

Hungarian journalists' practices on social media platforms in light of the concept of the “networked journalist”

A prevalent reticence to engage in dialogue with the users

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Abstract

The newly emerging practices of digital culture exert an effect on the changing praxis of journalism, but the manner of their adoption is not pre-determined. North-Atlantic journalists for instance are keen to use *Twitter*, the social micro-blog platform, to promote their work as well as to engage in dialogue with their colleagues and with their audience. In the event of breaking news, journalists on *Twitter* can be engaged in networked framing or collaborative production with the users, hence perform transparent news-making. The tech-savviness of Hungarian journalists vary, but they are less likely to use social media platforms to crowdsource their aggregated human resources or to discuss professional issues than journalists socialised in the liberal media model. The article is presenting the potential causes of that collective journalistic behavior pattern through an ethnographic analysis of the Hungarian online journalistic field.¹

Keywords: networked journalist, journalistic praxis, digital culture, participatory culture, professionalization, Kiss László scandal, Origo, Index, ≠ metoo

1. Current issues of media ethnography related to the networked information ecosystem

These days one of the most prominent subjects of the sociology/ethnography of journalism literature is how journalists adapt to the swiftly changing digital culture. Some scholars argue that in this process the profession is undergoing a profound transformation (Allen 2012, Boyer 2013, Jenkins 2016, Ryfe 2016, Usher 2016), while others explore how the journalists legitimize their roles in the many-to-many, sharing-based news economy and whether via this process we can witness the deprofessionalization of journalism (Örnebring 2012, Fenton 2012). Another important theme in the literature is what old-new norms journalists adhere to in order to fulfill their democratic responsibilities (Schudson 2013), and lastly what relationship they envisage and have vis-a-vis the users of social media platforms (Anderson 2011, Meraz & Papacharissi, 2013)?

This article aims to contribute to that broad discourse by bringing into focus the Hungarian news media field, where, due to the post-communist context, press freedom is much less obvious than for instance in journalistic cultures starting off with the liberal model. Why is it that Hungarian journalists tend to discuss professional issues within closed groups and that they are less likely to build their brands on social media platforms? At the same time, they rarely exploit the aggregated human resources for investigation or fact-checking, although they actively monitor those same social media sites. I tend to see a correlation between this restricted

¹ I am grateful for the Center for Media, Data and Society (CMDS) at CEU to provide me space and help in conducting part of my research for the paper.

use of the social media and the level of tech-savviness, and how much they actually *trust* the „aggregated wisdom” of the users. The chief research question of this article is the following: *What elements of the Hungarian online journalistic culture play a role in Hungarian journalists’ reticence to adopt the participatory practices of digital culture such as facilitation of dialogue or collaborative news production?* Phrasing the research question more in line with the literature to be discussed further: Why only a few attributes of the „networked journalist type” are present on the Hungarian online journalistic field?

2. Methodology

To answer my research question, phrased above, I used the classical tools of ethnographic approach. I did my fieldwork, lasting 4 months, back in 2013 at an online newsroom, where I also conducted personal, semi-structured interviews. The newsroom was Origo, before it was taken over by a pro-government owner. I visited the newsroom two or three times a week, mainly observing the work of the *current news* column, but also interviewed journalists from other columns. I made approximately 30 interviews, and participated at the morning editorial meetings. In the following years I supplemented my empirical findings with interviews with journalists working at other online newspapers. Meanwhile, a project called Hungarian Online and Digital Media History (MODEM) has also been launched, so I also used their resources, such as interviews with journalists and a document called “MATAV study” from 1997, which included the original plan and vision for the Origo news site at the very beginning of the internet era.

My paper also includes a mini case study to demonstrate the ambivalence of the networked mentality among Hungarian online journalists. The case centers around the scandal of the national swimming women team coach, László Kiss, which undoubtedly shook the public, hence had profound repercussion on social media platforms. With regard to the Kiss case, my point of inquiry was whether professional journalists engaged in dialogue with their online audience for investigating and interpreting the story, whether they conversed with users of social media, and how willingly they shared related content, not produced by their respective newspapers. In other words: how much they stepped out from behind their institutional walls to display a networked, collaborative mentality. For the content analysis of the case study I used the real-time text-analyzing software of Neticle. (here I express my gratitude to the staff of Neticle for giving access to their software and helping me in its usage).

3. The global context: the digital news environment and the transformed needs of news consumers

The fact that journalists are faced with new roles in the digital public sphere as opposed to the era of traditional mass media, is not new in the literature. But with the emergence of web2, the users not only give feedback on the content provided for them, but they also put forward their own agendas, and come up with new expectations towards the professional media.

To reiterate, the chief question of this paper is to see how the Hungarian journalists behave on social media platforms and why this is so. Before looking at it, however, it is worth summarizing how the meaning of news as a cultural artifact has changed in this new communication environment. In the context of the web2, there are three attributes of the news that have changed fundamentally: how they are generated, how long they “live” and how they spread. The generation of news have become much less predictable, as any event can become public without the professional media. The life-cycle of news has prolonged, because the economic logic of the online media dictates that the paper keeps its users in its universe, which together with the news race enabled the practice of constant updates of the articles, and the multiplatform coverage of the same stories on different channels in different formats. Plus, due to the producing power of the lay audience, news constantly evolve and branch into new directions. Finally, the networked logic plays into their spread/distribution, where the social media platforms’ algorithms and the preferences of their users currently play major roles. According to Alfred Hermida (2010) all this creates an ambient news media environment for the fragmented public. In the era of digital, globalized media, there is a trend towards the homogenization of journalistic practice, all tending towards the liberal model (Hallin & Mancini 2014). Nevertheless, there are a number of differences in the journalistic practices in different countries, since the journalistic cultures and the local media markets are highly different.

Mark Deuze argued in an earlier study (2008) that our age is best described by the term, *liquid modernity*, which he borrowed from Zygmund Bauman. The expression refers to a constant transient and accelerated mode, as a result of the fact that the social institutions of modernity, such as the church, the mass media, work, leisure time, private sphere and public sphere have lost their stability. In this liquid modernity, Deuze contends, there are the isolated offline news consumers and the online netizens, who constantly monitor the news and the information available to them. The question is how the press adapts to this general shift of conditions. In the next section I briefly wrap up how researchers interpret the newly emerging journalistic roles in this context to compare it later on with the Hungarian online journalistic praxis.

4. The emerging concept of the „networked journalist”

Many scholars see the survival of journalism as dependent on the appearance of a new type of journalist, whom they call the „networked journalist”. Undoubtedly, being networked has always been a must for any journalist, but the way they conceptualize it is much more dependent on a technological savviness, and the goal is not to get scoops, but to be embedded in social media. David M. Ryfe (2013) writes that a „networked journalist” is engaged in practices such as aggregating, content curation, facilitating conversation, crowdsourcing. He contends that a journalist must function as a filter in the new, networked informational environment. Charlie Beckett (2010) defined networked journalism as follows:

By 'Networked Journalism' I mean a synthesis of traditional news journalism and the emerging forms of participatory media enabled by Web 2.0 technologies such as mobile phones, email, websites, blogs, micro-blogging, and social networks. Networked Journalism allows the public to be involved in every aspect of journalism production through crowd-sourcing, interactivity, hyper-linking, user-generated content and forums. It changes the creation of news from being linear and top-down to a collaborative process. Not all news production will be particularly networked. Not many citizens want to be journalists for much of their time. But the principles of networking are increasingly practiced in all forms of news media.

Shanon Meraz and Zizi Papacharissi (2013) examined the new practices of journalists when they covered the Arab Spring. They made large-sample analysis on Twitter and arrived at the concept of *networked gatekeeping* and *networked framing*.

Both networked gatekeeping and networked framing depend on the algorithmic intelligence of the Web 2.0 socio-technical architectures, which amalgamate collective intelligence in an effortless aggregation, without centralized oversight by an elite group of newsroom gatekeepers. (...) The findings point to new directions for hybrid and fluid journalisms that rely on subjective pluralism, co-creation, and collaborative curation. (Meraz & Papacharissi 2013: 145).

They observed that during the coverage journalists gradually stripped of their objective, reserved attitude and started to engage in more informal dialogue with the Twitter users: they asked more and started to get them verify information.

C. W. Anderson (2011) was looking at how journalists built their legitimacy in the context of web2 as opposed to journalists in previous eras. He arrived at an intriguing conclusion on the causal link between social phenomena and the public expectations from journalism. In the 19th century, the proportion of urban working class has expanded and they displayed a need for shocking and sensational news stories on deviant behavior, which journalists had to dig up at police stations, or at the courts. From then on, the indicator of journalistic expertise was the production of breaking and original stories. In contrast, amidst the current information overload, there sprung a new need in readers, which is the synthesis, prioritization, explanation, contextualization of news. In connection to this, the indicator of journalistic expertise is in large part the appropriation of new platforms, technologies, and the ability to follow the *evolution of news*. In other words, expertise now entails technological skills and familiarity with new platforms, argues Anderson.

More and more scholars observe how these North-Atlantic trends have spread in other cultural contexts. Matthias Revers (2016) compared German and American newsrooms in relation to their blog and Twitter use to see how the traditional news media adopts and professionalizes newly emerging digital media practices. He noticed a sharp difference in the two cultural contexts. Whereas the German journalists displayed a limited use of social media and mainly used it as sources of information, American reporters used them as platforms of expression, as stages for professional performance, of conversation among themselves, with sources and the public, as channels for providing live coverage of events and receiving networked

expertise (Revers in Alexander et al: 2016: 243). In the States, the more readership journalists have for their blogs and the more followers they can boast on their Twitter feed, the bigger professional prestige they accumulate, he wrote. As we will see, the Hungarian journalists in their online practices are more akin to the German journalists.

5. Hungarian journalists' practices on social media

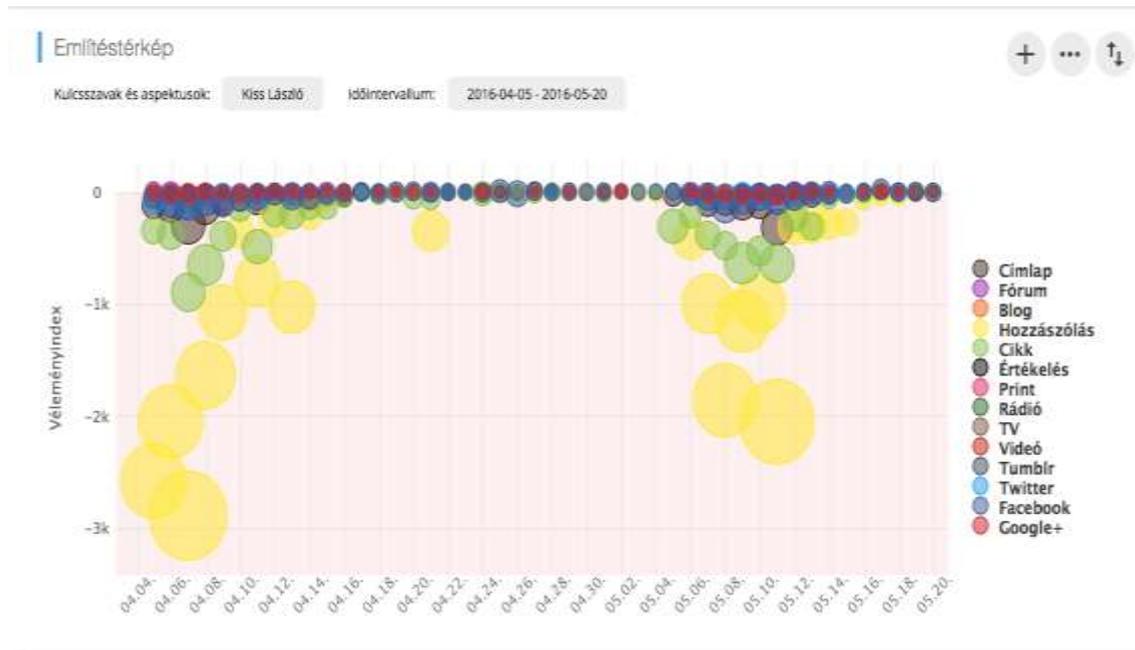
5.1. The Kiss case. Journalists monitor the social media and seek to be the agenda setters

On 2016, April 5 a hardly-known online newspaper (privatkopo.hu) specializing on criminal stories published the story that the national swimming women team coach Laszlo Kiss back in 1961, on 4 July (just one year before the general amnesty of the imprisoned 1956 revolutionaries) gang-raped an 18-year-old girl in the vicinity of the Sport swimming pool with two others. What's more, Kiss did not serve his 3-year prison sentence, maybe because he was co-opted as an informant for the state police.

It was a matter of hours that it spread in the mainstream media. A tabloid, Blikk was the first to report the story, then 444.hu, an online news site. A now late-newspaper, Nepszabadsag made a telephone interview with Kiss, who said that it was a fake trial. The next morning, prominent figures were interviewed on television (including the president of the Hungarian Swimming Association who defended Kiss). Then, as the quote mentioned, some new actors entered the scene, who were not asked but expressed their opinions on their Facebook pages, creating a havoc for their victim-blaming stands. It was a month later, that the former victim, who was declared dead by the media made a public announcement and then was interviewed by a commercial TV station, triggering the public admitting of liability and remorse of Kiss.

Looking at the online evolution of the story (Figure 1), we can see that the mainstream media remained the agenda setter for the story, because the majority of user content was made up of user comments **under the articles**. It could be argued that it already signals a networked mentality if users gather around particular papers to discuss the news, (and not incidentally, it was 444.hu, the most tech-savvy news site, where almost all the commenting activity took place), I still claim that the journalistic decision to not participate in these discussions is significant. In the one-month-period examined (5 April to 20 May) there were 2950 articles, and altogether 18 131 social media posts (Facebook, Twitter, blogs, chat rooms, comments below the articles (see Figure 2).

Figure 1
2016, April 5– May 20, all content divided by channels



Source: Neticle

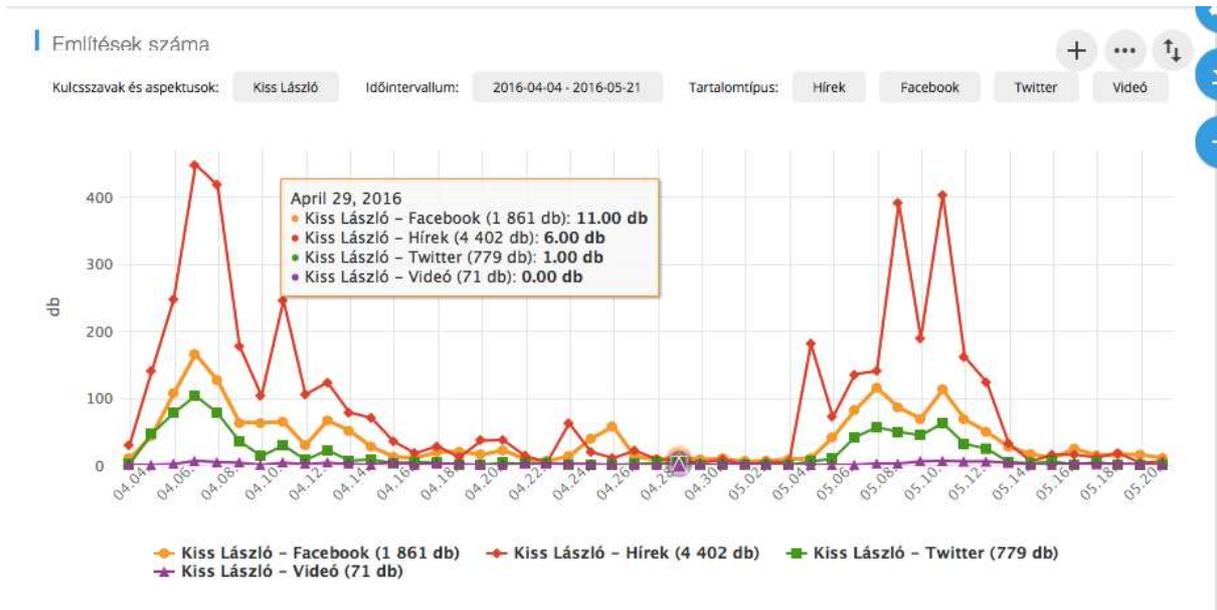
Figure 2
Social media content distribution

ÖSSZESEN	18 131 ▲3334%
SEMLEGES	8 659 ▲2070%
NEGATÍV	7 400 ▲9900%
CÍMLAP	0 %
FÓRUM	505 ▲4108%
BLOG	157 ▲772%
CIKK	0 %
HOZZÁSZÓLÁS	14 507 ▲9702%
ÉRTÉKELÉS	0 %
FACEBOOK	1 909 ▲473%
GOOGLE+	138 ▲4500%
VIDEÓ	91 ▲1038%
TUMBLR	42 ▲%
TWITTER	782 ▲12933%

Source: Neticle

Figure 3 shows how the mainstream media was in accord with the movement of the social media, as the discussions were mostly generated by the freshly published articles, as said earlier.

Figure 3
Mainstream and social media



Source: Neticle

5.2. Twitter was used only as a distribution platform for breaking content of the home sites

Several online newspapers used Twitter to publish their „institutional content”, but individual journalists almost never. The hashtags (which in the analysis of the Arab Spring by Papacharissi and Meraz 2013 served as a tool for the collaborative framing and gatekeeping), were practically not relevant, there were insignificant number of retweets as well.

The open and participatory practices of the networked journalist were not apparent neither on Facebook nor on Twitter. Content curation (linking to other papers’ content or in some instances to social media) was frequent, but always with the aim of providing adequate coverage, hence attracting users to their sites.

Figure 4
Twitter-use for publishing breaking news



Why do Hungarian journalists fail to promote themselves on Twitter and why are they hesitant to engage in conversation with their users or fellow journalists? From the interview excerpt below with a journalist, it seems that the answer is rooted in the interpersonal dynamics of the local journalistic field.

I've been using Twitter for 8 years, I think more or less as I should, also for brand building, but all in vain. This is not the case with Tumblr. I tweet, I retweet, make hashtags, and follow important stuff, professional stuff, but cannot get over 900 followers. The most I can achieve is 9 likes and 7 retweets for a post, but that does not bring new followers. I am willing to share others' articles, and opinions, but there is no reward, Hungarian journalists do not follow back each other and rarely share articles, content from others. I do not know why this is so. (Interview with an unnamed journalist, 2018)

The interviewed journalist mentions Tumblr, where he could build his brand and indeed other journalists also revealed that it is an important platform for them for finding topics, asking questions from fellow journalists, and even recruiting talented people who can write, but Tumblr is for subcultures, and is a much more closed platform than either Twitter or Facebook and require higher technological skills to enter that subfield. If we look at the Kiss case study and Figure 2, we can see that the activity on Tumblr was still insignificant compared to the user comments under the articles or Facebook.

It is obvious that Twitter in the US is a much more popular platform both for journalists and for users than in Hungary. A viral online movement, the #metoo, which in Hungarian media was connected to the Kiss case started on Twitter, and then migrated to Facebook, where on a global scale it attracted 4.7 million posts. "Though many of the stories that have shocked and horrified the entertainment and media worlds originated at storied publications like *The New Yorker* and *The New York Times*, Twitter was where the discussion gained steam, where women's outrage coalesced into something stronger."²

In the Kiss case, however active was the audience, journalists did not proactively participate in these discussions, did not try to facilitate conversation, debate or crowdsource information. They only monitored the social media as outsiders to keep themselves updated and gather snippets of useable content or used these platforms to disseminate their own products.

6. The historical and ethnographic explanation

6.1. The beginnings of Hungarian online journalism

To reiterate my research question, I wanted to identify those professional-cultural factors that play into the particular manner of Hungarian online journalists' practices using social media, compared to American

² Kosoff, Maya: Can Twitter claim the #Metoo movement? 2018, March 5
<https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2018/03/twitter-here-we-are-oscars-ad-harassment> (downloaded on April 10).

journalists. So far, I have shown that Hungarian journalists in general have not adopted the participatory practices. I will now look at the original journalistic role perceptions in the 90s, when online journalism started to develop in Hungary, to trace back their original attitudes to the web and its public.

“In the 1990s and at the turn of the millennium there were at least four, irreconcilable journalistic traditions existing beside each other.” (Bajomi-Lázár 2003: 13). First, despite the political liberation of the press, the “Soviet school” survived, characterized by the exclusive communication of governmental standpoints. Secondly, the European school was also present, which is driven by party and ideology but does not question press freedom and the plurality of opinions. Thirdly, the Anglo-Saxon model entered, which is characterized by objective reporting and internal pluralism. Fourth, as an old-new practice, the tabloid journalism also took hold.” (Bajomi-Lázár 2003). It was into this space that the new online pioneers, Index and Origo stepped in with their unique journalistic attitudes and practices. Origo wanted to adopt the real North-Atlantic liberal model (BBC style) saying that it was totally missing from the journalistic practices.

Reconstructing the history of the Hungarian online journalism, the MODEM project published the original MATAV study from 1997 on its website, including a section on how young journalists envisaged the relationship between the online paper and its audience. They intended to launch a magazine called *Human factor*, where they planned to have (IRC chat/real time) interviews, involving the users into the content creation, which in effect had already been in full force at the rival portal, InterNetto, the predecessor of Index. So, when the internet took off, the interactive, participatory potentials were more in the minds of the journalists and they were willing to make use of it and encourage user activity. They planned content to be edited by the users, an online soap opera for instance. They wanted to commission external authors for opinion pieces, but pointed out that it was important to “avoid the egocentrism and verbosity, so typical of Hungarian opinion writers.”

6.2. The results of the ethnographic fieldwork: Origo during its different phases more and more distanced itself from digital cultural practices

In the introduction I noted that there is of course a correlation between the technological know-how and the willingness to become a “networked journalist.” The two pioneers of Hungarian online newspapers, Index and Origo displayed a very different attitude to the technological aspect of online work. Whereas the Index newsroom merged the editorial work and the IT as much as possible, the Origo newsroom lived far away from the programmers, and the distance only increased during the years.

We believed that being an internet company, our journalists must be comfortable with the web, they should know what HTML is, they should be able to change a video card, and install a driver, they should be able to copy the suitable files to the suitable place even on ftp, etc. They do not have to make programs, but at least understand what is going on. The

programmers on the other hand must be able to think with a journalistic logic [...] Then I was shocked to see that even in 2011, at Origo, the IT division and the journalists lived in two very separate and even antagonistic worlds.³

Origo was founded within a huge Telecom company, and the corporate culture also hindered innovations at the newsroom, but probably it was also comfortable for journalists that they only had to take care of the “traditional” journalistic tasks. Though in 2013, many of them complained about the cumbersome process of content management, and they blamed the corporate structure for it:

There are surely some power games as well. Also, they separated it so much, making different boards, when they thought that the IT can do external jobs as well. It was a total blind road, which was clear in half a year, but then it just stayed like that. Before that, there used to be a part of the production that only worked for us and that was much more efficient, it was working well. (Gergő Sáling, head of news section, 2013)

It further alienated the two divisions - the IT and the newsroom - that they spoke two different languages, which is a recurrent phenomenon in other newsrooms as well. During my ethnographic fieldwork I noticed that technological skills were not overly appreciated at the newsroom. In 2013 one could be a senior editor without much affinity for technology. At the same time, the so-called screen journalism was very strong, even if the head of the news section resented the fact that the journalists do not go out on the streets more, which, given the newsroom’s central location within Budapest, should not have been a problem. (Earlier on it was more in the outskirts).

One of the most prominent changes between print and online media is the real-time measurability of page views and other metrics. When I was observing the news work, the task to monitor the clicks and page views and to refresh or change the articles accordingly was always on a different journalist each day. “This is our Bible”, explained the journalist who was on duty then. The metrics did seem to have an effect on journalists’ evaluations and the news judgement, but objectivity still remained a crucial norm.

Hungarian online native newspapers appeared well before the dawn of the social media when Origo set off with highly innovative plans to collaborate with the public. But after a while, because of the corporate culture, they gradually distanced themselves from digital practices and only dealt with the public in terms of page visits and downloads. The corporate culture of Index was different, and no wonder that later it became the platform for the most popular citizen blog engine. Nevertheless, participatory practices have not become prevalent for the journalists at that newspaper either. In the next section we will try to see why.

³ Tófalvy Tamás: Soha nem voltunk része az újságírószakmának. Interjú Új Péterrel. MODEM. 2016, March 21 <http://www.mediatortenet.hu/2016/03/21/ujpeter/> (letöltés: 2018 IV.10.) *Comment: Peter Uj was asked to help with the redesign of Origo in 2011.*

6.3. Journalists' attitude to the social media

I have mentioned in the previous section that it was Index, the first net-native news portal, which, as opposed to Origo, was willing to reconcile the technological unit with the editorial team from the start. But technological affinity is one thing, the 'trust' factor and the 'openness to dialogue', as well as the "imagination" of the public are another. I conducted interviews with the editor-in-chief and the content strategist in 2016 to ask about their perceived journalistic role and performance in relation to the Kiss case described in 5.1. The editor-in-chief articulated traditional journalistic norms, such as the truth shall be revealed, and that the press should hold the powerful to account. While on the one hand he emphasized the collective work of the press, on the other hand, he proudly said that not once could their outlet take over the agenda setting role during the lifespan of the story:

With the László Kiss case, I think that the press basically did the maximum it could. There was a scandalous case, and as a consequence, not so evident in Hungary, the culprit resigned. It took a long time but all the details of the case became known, with different outlets adding to it in turn. All in all, I think the Hungarian media performed very well in the Kiss case despite the fact that several actors tried to create a smoke screen around it. (Gergely Dudás, editor-in-chief at Index, 2016)

It seems that the editor-in-chief strongly adhered to the modernist concept of the press, who is (alone) able to safeguard democracy. When I asked him about the specific role of the outlet in the Kiss case, the content strategist highlighted other aspects such as the increasing co-dependence and collaboration between the mainstream media and the social media, so his understanding seems to reflect the hybrid modernity concept of Mark Deuze, which stresses transiency and the destabilization of modernist institutions.

The other thread of the Laszlo Kiss case was spreading in the social media. Index dealt with it precisely because it had already been trending in social media and the different actors added their content to it on those platforms as well. Content production has become a collaborative process. Aczél Endre and Sándor Friderikusz had nothing to do with the Kiss case but they first became communication hubs, then actual actors in the story because they expressed their opinions on Facebook. Index also added to it as an online media outlet. What is new is that people do not have to turn to the mainstream media to become actors. (Zoltán Szabó, content strategist, Index)

The content strategist is alluding to certain roles of the "networked journalist" as conceptualized by the literature. However, there is a contradiction between his previous statement on the growing collaboration and co-dependence, where he elevated the public to a quasi-partner role in content production, and this one:

It often happens that we merely clumsily walk behind the events. But as journalists we must somehow hold the news in our hands and from time to time run forward with an opinion piece or a synthesizing article. In the Kiss case, for instance, by writing down what is going on in the professional sports. The potential advantage of Index in relation to social media is

that it can give context and point at deeper connections. The social media is not about that because **the users can only follow the events**. (Zoltán Szabó, content strategist, Index)

It became apparent that journalists themselves are divided on their perceived roles in the digital communication environment, and that at Index, which has always been more innovative than rival online outlets, some features of the „networked journalist” have undoubtedly emerged. However, they are not willing to let go the agenda setting role, which is still an indicator of journalistic expertise and which somehow seems to preclude transparent and collaborative news-making (in the real sense), which seems more fitting to the networked environment.

7. Discussion

The study aimed at understanding why Hungarian journalists are hesitant to adopt participatory practices on social media platforms such as transparent news-making, crowdsourcing, facilitating dialogue, involving the public in fact-checking or verifying information, or to engage in professional dialogue with their colleagues publicly (not in closed groups). As for the literature, we can roughly divide the theories explaining participatory digital journalistic practices into three groups. The first places the emphasis on the individual practices of the journalist, but sees the technology, and the architecture of the platforms as the driving force, so we can ascribe the technologically determinist (which some refer to as utopian) approach to it. (Meraz & Papacharissi 2013). The second stream derives these practices from the digital culture as such, where it's not so much the technology that is important, but the general cultural-communicational context and the needs of the users. Journalists adopt the practices and professionalize them as they have always done in history (Deuze 2008, Anderson 2011, Jenkins 2016). The third theoretical school places a bigger emphasis on the local journalistic and corporate cultures (Revers 2016). The present case study seemed to reinforce this third direction, since we could see that the “networked journalist” type could not even emerge at a newsroom that was dominated by a big, hierarchical corporate structure. This study could also provide a more nuanced understanding of how perceptions about the journalistic role influence the adoption of one particular subset of digital practices within the Central Eastern European context. It seems that in the adoption/lack of adoption of participatory practices, the conceptualization of the public and the self-legitimizing strategies of the journalists play the biggest roles. The fragmented digital audience of the online media is the aggregation of users who have an ambient experience of news and information, which they constantly filter and monitor. The “networked journalist” is ideally able to “herd” those atomized users into communities but that requires a shift in mentality in the case of Hungarian journalists, in order to leave their ivory towers and open themselves up to transparent dialogue and exchange of information with their public and with each other.

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Personally conducted interviews:

- Zoltán Szabó, head of content development at Index (2016)
- Gergely Dudás, editor-in-chief at Index (2016)
- Gergő Sáling, head of news, later editor-in-chief at Origó (2013)
- Albert Gazda, editor-in-chief at Origó (2013)

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