (Slovak) court in 2018 to issue a preventive measure against activities of debunking activists, and later sued a special debunking portal *konspiratori.sk* located in Slovakia. The court case started in late 2020 (Breiner, 2020).

Some of these online alternative media were blocked by the non-state authority during the Russian-Ukrainian war in early 2022.

Syrovátka and Pinkas (2020) divided the alternative media, based on how they portrayed the COVID-19 pandemic, into three distinct categories: Quasi-media platforms, Blogosphere, and Conspiracy sites. The Quasi-media platforms attempted to present themselves as standard online news outlets and provided the most unbiased coverage of ongoing events among analysed platforms. They did not manipulate their audiences with complete falsehoods, but their bias was visible from their choices of headlines or the attention that was dedicated to various events. The blogosphere on their websites involved mainly heavily biased commentaries. Only the conspiracy websites published outright lies and dubious and extravagant theories in a significant volume, mostly finding inspiration abroad.

Clearly, the conceptualisation of the alternative media in Czechia is blurred. Neither the anti-system websites nor conspiracy sites can be seen as fair categories of the alternative media with alternative political news with a heavy dose of disinformation or misinformation. First, the anti-system websites may not be actually against liberal democracy. Second, the conspiracy sites represent only a marginal part of the alternative media. In such a case, the Quasi-media platforms are not sufficient to describe the remaining alternative media landscape, either. As discussed in a common theoretical chapter, Hájek and Carpentier (2015) suggested the notion of “alternative mainstream media” as well as “hybrid” media.

Political Party Landscape

This overview is important because it will show that the ANO party and Babiš’s ascendancy was caused by a political/moral crisis rather than social media. The political landscape in the Czech Republic was seen as relatively fixed for about two decades after the fall of communism (Cirhan, Kopecký, 2017). Two leading blocks had been present for a long

time: one usually led by the right-wing Civic Democrats (ODS, Civic Democratic Party) and the other led by the Social Democracy (ČSSD). In addition, traditionally, the Communists as a protest party and the Christian Democrats as one of the representatives of the centrist ideology had a strong position. The Czech party system began to change around 2010, when both ODS and ČSSD lost their popularity due to systemic corruption scandals, clientelism and intra-party fight. In addition, Hájek (2017) claims that the threat of the European financial crisis and criticism of the increasing public debt were also perceived as important political issues. Brunclík and Kubát (2014) recognised three main dimensions of the Czech political crisis: a crisis of confidence in politics, a crisis in the Czech party system and the weakness of the Czech parliamentary regime. Logically, new political alternatives were sought and offered. The mainstream parties, in general, were largely viewed as having morphed into a “cartel of insiders” (Jarábik, Učeň, 2018). Seongcheol (2020) observed that these changes marked the culmination of at least three notable developments in the Czech party politics: 1) the rise of ANO to the status of the main governing party within a few years since its foundation; 2) the confirmed unwillingness of ANO to govern with its far-right populist competitor, Tomio Okamura’s Freedom and Direct Democracy (SPD), in a ‘populist coalition’; and 3) the inclusion of the Communists in a governing arrangement for the first time since the 1990s. Balík and Hloušek (2016) define the 2010–2013 period as a turning point in the Czech party system. Thus, between 2009 and 2014 – two election periods for the European Parliament – the Czech political party landscape almost completely transformed (Kaniok, 2014). One of these political newcomers was the ANO political movement established exactly during this political crisis, specifically in 2011 (not yet formally registered as a political party) as ANO 2011. The ANO political movement has been defined as a catch-all political party, business party (Hloušek, Kopeček, 2017), entrepreneurial party (Brunnerová, 2019), more similar to a political company than just a party (Círhan, Kopecký, 2017), centrist technocratic populism (Kubánek, 2016; Bušítková, Guasti, 2018; Havlík, 2019) or a populist party (e.g. Rovný in Horký, 2020) or even as a marketing party (Kubánek, 2016).

According to the Populism and Political Parties Expert Survey (POP-PA), the ANO populism index was 6.75 on a 10 points scale.³ However,

³ <http://poppa-data.eu/>.

Kubánek (2016, p. 344) believes that ANO's political identity is less defined by the traditional understanding of populism than certain typical features of populism. Thus, when using the available concepts, ANO was, in his opinion, a typical example of "The Tactical Populist" party cited Henneberg's (2006) as a concept of marketing strategy. Alternatively, Kubánek (2016) suggested using the term "The Marketing Tactician" party. It would, in his view, underline the importance of political marketing instead of populism in this case. It is indeed an important observation that should deserve more attention among political scientists. Indeed, a spatial analysis of roll-call voting in the Czech lower parliamentary chamber after the 2013 elections found that ANO occupied the ideological centre. Since this method is based on the actual voting of MPs in the Parliament, it is possible to infer conclusions from the ideological positions of legislators and the party (Hájek, 2016).

Although ANO did not succeed in the 2012 elections to the Senate (the Upper House of the Czech Parliament), it was very successful in the 2013 general elections when it surprisingly was placed second, only to finally win the 2017 parliamentary elections with almost 30% of the vote. ANO, led by Babiš, formed a minority government with the Social Democrats, backed by the Communists, in 2018. Meanwhile, ANO won elections to the European Parliament in May 2014; the party repeated this electoral success in October 2014 by receiving the highest support in the municipal elections.

Seongcheo (2020) sees the ANO as a political subject that constructs 'hard work' in a populist manner against the ('traditional') 'parties', while the SPD articulates an exclusion of non-working 'unadaptables'. Indeed, the SPD is closer to the Western European far-right parties than to the Jobbik of Hungary or the far-right movements in Poland (Šimečka, 2017).

Experts share a consensus that Andrej Babiš is the key player behind the ANO. Babiš calls himself a pragmatist (Hejl, 2017) and describes himself as a political and non-ideological, successful entrepreneur who remains close to the people (Buščíková, Guasti, 2018). Indeed, Babiš likes to present himself as a self-made businessman fed up with corruption and incompetence in Czech politics. In contrast, Šimečka (2017) called Babiš a quintessential opportunist, deprived of any coherent set of ideas, let alone any alternative vision of political order.

In 2013, the ANO became the second-strongest political party, joined the government as a junior partner with the Social Democrats and Babiš became the minister of finance and the deputy prime minister. In 2017,

he won the general elections, and since July 2018, he has been the prime minister. The ANO reached surprisingly good results of 27,1% in the 2021 general elections.

Bušťíková and Guasti (2018) mention as the defining feature of Andrej Babiš's communication the combination of a technocratic language focused on economic policy with the language of the so-called "ordinary people". Moreover, an analysis by Havlík and Voda (2018) suggested that support for the ANO, as one of the typical "centrist populist political parties", can be seen as a "vote for hope". In other words, it was the desire for a "different" or "alternative" politics. It can be assumed that this will be reflected in his preference for the media sources on his FB account. In a sense, this was indeed the case. However, there was no preference for alternative media.

The Use of FB "Like" Button on the Official Andrej Babiš's FB Profile

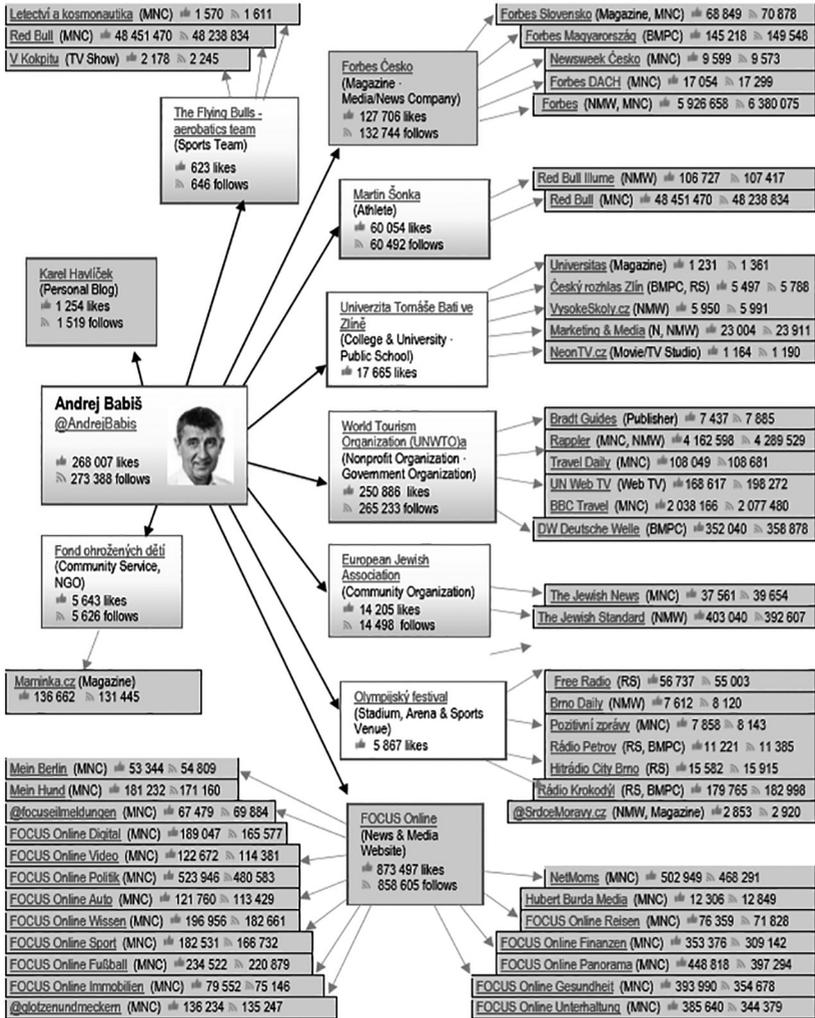
Andrej Babiš's FB page (Charts 1a, b) is related to the FB pages with various backgrounds. They can be divided into three main categories: (A) the FB entertainment pages, (B) the FB pages of various institutions and organisations (both the civic and state sector), (C) the Personalities FB pages. Thus, in contrast to the ANO FB page (not discussed here), the FB page of Andrej Babiš connections was different.

Within the first level of connection, the FB category was linked with the FB entertainment pages of various backgrounds, such as a sports team, video game studio, or festival. The second category within the first level of connection was linked with various institutions or organisations related to culture, media, or other non-profit activities. The last category of the FB pages within the first level of connection was related to the public figures of Czechia – over-representation was visible among the FB pages of popular athletes that also had an impact on the second level of connection.

The second level of connection was closely associated with the first level, namely, the entertainment and culture categories. The most interesting observation of the personal Andrej Babiš profile is the specification of his connections – mainly focused on culture and entertainment. It can be argued that this reflects his true personal interests, rather than political interests, or interests utilised for his political communication.

Chart 1a. The Andrej Babiš's "Liked" Pages on Facebook

The Three Level Network Analysis of Andrej Babiš - Personal Facebook Page "Liked" Pages with Focus at the Media/Information Sources as of June 2020 Part 1



MNC-MediaNews Company, NMW-News & Media Website, RS-Radio Station, N-Newspaper, BMPC-Broadcasting & Media Production Company

Chart 1a reveals the first part of the FB pages, on which Andrej Babiš's public FB profile used the „like” button. We found only two media companies among the FB accounts that the Czech P.M.'s site

likes directly. Specifically, it is the Czech language version of the global media FORBES company Forbes and the popular German news portal “FOCUS Online”. The credibility and bias of the Forbes magazine were assessed by the AD Fontes organisation, which reviews reports or articles published in the media using a rigorous methodology and a politically balanced team of analysts. „Forbes is a bi-weekly business magazine published in print and online. It publishes 40 global editions, with print subscriptions totalling more than 6 million, and its website recording 142 million visits monthly. Ad Fontes Media rates Forbes as neutral/balanced in terms of bias and as most reliable”.⁴ “FOCUS Online” is one of the most popular German news Internet portals with a reach of over 27 million people every month. It offers the latest content and solutions in all areas with a great need for information, for example, telecommunications, finance, politics, sport, health, automotive, culture, and travel.⁵

Clearly, “Forbes Česko” and “FOCUS online” represent high-quality, relevant sources of information belonging to the group of the mainstream media with a long tradition and definitely cannot be described as those alternative media which are perceived in the Czech Republic as platforms for misinformation and disinformation.

Other sites that the Czech P.M. „liked” on FB belong to the non-governmental, community organisations such as Fond ohrožených dětí (the Endangered Children Foundation), the World Tourism Organization and the European Jewish Association. Andrej Babiš’s FB page also likes the profile of Tomáš Baťa University in Zlín.

Chart 1a also shows that Andrej Babiš is a fan of sports, specifically the Red Bull Air Race World Championship and especially the Czech representative in this competition, fighter and aerobatic pilot Martin Šonka. The P.M. also likes the Czech team of aerobatic pilots, The Flying Bulls.

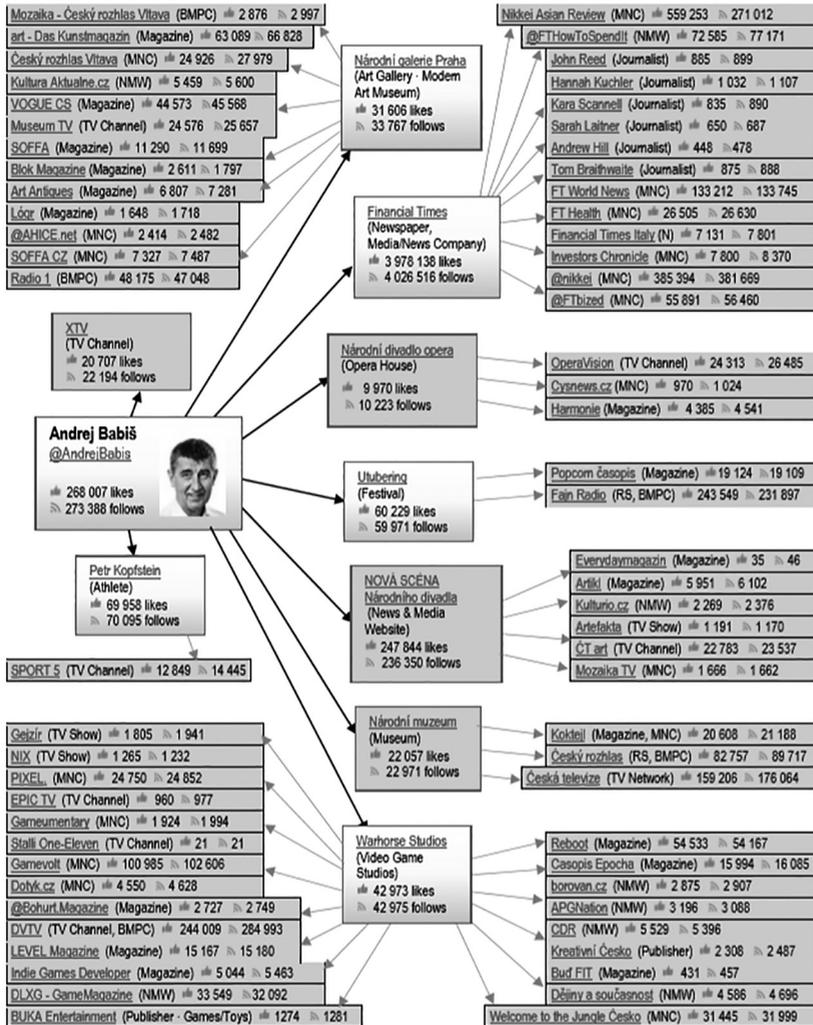
Overall, it can be concluded from Chart 1a that the Czech P.M. Andrej Babiš monitors or prefers the quality and relevant sources of information on FB, and there is no medium among his “liked” preferences that could be described as an alternative source engaged in disinformation or misinformation activities.

⁴ Ad Fontes Media, *Forbes Bias and Reliability Overview*, “Ad Fontes media”, 2020, <https://www.adfontesmedia.com/forbes-bias-and-reliability/>.

⁵ “Daily digital facts”, *AGOF digital facts*, September 15, 2020, <https://www.agof.de/service-downloads/downloadcenter/download-daily-digital-facts/>.

Chart 1b: The Andrej Babiš's „Liked” Pages on Facebook

The Three Level Network Analysis of Andrej Babiš - Personal Facebook Page "Liked" Pages With Focus at the Media/Information Sources as of June 2020 Part 2



MNC-Media/News Company, NMW-News & Media Website, RS-Radio Station, N-Newspaper, BMPC-Broadcasting & Media Production Company

Chart 1b shows other FB profiles to which Andrej Babiš used the „like” button through his FB page. Again, among the “liked” media sources were only two accounts of media companies, namely the page of

the Financial Times, a well-known global business journal and the page of the Czech Internet television XTV. Ad Fontes Media rates Financial Times as neutral/balanced in terms of bias and as most reliable.⁶

XTV is the first FB site directly “liked” by Andrej Babiš that we can consider as an alternative media. XTV is an Internet TV channel operating since 2017 by Lubomír “Xaver” Veselý. It states that it is an independent medium with the ambition to bring its viewers interviews with personalities of the Czech public life – their attitudes, opinions, arguments and comments directly to their computers or mobile devices. We could describe XTV as an alternative medium since it gives considerable space in its broadcast (interviews) to representatives of the Czech nationalist, Eurosceptic or populist parties such as Tomio Okamura or Václav Klaus Jr., chair of the TRIKOLORA party. However, mainstream media also re-broadcast these professional videos, such as Seznam.cz (Berger, 2020). Moreover, representatives of almost all political parties visited the XTV studio. Still, almost the entire leadership of the TRIKOLORA party (right-wing Eurosceptic) and other movement representatives have also appeared in the broadcast there. It is a promotion that probably no other medium in the Czech Republic has offered to Václav Klaus Jr. Thus, the XTV can be described as an alternative medium, which promotes a certain (more towards the political right) agenda, but not exactly the one that would systematically spread disinformation or misleading content. If this was the case, then it would be unlikely that Jan Cemper, the editor-in-chief of the Manipulatoři.cz debunking portal would accept an invitation to its programme.⁷ A correct way would be to say that the XTV is a borderline case. It serves as a platform for the occasional spreading of disinformation. Interestingly, the online TV station became one of the main channels for attacking the editorial independence of the public broadcaster Czech TV. It illustrates that the channel of Xaver Veselý, who sits on the Board of the public channel, serves to promote political or his own hidden business agenda.⁸

⁶ *Financial Times Bias and Reliability Overview*, “Ad Fontes media”, 2020, <https://www.adfontesmedia.com/financial-times-bias-and-reliability/>.

⁷ Interview with Jan Cemper, 17.12.2020 v 18:00, XTV, <https://xtv.cz/jb-talk/skolime-pracovniky-ministerstva-vnitra-jak-pracovat-s-dezinformacemi-spolupracujeme-s-clovekem-v-tisni-odjizdime-skoly-a-delame-prednasky-rika-jan-cemper-sefredaktor-manipulatori-cz>.

⁸ *Hrad má smlouvu s XTV na skrytou reklamu. Cena je 24 tisíc za rozhovor* [The Castle (meaning the Office of the President) has a contract with XTV on hidden adver-

Furthermore, Andrej Babiš's FB page has liked pages of some Czech cultural institutions, such as the National Gallery in Prague, the National Opera Theatre, the National Museum and the New Stage of the National Theatre.

The Czech P.M. is no stranger to the world of the online influencers, as evidenced by his "likes" on the Utubering website, which is an annual festival where the stars of the Czech and Slovak YouTube scene go to meet their fans, for whom various activities are prepared, as well as a music programme. The Utubering page on FB, on the other hand, "likes" the media accounts aimed mainly at the young generation, such as the Popcorn magazine and the Fajn Radio station. It is interesting that Andrej Babiš also "likes" the website of the Warhorse studio in Prague.

It can be concluded that Andrej Babiš prefers the quality, globally popular business, finance and economic newspapers and magazines on FB, enjoys sports and culture, and is also interested in successful young creators of original online content. He also "likes" the XTV internet television, which shows the signs of an alternative medium since it also invites guests close to the Czech radical or extremist scene to its discussion programmes. However, this medium explains its action by saying that it is an independent medium that does not shy away from allowing everyone to express himself and does so, without any editorial work. Thus, it cannot be described as an explicitly conspiratorial, disinformation or misinformation medium spreading harmful content on the Internet. Nonetheless, it is true that the XTV serves more and more as a platform for expressing particular points of view critical of the so-called establishment, measures taken against the COVID-19 pandemic or independence of the Czech TV public broadcaster, which would speak in favour of promoting illiberal agenda.

Conclusion

This article presents the analysis use and significance of the button "like" on the FB page of Andrej Babiš, the leader of the ANO Czech political party and then prime minister of Czechia for a more permanent

tising. Its price is 24,000 per interview], "Forum 24", October 8, 2019, <https://www.forum24.cz/hrad-ma-smlouvu-s-xtv-na-skrytou-reklamu-cena-je-24-tisic-za-rozhovor/>.

“liking” of selected, namely media-related sources. The assumption that populist leaders “like” the alternative media understood as disinformation media was found incorrect. The FB personal profile of Andrej Babiš used the “like” button to connect to the FB pages of several media companies. However, he preferred the quality economic business magazines and journals like Forbes Česko or Financial Times and a popular German news magazine, “FOCUS online”. He “liked” only one media source we can consider the alternative – the XTV. It is an Internet television channel that hosts politicians from the government or Parliament and some far-right representatives. However, it is not a typical disinformation medium, even if its content is sometimes highly manipulative, spreads disinformation and lacks any editorial policy. Rather, it can be seen as a border case, or *sui generis* example.

On FB, Andrej Babiš also “liked” the NGOs and cultural institutions pages. He seems to be a big fan of flying sports, Czech sports, acrobatic pilots, and even video game creators or young internet influencers. Surprisingly, he did not “like” any of those many media purchased a few years earlier and put into the governance of a special foundation.⁹

The current findings question the popular assumptions that there is a popular link between “alternative” politics as represented allegedly or really by the populist leaders and movements and “alternative” (often regarded as of low quality, misinformation or disinformation) media. This finding indirectly questions the implicit irrationality often attributed to Babiš, who was seen as a populist leader. However, it also must be acknowledged that liberal education (Danin, 2011), or, in our case – following the liberal media – does not necessarily result in a higher level of humanity or rationality.

In a sense, this study also offers some initial data for further exploration into political psychology and political marketing. It is no coincidence that Babiš belongs to the more popular politicians on FB than his movement. Clearly, his social media communication matters. It does not seem to be just an accident that Babiš and his ANO emerged during an internal socio-political crisis in the Czech Republic. Although social media were helpful in his political communication, they did not facilitate his political success story alone. Apparently, neither traditional media played a very relevant role in that case – be it positive or negative. As mentioned, it is

⁹ Mediaguru, *Aktualizovaná mapa vlastníků českých médií* [An Updated Map of Czech Media Owners] (2019, March 21), <https://www.mediaguru.cz/clanky/2019/03/aktualizovana-mapa-vlastniku-ceskych-medii/>.

a bit of a paradox to have a populist politician who follows the high quality international liberal media.

This research provides some data that document the political and personal statements in the form of a more permanent “liking” on FB by an important politician in the Czech Republic. Considering the liquid substance of online communication and online data in general, it is a unique data archive that can serve for future references and comparative research. Further aspects of Babiš’s political communication on FB, such as intentionality versus randomness of his connections, can be examined. The role of the administrators or political consultants behind these connections (if any) can also be researched in the future.

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Stosunek byłego premiera Czech Andreja Babiša wobec mediów alternatywnych na Facebooku

Streszczenie

Odkryto tylko jedną preferencję wobec alternatywnych lub kontrowersyjnych źródeł, które Babiš określił jako stale lubiane źródła medialne na FB. Co zaskakujące, Babiš nawet nie „polubił” na stałe żadnego z tych mediów, które zakupił kilka lat wcześniej i przekazał zarządzanie nimi specjalnej fundacji, samemu zachowując się przy tym jak polityk. Babiš preferował wysokiej jakości czasopisma ekonomiczne i biznesowe. Spodobało mu się tylko jedno źródło mediów, które można uznać za media alternatywne – Internet TV XTV. Jednak nawet ta internetowa stacja telewizyjna nie może być postrzegana jako tradycyjne medium alternatywne/dezinformacyjne, ale raczej jako przypadek graniczny. Andrej Babiš polubił też na FB strony organizacji pozarządowych, instytucji kultury i inne, dość nietypowe aktywności o niepolitycznym charakterze.

Słowa kluczowe: Babiš, ANO, Czechy, populizm, media alternatywne, media społecznościowe, Facebook, przycisk „Lubię to”