

The Business of Misinformation: Hungary



PUSHING POLITICS, PICKING POCKETS

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Main findings

- It is almost impossible to obtain information about who is behind Hungarian misinformation websites; financial information about them is even harder to come by;
- Hungarian misinformation websites fall on the spectrum from purely ideological sites to simple money-making machines;
- Facebook appears to be the almost exclusive source of traffic for misinformation websites in Hungary;
- Misinformation websites focusing on generating income are often abandoned and then brought back to life using a different domain name;
- The Facebook page of misinformation websites is stable and keeps directing users to the ever-changing urls of the websites;
- The websites' posts are spread via Facebook pages and groups that often bear names unrelated to the website. In a lot of cases, this can be because the websites' names have changed. But we also found signs of an underground trade of Facebook groups and pages;
- The revenue generated by placing ads on a website may not be significant, but Hungarian misinformation websites appear to have at least a couple of sister-sites;
- At the money-making end of the spectrum, lots of misinformation websites appear to be controlled by few individuals/groups, and some individuals/groups appear to run a high number of misinformation websites;
- One of the groups identified as operating a number of misinformation websites can be linked to a network of political organizations that have been accused of fraud in the 2014 and 2018 general elections in Hungary.

Introduction

This brief report reviews the findings of a small-scale study into the business of Hungarian misinformation websites. Approximately 100 misinformation websites were reviewed to gain insights into their business model, the revenue they generate and the means through which they generate it. Unfortunately, these websites are rather secretive as to their ownership structure and operating companies. They nearly always lack an "About" or an "Impressum" section. Whois databases generally show that the websites' registrars are "privacy protected". In the rare cases when this was not true in this research, linking an email address to a company whose financial information is accessible proved nearly impossible.

MISINFORMATION WEBSITES IN HUNGARY: AN OVERVIEW

For the purposes of this research, looked at from the business perspective, the websites in the Hungarian sample are varied, ranging from websites that are run out of conviction/ideology to websites that appear to be only about business. The three rough categories that we placed them in are the following:

1. Websites that do not appear to aim to generate income
2. Websites that have some goal other than generating income but that also run advertisements
3. Websites whose sole goal appears to be making money

Placing some of the websites under one of these categories involves some subjective judgment. Yet, in the vast majority of cases, the analyzed websites clearly belong to one of these types.

Websites that do not appear to aim to generate income

The misinformation websites under this category contain no ads; their owners/operators appear not to be financially motivated. Some of the conspiracy theory websites fall under this category. Vilaghelyzete.com (meaning “the situation of the world” in Hungarian), and its sister site, Alternativhirek.com (“Alternative news”), for example, aim to “awaken the world” because “the truth will set you free.” They appear to be run by a single person. While they contain no ads, these two sites do accept donations and patrons.[1]

The satirical/parody news site Hircsarda.hu (“News tavern”) also runs without advertisements. Hircsarda.hu is one of the rare cases where the website owner could be tracked down and financial information about it was available; it is run by Hírcsárda Ltd, a company with HUF 0 in turnover in 2019, and that is currently under liquidation.[2]

Websites that have some goals other than generating revenue

The distinctive features of the websites under this category are that they do run advertisements (unlike the previous category), but they also present properly written (although, of course, mis-informative) articles (which is not the case with the third category).

Several conspiracy theory/pseudoscientific websites as well as the majority of the politically biased/hyper-partisan websites belong here. For example, Rejtelyekszigete.com (“Mystery island”) runs sometimes 5,000-character long, often original, well-written, properly illustrated pieces on topics such as druids, peppered with Google ads. Another example of this kind is Ujvilagtudat.blogspot.com (“New world consciousness”). In addition to Google ads, this website also sells t-shirts and other merchandise. Drabikjanosblog.wordpress.com also tries to sell conspiracy theorist János Drábik’s books, magazine, lectures as well as to collect donations for his foundation.[3]

[1] These crowdfunding efforts may not be too successful, though. On 5 July 2019, for example, the website only had four supporters on the crowdfunding site [Patreon](#).

[2] See more information at <https://www.nemzeticegtar.hu/hircsardahu-kt-c0109929300.html> (accessed on 23 July 2019).

[3] Another example of a misinformation website trying to sell something directly is 24ora.eu, which offers credit services alongside articles such as “16-year old actress dies unexpectedly,” available online at <https://24ora.eu/szomoru-gyaszhir/> (accessed on 23 July 2019). Another rather strange example is Mennyeitipp.hu (“Heavenly tip”), on which the first item in the navigation menu is an advertisement for a facial mask, distributed in an MLM-scheme, which has nothing to do with the website’s junk news content. Additionally, any number of pseudoscientific lifestyle/ health websites can be found trying to sell various products, for instance [Antalvali.co.hu](#).

Further along the spectrum and much closer to the “money-making” category is Vilagfigyelo.com (“World watcher”). On one of the Facebook pages belonging to the website, it claims to be a site run by a group of private citizens, not as a money-making business, but “for society, for humankind.”[4] Another Facebook page belonging to the website emphasizes that the website makes no money off visitors.[5] Yet the website runs several Google ads while the majority of the articles seem to be simply stolen from other websites.

As for biased/hyper-partisan websites that fall under this category, the anti-Muslim website Dzsihadfigyelo.com (“Jihad watch”) is one example. In an interview, the website’s anonymous founder emphasized that the site was run for ideological rather than financial reasons.[6] Yet the website does contain Google ads.[7]

Infamous anti-migrant website Napimigrans.info (“Daily migrant,” also available at dailymigrants.com) and its sister site Hungaryexpres.com can also be included in this category, although closer to the “business” end of the spectrum. They produce very little, if any, original content, aggregating instead anti-migrant and pro-Fidesz[8] news from a wide variety of sources. Yet the political ideology seems to be taken seriously, and this differentiates these sites from the third category.

But not only extreme-right misinformation websites exist in Hungary; there is a host of hyper-partisan leftist sites, and they mostly fall under this category. Pestibulvar.hu (“Tabloid from Budapest”), Ellenszel.hu (“Headwind”), Fuggetlennemzet.hu (“Independent nation”), Balramagyar.hu (“Hungarians go left”) and Hirhugo.hu (“News Hugó”) are staunchly anti-Fidesz websites with clickbait-y titles and often misleading content, false context and false connection. For instance, a piece on Hirhugo.hu screams in its headline, “*Boozy Orbán in action again: the prime minister picked up the bottle again*”,[9] when reporting on a picture published on the public Facebook page of Hungarian Prime Minister Orbán, depicting him with some white wine spritzer in a restaurant (hardly the scandalous drinking scene the headline promised). These websites are crowded with advertisements but appear to be honest about their political affinities. Some of them, including Pestibulvar.hu, Ellenszel.hu and Hirhugo.hu are run by low-level (current or former) members of the Hungarian socialist party MSZP.

The articles on the websites in this category tend to be properly written with polished language and decent grammar and spelling, not worse than mainstream news sites.[10] This is in striking contrast with the third category.

Money-making machines

As we approach the “business” end of the spectrum, we find a large number of sites where the content matters only insofar as it draws in the audience. The titles become more sensationalized, the articles (or often, “articles”) at the extreme of fakeness, often not only misleading but completely made up. The style of writing is much less polished; spelling and grammatical errors abound. The pieces appear to be optimized for sharing on social media (i.e. on Facebook in the Hungarian context), and they are often very short,

[4] See more information at https://www.facebook.com/pg/vilaglatohirmagazin/about/?ref=page_internal (accessed on 23 July 2019).

[5] See more at https://www.facebook.com/pg/ValosagAmiTudnodKell/about/?ref=page_internal (accessed on 23 July 2019).

[6] “The website is run by a dozen idealists, who use their free time to translate articles, to subtitle videos, to make material hitherto unavailable in Hungarian accessible for Hungarians.” (See more in the interview available online at http://www.hetek.hu/interju/201712/interju_a_dzsihadfigyelo_blog_alapitojaval, accessed on 23 July 2019).

[7] Dzsihadfigyelő is also available on a Hungarian blogging platform at dzsihadfigyelo.blogstar.hu. This site is overrun with ads, but they seemed to be placed on the site by Blogstar and not by Dzsihadfigyelő, as the same ads appear on other blogs on the platform.

[8] Fidesz is the political party of the Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, in power uninterruptedly since 2010.

[9] See more at “*Piás Orbán ismét akcióban: megint alkoholhoz nyúlt a miniszterelnök (+videó)*” (in Hungarian), available online at <https://hirhugo.hu/2019/06/05/pias-orban-ismet-akcioban-megint-alkoholhoz-nyult-a-miniszterelnok-video/> (accessed on 23 July 2019).

[10] [Ujvilagtudat.blogspot.com](http://ujvilagtudat.blogspot.com) and Dzsihadfigyelo.blogstar.hu even have referenced articles, complete with footnotes.

serving only as a means to display the advertisements. The articles are usually not dated. The websites are teeming with ads, not only by Google but also from other networks, often displaying animated, sometimes pornographic and always sickening ads for miracle cures aimed at graphically depicted health problems.

Of the conspiracy/pseudoscientific sites, Avilagtitkai.com (“Secrets of the world”) seems to be using the issues it covers only to reach a bigger audience. When you visit the site, upon clicking on any article, a new window opens, and you are taken to an illegal movie site (mozi.ma); but even if you click on the play button, you are just shown more advertisements.

Many “junk news websites” that take tabloid to the extreme fall under this category; some of them are also impostor websites such as fem3cafe.me (mimicking the url of the television channel and website Fem3 and NL Cafe) or tv2-friss.com (imitating TV2’s url). Several of these websites also run political tabloid news. Interestingly enough, many of them are anti-government. An extreme example is Hirturi.blogspot.com (“News shop”), with sensationalized headlines such as *“Scandal! Migrant worker called in to Hungary by Orbán used a knife to rob someone in Veszprém county! IT IS STARTING!”*[11] These websites appear to have found an audience hungry for scandalous news about Hungary’s ruling Fidesz party, which makes sense in the overwhelmingly pro-government Hungarian media context. At the same time, and as a further proof that their political convictions are far from sincere, some of these websites also produce pro-government propaganda: anything that generates clicks.[12]

Beyond what appears to be a lack of genuine political belief, these websites differ from the leftist websites discussed above in their content (their focus is not exclusively political) as well as in their style, visibly less polished. They also frequently fabricate content as opposed to manipulate news content that has some basis in reality.

“Dumb Hungarians”: An example of fabricated content

In early June 2019, Tv2-friss.com created a whole series of articles on scandalous comments and responses about the sinking of sightseeing boat Hableány on the Danube in Budapest on 29 May 2019. The accident killed 28 people, most of them tourists from South Korea.

In an article dated 4 June 2019, this website reported that Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán’s childhood friend, multimillionaire Lőrinc Mészáros said that the prime minister “had better things to do” than mourning the dead all day. “What do all these dumb Hungarians think?”, the article reported Mészáros as saying.

In an undated article, the website later reported that the popular television program host Gabriella Jakupcsek (referred to in a familiar name as Gabi Jakupcsek) responded to Mészáros’ “arrogant outburst” by saying that she was ashamed to read the remarks and especially the part where Mészáros called Hungarians dumb. In another undated article, late government commissioner Andy Vajna’s well-known widow, Tímea Vajna (again, simply called Timi Vajna) is reported as defending Mészáros. In yet another undated article, well-respected, elderly horticulturalist and television personality György Bálint (referred to by his popular name as “Farmer Bálint”) is reported to demand that Mészáros and Orbán apologize for the comments. Finally, in another article published on a different website but belonging to the same group (see below), Tímea Vajna’s former partner, actor Roland Damu sent a public message to “Timi” telling her to stay out of politics. Not only are any of

[11] See more details at <https://hirturi.blogspot.com/2019/05/botrany-az-orban-altal-behivott.html> (accessed on May 30, 2019). This example also shows that just because a website opposes the anti-immigrant Hungarian government, it does not mean that the website is pro-migrant.

[12] For example, in May 2019 alone, the otherwise anti-government website Bekezdes.co (“Paragraph”) had four pieces on “wonderful news” for pensioners, complete with pictures of Viktor Orbán.

these public figures highly unlikely to make such comments,[1] but their alleged remarks have not been reported in any mainstream news media (though Mészáros' alleged comments have been reported on other misinformation websites, likely taken from here). This whole story, leading to the production of five separate articles, has no basis in reality; it is entirely fictitious.[2]

[1] On 7 July 2019, Tímea Vajna actually threatened to sue one of the impostor websites in this group, blikkruzs.me, which she mistook for the original women's tabloid Blikk Rúzs (blikkruzs.blikk.hu), for similar invented comments about a musician who had recently passed away. For more, see https://velvet.hu/gumicukor/2019/07/09/vajna_timea_kiakadt_amiert_hazugsagokat_irtak_rola_jogi_lepeseket_tesz/ (accessed on 8 Aug 2019).

[2] **Links to the stories:**

Mészáros Lőrinc: Már elnézést, de a miniszterelnök úrnak fontosabb dolga is van annál, hogy a hajóbaleset... (Lőrinc Mészáros: Excuse me, but the prime minister has better things to do than the boat accident...) <https://www.tv2-friss.com/2019/06/meszaros-lorinc-mar-elnezest-de.html>

Jakupcsek Gabi nyílt üzenete Mészáros Lőrinc arrogáns kirohanására a hajóbalesettel kapcsolatban – kérek szépen minden jóérezsű magyar embert, aki teheti ossza meg soraimat! (Gabi Jakupcsek's open message in response to Lőrinc Mészáros' arrogant outburst about the boat accident – I'm asking decent Hungarians to share my words if they can!) <https://www.tv2-friss.com/2019/06/jakupcsek-gabi-nyilt-uzenete-meszaros.html>

Vajna Timi felszólalt Mészáros Lőrinc védelmében a hajóbalesettel kapcsolatban – "Ha néhai férjem itt lenne, elmagyarázná nektek, hogy mi a dolga egy... (Timi Vajna spoke up in defence of Lőrinc Mészáros about the boat accident – "If my late husband was here, he would explain to you what it is...) <https://www.tv2-friss.com/2019/06/vajna-timi-ismet-felszolalt.html>

Bálint gazda üzenete az ország vezetőinek a dunai hajóbalesettel kapcsolatban – "Csak akkor legyen kedves megosztani, amennyiben igazat adnak kérem tisztelettel..." (Farmer Bálint's message to the leaders of the country about the Danube boat accident – "I kindly ask you to please only share if you think I'm right) <https://www.tv2-friss.com/2019/06/balint-gazda-uzenete-az-oroszag.html>

Damu Roland kijózanító válasza Vajna Timinek, aki felszólalt Mészáros Lőrinc védelmében a hajó balesettel kapcsolatban: "Miért szólsz bele olyanba, ami..." (Roland Damu's sobering response to Timi Vajna, who spoke up in defence of Lőrinc Mészáros about the boat accident: "Why do you barge in things that..." <https://www.ma-reggel.me/2019/06/damu-roland-kijozanito-valasza-vajna.html>

Unless you sell something directly, of which some examples were given above, the way to make money online is through advertisements. Accordingly, the websites in the third category are covered with ads. The content-ad ratio often suggests that the content is created only as a vehicle to display ads. For example, a fabricated story run by Hitel.news7.hu ("Credit news") on refugees having a May 1 picnic in a cemetery in Hungary's Fejér county consists of two sentences and a picture, and it is surrounded by numerous advertisements.[13] Another example is an article on fem3cafe.me that reports a fictitious story that Viktor Orbán's son Gáspár said his father is worse off financially than most Hungarians.[14] (See Figure 1)

[13] *Felháborító: Május 1-én a temetőbe sütögettek, grilleztek a menekültek...*, available online at <https://hitel.news7.hu/felhaborito-temetobe-sutogettek/> (accessed on 23 July 2019). The poorly written "story" claims that Indian migrants (of whom 2,000 are allegedly already in Fejér county, Hungary) were having a barbecue at the local cemetery. The picture used, however, is from an Instagram page called Slavic graveyards, and the location for it is Serbia (see, <https://www.instagram.com/p/Bwz8itOAWAY/>, accessed 3 August 2019). Interestingly, the image is featured on another Hungarian misinformation website. Here the "story" is written as a Facebook post in first person singular, according to which the author went to the cemetery and found people having a picnic on his or her mother's grave (see more at <https://otpercpihenoblogspot.com/2019/05/ma-ahogy-kimentem-edesanyam-sirjához.html>, accessed on 3 August 2019). The photo also made an appearance on anti-immigrant German social media sites, claiming to have been taken of immigrants in the cemetery of the city of Magdeburg (see more at <https://www.mimikama.at/allgemein/grillen-auf-dem-friedhof-magdeburg/>, accessed on 3 August 2019).

[14] *Orbán Gáspár üzenete a magyaroknak: Sirtok, hogy nincs pénzetek, közben a statisztika szerint legalább 15 millió van elrakva minden háztartásnak mert...* (Gáspár Orbán's message to the Hungarians: You're crying that you have no money when statistics say that every household has at least 15 million saved because...), available online at <https://www.fem3cafe.me/2019/04/orban-gaspar-uzenete-magyaroknak-sirtok.html> (accessed on 23 July 2019).

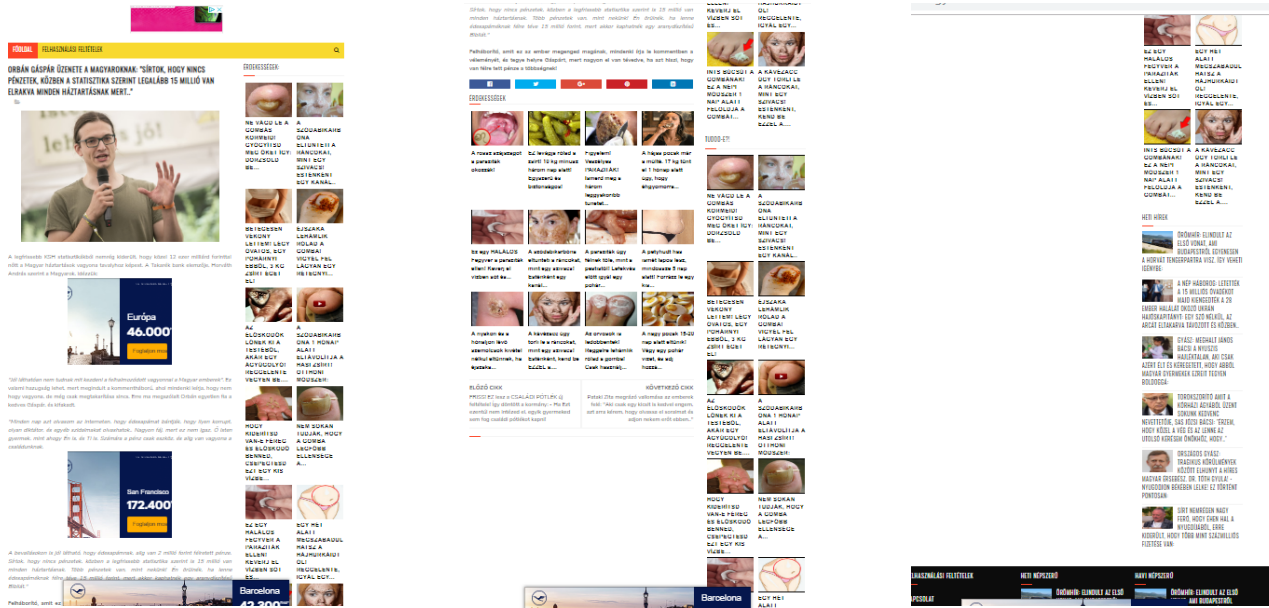


Figure 1: Page from fem3cafe.me

The screenshots were taken when scrolling down the page; the size was reduced so that all of the advertisements could be captured in three images. This one bogus 200-word article displays 40 advertisements.

The placement of advertisements is also often misleading. An article from Titokterminal.com (“Secret terminal”) on how the food industry “poisons us”[15] shows that advertisements are mixed with related articles. Three of the eight links on this page are for ads.

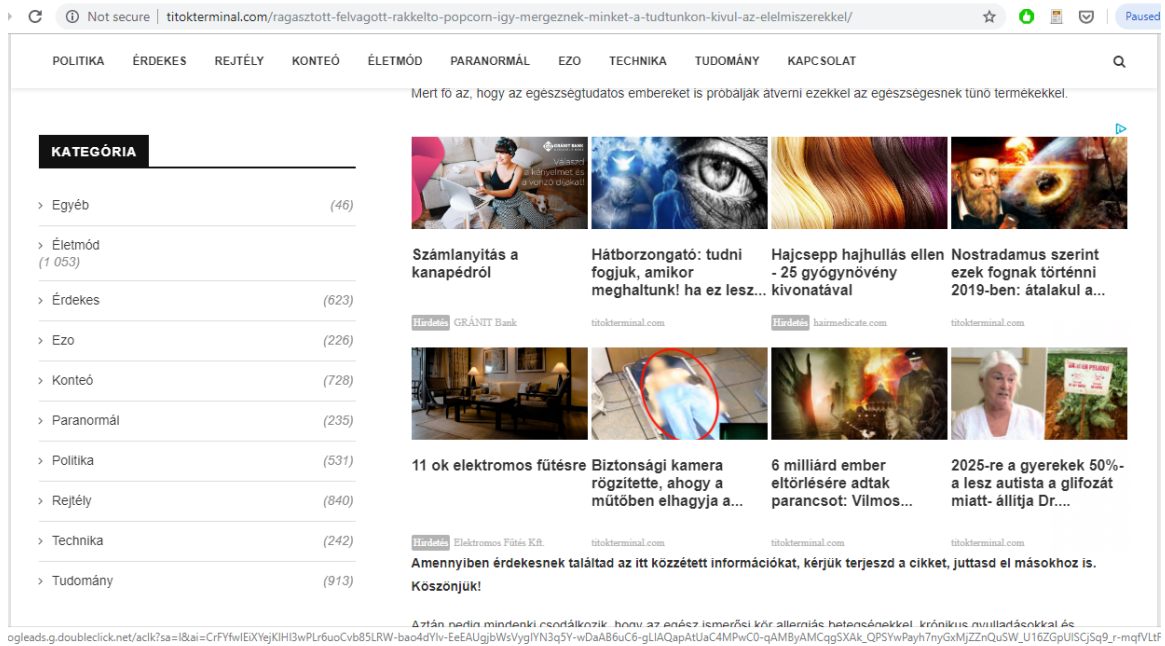


Figure 2: Page from Titokterminal.com

[15] Ragasztott felvágott, rákkeltő popcorn: így mérgeznek minket tudtunkon kívül az élelmiszerekkel!, available online at <http://titokterminal.com/ragasztott-felvagott-rakkeltlo-popcorn-igy-mergeznek-minket-a-tudtunkon-kivul-az-elelmiszerekkel/> (accessed on 23 July 2019).

It is unclear how much revenue the websites are capable of generating via banners and other ads. In early July 2019, Titokterminal.com ran an ad for potential advertisers, telling them that, “tens of thousands” of visitors will see their ad. Another clue is offered by the website Latogatoknovelese.blogspot.com/ (“Increasing visitors”), which says the daily rate for banners on Netbulvar.com (“Net tabloid”) starts from HUF 500 (€1.5) for the smallest banner to HUF 2,000 (€6) for the largest one.[16] Karpathir.com (“Kárpát news”) offers to run banners for a monthly rate from HUF 11,500 (€35) to HUF 35,000 (€107), depending on the size and placement.[17] The profit and loss account of the foundation that owns the site shows that it had a net sales revenue of HUF 2.363 million (€7,100) in 2018; yet it is unclear whether the money was generated through the website or the foundation’s other activities.[18] Leftist political website Pestibulvar.hu lists surprisingly high advertising prices, ranging from HUF 990,000 (€3,000) per week to HUF 1.950,000 (€5,900) per week for banners,[19] which, if true, would generate significant revenue. Unfortunately, and in breach of Hungarian law, the company that runs the site has not made its balance sheet and profit and loss accounts available in the Justice Ministry database. This means that it is not possible to check whether the revenues have materialized. It is worth noting that at the time of the research, only Google ads were shown on the site. In any case, even if the amounts are insignificant in themselves, what this research found is that for-profit misinformation websites rarely stand alone.

NETWORKS OF MISINFORMATION WEBSITES

The most striking finding of this review of Hungarian misinformation websites is that several of the websites towards the “business” end of the spectrum appear to be controlled by the same persons or companies, and that persons and companies in this business control several misinformation websites rather than running only one. In a few cases, where the registrar of the websites could be identified, WhoIs databases revealed that some of the registrants have registered more than one websites.[20] In other cases the websites referred to related sites or contained some other clear clue about their links to other websites.

However, for most of the sites it is impossible to identify the owner/operator. For this reason, in most cases the connections were made on the basis of visual and stylistic likeness,[21] the usage of the same tag-lines and terms,[22] and most importantly, their Facebook connection – what Facebook pages share the articles of particular websites, and, conversely, what other websites’ articles share particular Facebook pages.[23]

[16] Netbulvar.com does not operate as of June 2019, but lives on as Netbulvar.eu.

[17] See more details at <https://karpathir.com/2017/02/15/reklam/> (accessed on 8 August 2019).

[18] See more details at <https://birosag.hu/kozzetétel-kereso> (no direct link to accounts possible). The foundation that runs the site is named Magyar Szív-Magyar Szó Alapítvány (Hungarian Heart-Hungarian Word Foundation).

[19] See more details at <https://pestibulvar.hu/mediaajanlat/> (accessed on 7 August 2019). The outstandingly high prices are all the more interesting because Pesti Bulvár has 33.7k Facebook-followers, which is not a particularly high number for misinformation websites.

[20] One notorious misinformation-site founder is “Tomi Horváth from Kerepestarcsa” (it is unclear whether this is a real person). The email-address horvath.tomi.69@gmail.com has been used to register altogether 58 (non-EU and non-Hu) domain names (<https://www.whoxy.com/email/509124>). Another one is partyarc20@yahoo.com, who has registered 34 domain names (<https://www.whoxy.com/email/663839>). Keszthelyinorbert2015@gmail.com has owned altogether 21 domain names (<https://www.whoxy.com/email/26809612>), sometimes providing the “funny” name of Maugli Kalányos (clearly not a real person). Nstnst99@gmail.com has been used to register 15 domain names (<https://www.whoxy.com/email/22034788>).

[21] This was only an indication of a possible connection to be checked via other means. Most of the misinformation sites use free web templates so it is possible that they look alike even if they are not connected.

[22] After some false leads the research proceeded with caution – many misinformation websites repurpose materials from other similar sites without attribution. This means that they can contain the same sentences without being related.

[23] Yet, the Facebook connection must also be evaluated in light of the other data because the sale or “rent” of Facebook pages is not uncommon (see below).

The results show that even smaller misinformation websites tend to have a couple of sister sites.[24] More importantly, two groups were identified that seem to run a larger number of sites. The first one can be named “the impostor group” because the majority of their domains imitate media organizations’ domain names. Tv2-friss.com, nlcafe.me, blikkruzs.me, tudasfaja.club[25] are some of the dozen websites that seem to be currently operating. (See below the home pages of four different websites of the group.)

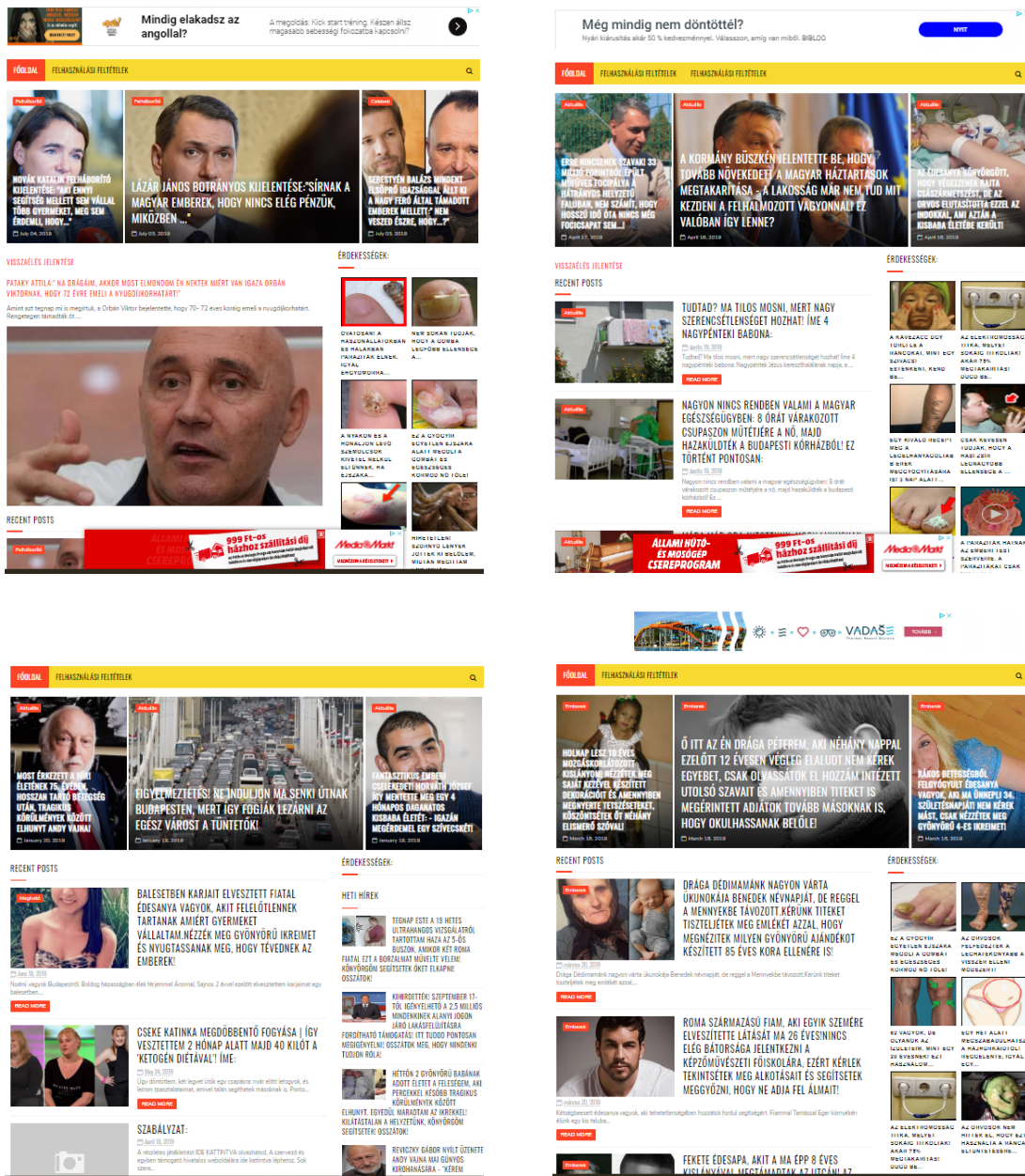


Figure 3: The front pages of tv2-friss.com, rtl-klub.me, magyararnep.me and tudasfaja.club

[24] These sister sites sometimes cut across disinformation “genres.” For example, the pseudo-scientific diabetika.hu, the impostor site kormányinfo.info (“Kormányinfo” is the name of the weekly press conference held by the Hungarian Minister of the Prime Minister’s Office) and the clickbait/nationalist news site Magyarvagok.info all belong to the same persons. While the latter two are not operational in July 2019, their Facebook communities are alive and well (<https://www.facebook.com/Kormanyinfo-127241867843149/>) and <https://www.facebook.com/magyarorszag.magyarok/>), sharing posts from Diabetika.hu.

[25] TV2 is a television channel, NICafe is a women’s portal, Blikk Rúzs is a tabloid, and Tudasfaja is a very successful misinformation website. That is, this group spoofs not only legitimate media outlets but also misinformation ones.

Beyond the unquestionable visual, stylistic and topical similarity, these websites also link to each other, though possibly by accident. For example, when you click on the “terms and conditions” page on nlcafe.me, you will get to the “terms and conditions” page on nephangja.com. Additionally, their stories are all shared by the same Facebook pages.

The persons/organizations running these sites could not be identified. However, anti-fake news site Fakepalm has been following the group’s activities and it claims to have traced the sites back to a family and a circle of friends led by a former teacher and her son in the town of Orosháza.[26] The Fakepalm-investigation also claims that at their peak, these websites generated HUF 10m (€30,700) to HUF 12m (€36,800) a month.

The other larger group has websites that copy the mother of all Hungarian misinformation sites, Mindenegyben (“Everything together”), with names such as Mindenegybe.com, Egyazegyben.com and Egyazegyben.co, as well as more special interest sites like the seemingly environmentalist Zoldujsag.hu (“Green news”), a site targeting the elderly, Nyugdijasok.hu (“Pensioners”), or a clickbait site about children, Gyermekek.hu (“Children”, not updated since September 2018). These sites do not look so much alike, and they differ in tone and the topics they cover, but the connection between them could be established via registrant and operator data.

Some of them were registered with the same email-address, some by the same company, and some have the same operator named on the site. Interestingly enough, these websites could also be linked to political organizations. Zöld Újság’s founder and the former owner and CEO of its publisher, which registered Zoldujsag.hu, Ottó Stekler ran for various positions representing the Hungarian Green Party (Magyarországi Zöld Párt) at the elections of 1994, 1998, 2002 and 2006. Stekler’s wife, Mária Seres, a contributor for Zöld Újság, also ran as the Party’s candidate in 1994 and in 2002. In 2004, Stekler and Seres ran for the European Parliament representing the Hungarian Rural and Civic Party-Green Party (Magyar Vidék és Polgári Párt-Zöld Párt). In 2010, Seres launched a new party called Civil Movement (Civil Mozgalom); she and Stekler both ran as the party’s candidates at the local elections that year; Seres also ran for Parliament. Zöld Újság’s publishing company, and the registrant for several misinformation sites is called Kontroll Média Ltd; its CEO Léna Sutáné Vígh[27] ran in the 2014 general elections representing Mária Seres’ party (called SMS at that time). Stekler and Seres also ran in 2014 representing this party. In 2018, Mária Seres ran for Parliament representing a new party called Közös Nevező (Common Denominator). Today, the operator of several of the misinformation sites registered by Kontroll Média runs a website for György Gődény,[28] who headed Közös Nevező’s party list in 2018. This operator is named Média Alternatíva; originally, in 2014, it was registered as Seres Mária Szövetségesei (Mária Seres’ Allies), or SMS – the name of Seres’s party in 2014.[29] According to an investigative documentary released in 2019,[30] Seres’ parties were not engaged in genuine political activities; rather, their goal was to collect state funding given to political organizations to run in elections. Seres, Stekler and their collaborators are accused of pocketing over HUF 2bn (€6.2m) this way.

[26] See more details at <https://www.fakepalm.hu/index.php/home/hoax/132-alhir-szervezet> (accessed on 23 July 2019).

[27] <https://www.e-cegjegyzek.hu/?cegadatlap/0109690668/TaroltCegkivonat> (accessed on 28 August 2019).

[28] The site (doktorgodeny.hu) looks similar to misinformation sites bekezdés.co or mindenegybe.com, and while Gődény has a pharmaceutical degree and has worked as a pharmacist, the website peddles pseudoscientific information, such as that yoghurt can help depression or vitamin D helps people with cancer. The website also sells supplements in advertisements disguised as articles (for example, <http://doktorgodeny.hu/a-jollakottsaghormon-segit-az-elhizas-legyozeseben-111954>, accessed on 27 August 2019).

[29] According to company registry data, it was renamed as Média Alternatíva on 30 October 2015.

[30] Rablópartok, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ymXH4mODDfk> (accessed on 23 July 2019).

THE KEY LINK: FACEBOOK

Hungarian misinformation websites are ephemeral. Four of the 25 misinformation websites found to be highly visited in January 2019 by Urbanlegends.hu were abandoned by early July 2019. Even the two months of this research saw some websites that were highly active at the beginning of the period disappearing or no longer getting updates at the end. Yet, while the websites appear to be dead, their content often lives on, either on a different domain or under a different name.

With the ever-changing urls, it is clear that visitors do not find these websites via bookmarked links. It appears that Facebook is the main source of traffic to Hungarian misinformation websites.[31] Some of the websites in question use tracker widgets such as whos.amung.us, which showed, for example, that hirozon.info or hungaryexpres.com received all of their traffic via Facebook in the past 30 days.[32] In many cases, the “articles” on the websites themselves are also written as if they were Facebook posts and call on readers to share on.

News article or Facebook post?

Much of the content of misinformation websites reads more like Facebook posts than articles. An undated “article” on magyarnepe.me, for example, is titled, “I WAS GOING HOME LAST NIGHT BY BUS NO 5 FROM THE 19-WEEK ULTRASOUND WHEN TWO YOUNG ROMA DID THIS HORRIBLE THING TO ME! PLEASE HELP US CATCH THEM! SHARE THIS!” The “article” is complete with a seemingly candid photo of a pregnant woman and the No 5 bus as well as a detailed description of the alleged incident and the two perpetrators. The “article” ends with a call to notify the police if you know anything, or at least to share the post, and it is signed in a woman’s name and email-address. In short, it has the characteristics of Facebook posts calling for help.

Most of the websites contain salient links to their Facebook page. At the same time, some of the websites do not advertise any Facebook page, raising the possibility that they receive visitors via other sources. However, after some digging it was always possible to connect the websites in question to a Facebook page. For example, clickbait site Erdemesszo.club’s stories are shared by a Facebook page called Newcontact,[33] which had 222,545 followers at the time of writing.

The person who registered Netbulvar.eu, on a separate site offers packages to advertisers, claiming that they have over 1.5 million people on Facebook.[34] Yet Netbulvar.eu’s Facebook page is followed only by 24,000 Facebook-users, and this was one of the few sites in the sample to which no sister site was found. [35] The key is that misinformation sites share their articles via more than one Facebook page, enhancing their visibility. For example, sister sites Erdekesportal.com, Bovebbenportal.com, Erdekescikkek.hu, Vilagunk.hu and Mocool.eu all have their own Facebook pages but they cross-post all of the articles, thereby increasing their reach.

Yet nowhere is this cross-posting more evident than with the first large group of sites identified above (“the impostor sites”). In the time period when the research was carried out, their stories were shared by at least

[31] The importance of Facebook in the Hungarian context has been shown in many datasets. Of particular relevance to this research is the Reuters Digital News 2019 study, which found that 62% of Hungarian internet users use social media, especially Facebook for news. <http://www.digitalnewsreport.org/survey/2019/hungary-2019/>

[32] For hirozon.info, this was the case any time the website was checked in the research period for any “past 30 days.” For hungaryexpres.com, in early July 2019, the widget showed 96% referrals from Facebook, while the rest of the visitors came mostly via search engines (Google, Yahoo, Baidu).

[33] See more at <https://www.facebook.com/newcontactmagyarorszag/> (accessed on 23 July 2019).

[34] See more at <http://latogatoknovelese.blogspot.com/p/csomagok.htm> (accessed on 23 July 2019).

[35] Of course, that does not rule out the existence of related sites at all.

11 Facebook pages simultaneously.[36] These groups appear to be suspicious. This is not only because three of them were created on the same day and one two days later, but also because what does tabloid news, real or fake, have to do with, say, wood-carving? Yet one of the pages sharing these stories is entitled “Beautiful things made of wood.” Five of the 11 pages are about nostalgia; the description of the Made in Hungária page, for example, states, “Alternative time travel! Everything retro, everything Hungarian [...] from the 1960s, 70s and 80s.”

This has not much to do with the (fictitious) remarks made by prime minister Orbán’s daughter or the equally fictitious post of a mother asking people to pray for her son who is dying of cancer.[37] Anti-fake news site Fakepalm seems to have an explanation.[38] According to Fakepalm, the group behind these websites buys up Facebook pages and groups, and then starts sharing its own content on them. As evidence, the Fakepalm website claims to have screencaps of one of the group members offering to buy the page “The world does not belong to twenty-somethings only.” The page’s owner says in response to the offer that she usually sells groups when they are bigger.

This suggests that the buying and selling of Facebook pages is not uncommon in Hungary. Indeed, a simple web search brings up several forum posts and some classified ads for Facebook pages wanted and Facebook pages for sale. The rate varies greatly, depending on the number of likes and followers, the demographics reached, their engagement levels and so on.[39] There are ads buying and selling pages for HUF 0.5 (1 euro cent)/like to HUF 10 (3 euro cents)/like.

Since they depend on Facebook for traffic, most misinformation websites post a high number of articles on Facebook every day. Egyazegyben’s Facebook page, for example, posted 41 times on a randomly picked single day on 31 May 2019. The sheer volume of the posts and their regularity suggests automation. For example, Titokterminal.com created 32 posts on 26 May 2019, all of them on the hour or at half past. In other cases, there seems to be some coordination among sites. On the randomly picked day of 2 June 2019, Harmonikum.co and Napjainkportal.hu both created 17 Facebook-posts appearing in sync on the two sites at seemingly random times throughout the day (such as 7:44; 15:16/17; 20:41; 23:16/17). The “impostor group” also appears to coordinate posts. On 5 June, for example, the same seven posts were shared on nine out of the group’s 11 pages throughout the day at roughly the same time.

[36] It is possible that the real figure is even higher, but 11 pages were identified: Észbontó (“Mind-blowing”, 62k followers, <https://www.facebook.com/eszbonto1/>); Fából készült szépségek (“Beautiful things made of wood, 35k followers (gained in just four months!), <https://www.facebook.com/Fából-készült-szépségek-631538010607768/>); Nők közössége (“Community of women”, 63k followers, <https://www.facebook.com/magyarnokkozossege/>); Retro Klub public group (25k members, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/682760302058990/>); 40 év feletti közössége (“Community of people over 40,” 73k followers, <https://www.facebook.com/40-év-feletti-közössége-197951530832944/>); Made in Hungária (63k followers, <https://www.facebook.com/madeinhungaria18/>); Varázslatos világ (“Magical world,” 95k followers, <https://www.facebook.com/varazslatosvilagunk/>); Nem csak a húszéveseké a világ (“The world is not only for twenty-somethings”, 61k followers, <https://www.facebook.com/nemcsakahuszevesekeavilag/>); Magyarok közössége (“Community of Hungarians”, 88k followers, <https://www.facebook.com/Magyarok-Közössége-343307836198360/>); Szóljon hangosan az ének (“Let the music sound out”, 36k followers, <https://www.facebook.com/szoljonhangosanazenek/>); Fekete kávé Magyarország (“Black coffee Hungary”, 8k followers, <https://www.facebook.com/Fekete-Kávé-Magyarország-295668697758854/>).

[37] Occasionally, there is a post that is relevant for the given page – an old television set (“Share if you remember!”) in one of the nostalgia groups or some pretty wooden cabinet on the “Beautiful things made of wood” page. Yet, the vast majority of the posts have nothing to do with the page’s supposed focus.

[38] <https://www.fakepalm.hu/index.php/home/hoax/132-alhir-szervezet>

[39] One seller advertised their page by saying the followers are mostly women over the age of 50, which means they are “adblock-free” (See more details at <http://www.netboard.hu/viewtopic.php?topic=28533>, accessed on 23 July 2019).

Yet, the high volume of Facebook posts does not correspond to a high number of new articles on the websites. Articles are shared time and time again. For example, on 6 June 2019, Zoldujsag's Facebook page shared an article on reincarnation, originally posted on 23 February 2017. This "recycling" of posts is probably a reason why the articles on misinformation websites are usually undated, and, apart from reflections on political news, are rather "generic" or timeless. An article on reincarnation is just as valid (or not) in 2017 as in 2019. Yet even when the topic of the article is seasonal, little care is taken to post only relevant pieces. For example, Legjava.pro's Facebook page[40] posted a piece on Christmas decorations on 29 June 2019. This perhaps again suggests automation, which undoubtedly cuts down on costs. Instead of writing new articles, the sites just endlessly recycle old ones.

The business side of it is unclear. A person trying to sell 4-5 Facebook pages with altogether 20,000 likes claimed that the pages generate HUF 100,000 (€307) to HUF 150,000 (€46) in income every month.[41] If this figure is realistic, then one can conclude that the business of misinformation can be lucrative.

MISINFORMATION WEBSITES AND MAINSTREAM MEDIA

Hungarian misinformation websites have a two-sided relationship to mainstream media. First of all, misinformation websites of all kinds often claim to be the true source of news as opposed to mainstream media. This is obviously the case for ideology-based conspiracy theory websites, such as Vilaghelyzete.com, which claims in its header that it shares "TRUTHS that are not shown by the globalist media but that are necessary" to understand the world.[42]



Vilaghelyzete.com's header

The leftist political websites also claim to reveal the truth as opposed to Hungarian mainstream media. Unlike Vilaghelyzete.com, they do not view Hungarian mainstream media as "globalist" but as government propaganda. For example, Balramagyar.hu has a pop-up screen offering the choice between "Propaganda" and "Oppositional news" – if you click on the latter, you can sign up for the site's push notifications. The site's tagline is "Government propaganda gets everywhere. This article only does so if you share it."[43] Likewise, Hirhugo.hu states that it is "0% propaganda, 100% truth," and it defines itself against the "oligarch media." [44] Pestibulvar.hu urges readers to share its articles "to help destroy government propaganda." [45]

[40] See more details at <https://www.facebook.com/Legjavapontpro/> (accessed on 23 July 2019).

[41] See more details at <http://www.netboard.hu/viewtopic.php?topic=28533> (accessed on 23 July 2019).

[42] See more details at <https://www.vilaghelyzete.com/> (accessed on 16 August 2019.)

[43] See more details at <https://balramagyar.hu/hirkuldo/> (accessed on 16 August 2019.)

[44] See more details at <https://hirhugo.hu/impresszum/> (accessed on 16 August 2019.)

[45] This call is placed at the end of every article on the site. See, for example, <https://pestibulvar.hu/2019/07/01/orban-legnagyobb-hazugsagat-lepleztek-le-semmi-nem-igaz-abbol-amit-most-rola-allitanak/>

Right-wing, pro-government misinformation sites also claim they share news that the mainstream media do not cover. Maivilag.com (“Today’s world”) has a Facebook page called Cenzúra nélkül (“Without censorship”), which states in its description, “Our community was founded so that members see not only the manipulated news of the mainstream media, but also the undisclosed or maybe forbidden news.”[46] Vilagfigyelo.com’s Facebook page used to be called “News kept hidden.”[47] Flag Media Group runs a site called Elhallgatott hírek (“Supressed news”), which, ironically, shares articles from such mainstream pro-government media outlets as the daily Magyar Nemzet or news portal 888.hu.[48] As this example shows, given that the mainstream media in Hungary are largely controlled by the right-wing Hungarian government, [49] the argument that Hungarian mainstream media suppress right-wing, pro-government news is difficult to make.

Even some of the clickbait websites claim that they, and not the mainstream media are the source of “real news.” Hirturi.blogspot.com’s Facebook page states, “Don’t get misguided by fake news, read the real thing!”[50] This is rather bold for a page that reported, for example, that Charles, Prince of Wales bugged the bedroom of Prince William and his wife Catherine.[51]

Beyond positioning themselves as against the mainstream media, misinformation websites very often report news from the mainstream media – but rewritten in a more clickbait, sensationalised form. This is clearly the main feature of the political misinformation sites, which rarely break news; instead, they re-write news stories in accordance with their world view. For example, on 30 June the mainstream media reported that Hungarian prime minister Orbán wrote a letter to European People’s Party president Joseph Daul, asking him not to agree to the nomination of Frans Timmermans as European Commission President.[52] Right-wing Dailymigrants.com headlined its piece on this story as, “*The war for Europe: Orbán wrote his letter – the nomination of Soros-soldier Timmermans is unacceptable.*”[53] The same story got reported on leftist Pestibulvar.hu as “*It’s over, Orbán’s trying to escape – the prime minister gave up.*”[54] Another example is a story from 7 July 2019 when the Tunisian coast guard recovered the bodies of 14 migrants who had drowned. Dailymigrants.com reported on this story saying, “*14 drowned migrants were fished out of the sea off Tunisia.*”[55] A further example is leftist Baramagyar.hu, which on 15 May had the attention-catching headline, “*Orbán is desperately trying to get away from being held responsible – the failed politician is using a cheap trick.*”[56] This was a rewrite of an article from the daily Népszava about Orbán not wanting to meet the European People’s Party’s representatives before the European elections. Világfigyelo.com also used “classic” clickbait technique when reporting, “*Over a thousand migrants broke through the fence at night. Video!*”[57] Hungarian readers probably thought the article will be about the Hungarian border fence – but this piece is a Fox News video about migrants caught when entering the US.[58]

[46] See more details at https://www.facebook.com/pg/nemkellmas/about/?ref=page_internal (accessed on 18 August 2019).

[47] See more details at <https://www.facebook.com/vilaglatohirmagazin/> (accessed on 19 June 2019).

[48] See more at <https://valovilag1.blogspot.com/> (accessed on 12 August 2019.)

[49] Mérték Media Monitor (2019). Fidesz-friendly media dominate everywhere <https://mertek.eu/en/2019/05/02/fidesz-friendly-media-dominate-everywhere/> (accessed on 21 August 2019).

[50] See more at https://www.facebook.com/pg/hirturi/about/?ref=page_internal (accessed on 21 August 2019).

[51] See more at <https://hirturi.blogspot.com/2018/07/kiszivargott-erzsebet-kiralyne.html> (accessed on 21 July 2019).

[52] See more at <https://hungarytoday.hu/orban-epp-would-be-making-historic-mistake-by-backing-timmermans-for-ec-president/>, accessed on 22 August 2019.

[53] <http://dailymigrants.com/haboru-europaert-orban-megirta-levelet-a-soros-katona-timmermans-jeloltsege-elfogadhatatlan/>, accessed on 22 August 2019.

[54] <https://pestibulvar.hu/2019/06/30/vege-mindennek-menekul-orban-bedobta-a-lapjait-a-miniszterelnok/>, accessed on 22 August 2019.

[55] <http://dailymigrants.com/tizenegy-vizbe-fulladt-migranst-halasztak-ki-tuneziai-partoknal-a-tengerbol/>, accessed 22 August 2019.

[56] <https://baramagyar.hu/2019/05/15/ketsegbeesetten-menekul-orban-a-felelossegre-vonas-elol-ilyen-ocska-trukkel-probalkozik-a-bukott-politikus/> (accessed on 20 May 2019).

[57] <https://vilagfigyelo.com/tobb-mint-ezer-migrans-tort-at-ejjel-a-keritesen-video/> (accessed on 6 June 2019).

[58] In an even worse example of clickbait, anti-migrant misinformation, Vilagfigyelo.com reported on 5 May 2019, “*Syrian migrant beats 18-year old female student to pulp on the tram,*” complete with a very disturbing image of a woman with a black eye. Contrary to what Hungarian readers probably think seeing the headline, the story reveals that this happened in Germany, and also that the photo is unrelated and used as an “illustration.”(See more at <https://vilagfigyelo.com/18-eves-diaklanyt-vert-agyba-fobe-verte-a-villamoson-egy-sziriai-ferfi/>, accessed on 6 June 2019).

Not only political sites rely on “recycling” stories from mainstream media. This is also a favorite technique of other types of misinformation sites. Anything can be written up in the most click-generating way possible, from accidents (“*Shocking details of the tragedy (video)*”[59]) to the weather forecast (“*ATTENTION! ALERT FOR TOMORROW! BE PREPARED!*”[60]). Additionally, any time an even marginally famous person dies, sensationalist tabloid misinformation websites report on his/her death as if the whole country was in mourning.[61] Celebrity, crime and other tabloid news stories from the mainstream media are also a constant source for articles to be rewritten for misinformation websites. For example, a story from the tabloid Borsonline.hu about the court hearing of two elderly men accused of discussing a plot to murder the country’s leaders[62] got reported as “*They wanted to murder Viktor Orbán!*” on various websites.[63] Blikkruzs.me even went as far as shouting in its headline, “*BREAKING! VIKTOR ORBÁN ASSASSINATED! THESE TWO MEN DID IT AND THIS IS WHAT THEY DID.*”[64]

“My little son died”: An example of news recycling

A story that has been making the rounds of sensationalist misinformation sites is based on a report on commercial television channel RTL Klub, run on 11 October 2018, entitled “Boy fell, died a day later.”[1] This recounts the tragic story of an 11-year old boy who collapsed and died in a Hungarian village. A day earlier he fell down the stairs, for which he was taken to the hospital. The hospital released him after an X-ray. The cause of death is being investigated. This story has been re-written and widely published on several misinformation websites, and then shared time and time again on their Facebook pages. The most often shared re-written version is entitled, “My 11-year old little son was kicked out of the hospital. In the morning, little Dávid was dead. The cause is more than shocking. We’re asking every parent who is outraged by our story to please share this. May he rest in peace!” The story is accompanied with a picture of a hospital room and a little boy – who, of course, is not the boy who passed away, but a kid featured in several online collections of “cute boy hairstyles,” going back to 2014.[2] The recycled story was featured on at least eight different websites,[3] and shared several times on different Facebook pages. A particularly

[1] <http://rtl.hu/rtklub/hirek/elesett-masnap-meghalt-a-fiu>, accessed on 21 August 2019.

[2] For more information, see <https://www.tineye.com/search/6808e1a6b0b90d405e3a80ca305081c7dc86e91e?page=1&sort=score&order=desc> (accessed on 22 August 2019).

[3] Szupertanácsok: <https://szupertanacsokhu.hu/2018/10/12/haza-zavartak-a-korhazbol-a-11-eves-kisfiamat-reggelre-elhunyt-davidka-az-oka-tobb-mint-felhaborito-kerunk-miden-szulo-ossza-meg-okulasul-akit-szinten-felhaborit-a-tortenetunk-isten-nyugoszta/>,
Magyarok vagyunk: http://magyarokvagyunk.com/borzaszto-haza-zavartak-a-korhazbol-a-11-eves-magyar-kisfiut-masnapra-meghalt/?fbclid=IwAR1U-0IdLcyCf7_oK0G82qPre00GMTLIDQmAtiCdcdf7GBPNtZ03IC-zoKkM,
Szerencsemanó: <http://szerencsemano.info/cikk.php?id=9005&fbclid=IwAR1NOD0NUJ51QF7GFIGteJlqlhesGv8nAZ8f4zKOVHrM8LQUsRd9YgU-LLY>,
Mindenegyben: <https://www.minden-egyben.com/hirek/haza-zavartak-a-korhazbol-a-11-eves-kisfiamat>,
Egy helyen: <http://egyhelyen.info/2018/10/12/haza-zavartak-a-korhazbol-a-11-eves-kisfiamat-reggelre-elhunyt-davidka-az-oka-tobb-mint-felhaborito/>,
A nép hangja: <http://www.anephangja.com/2018/10/haza-zavartak-korhazbol-11-eves.html>,
Fem3Café: <https://www.fem3cafe.me/2019/05/haza-zavartak-korhazbol-11-eves.html>,
Hitelnews: <https://hitel.news7.hu/11-eves-kisfiu-miutan-hazavartak/>,
Hitelfórum: https://hitelforum.hu/haza-zavartak-a-korhazbol-a-11-eves-kisfiamat-reggelre-elhunyt-davidka-az-oka-tobb-mint-felhaborito/?fbclid=IwAR35tkz5xslsVWF8Rm7aPpYfAOha_dtJKsnmTY6YXv-x9fYXpduX8rwzt6k4, all accessed on 22 August 2019.

[59] <https://egyazegyben.com/megdobbentoek-a-tragedia-reszletei-video-116087>, accessed on 12 July 2019.

[60] <http://diabetika.hu/figyelem-riasztas-erkezett-holnapra-keszuljenek-fel/>, accessed on 15 June, 2019). Other examples include, “*Alarm! Damaging hailstorm with 2-cm hail and 80 kmh winds may hit within hours!*” on <http://nyugdijasok.hu/riado-orakon-belul-lecsaphat-a-puszito-jegeso-2-centis-jegdarabokkal-es-80-km-oras-szellel-115755> (accessed on 25 June, 2019) or “*Brutal heat wave is coming! 43 Celsius! Meteorologists are asking you to share this so that everyone can get prepared! EXTREME HEAT WILL KNOCK OUT ALL OF EUROPE!*” on <http://eztnezdmege.com/brutalis-hohullam-jon-43-fok-a-meterologusok-kerik-a-megosztat-hogy-mindenki-felkeszuljon-extrem-hoseg-tarolja-le-egesz-europat/> (accessed on 27 June 2019).

[61] Hirozon.info reported on the passing away of the literary editor of an art theatre in Budapest Annamária Radnai with the headline, “*HUNGARY IS MOURNING: Breaking news! THE WONDERFUL ARTIST DIED tragically and suddenly, at a young age!*”(<http://hirozon.info/2019/06/28/gyaszol-magyarorszag-most-jott-a-hirtragikus-hirtelenseggel-fiatalon-elhunyt-a-csodalatos-muveszno/>, accessed on 29 June 2019). While Radnai was an accomplished expert in her field, most of Hungary clearly has never heard of her.

[62] <http://www.borsonline.hu/aktualis/magat-martotta-be-a-pancser-nyugdijas-orban-eletere-tortek-volna-a-gyanu-szerint/147299>, accessed on 15 August, 2019.

[63] “*They wanted to murder Viktor Orbán!*”, <https://www.minden-egyben.com/hirek/megakartak-olni-orban-viktort/>, accessed on 15 August, 2019, or “*Breaking! They wanted to murder prime minister Viktor Orbán!*”, <http://hirozon.info/2019/06/27/most-jott-a-hir-meg-akartak-olni-orban-viktor-miniszterelnokot/>, accessed on 15 August 2019.

[64] <https://www.blikkruzs.me/2019/06/friss-megakartak-olni-orban-viktort-ez.html>, accessed on 15 August 2019.

insidious example is the Hítel fórum Facebook page, which not only shared the story from its Hítelforum.hu website on 7 and 25 June,[4] but also from its other site, Hítel.news7.hu, on 12 July,[5] renaming “little Dávid” as “little Robi.”[6] This is not even the end; the fake news machine keeps on churning out reports. On 26 June, 2019, Eztnezdmeq.com reported with its headline that the cause of death has been found – but it was not, and apart from the headline, the article itself was unchanged from the earlier version.[7] The original news story is milked for profit as much as possible by these sites.

[4] 7 June 2019: https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=2174718565982909&id=842171652570947 and 25 June 2019:

https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=2206587216129377&id=842171652570947

[5] https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=2236122563175842&id=842171652570947

[6] https://hitel.news7.hu/az-oka-felhaborito/?fbclid=IwAR2YMwTD1MkEEPvPNukJsK_edXzEZKvnz4sIPaW58bZ9MIOUbwSxPIO2thc

[7] <http://eztnezdmeq.com/kiderult-hogy-a-haza-zavart-11-eves-kisfiu-mitol-halt-meg-a-korhazbol-haza-zavartak-reggelre-elhunyt/>, accessed on 21 August 2019.

In summary, then, for Hungarian misinformation websites, the mainstream media are an “other” against which to identify themselves – although, of course, doubts about the honesty of such declarations can often be raised. The mainstream media also serve as the basis of one of the two main types of misinformation articles: real news stories re-written in a way to generate as many clicks as possible.[65] Yet looking at these recycled articles, a third aspect also becomes clear: in some cases, the mainstream media articles barely need to be modified; they fit perfectly on the misinformation sites. That is, women’s tabloid Kiskegyed also reported on the death of a mostly unknown literary editor as “*THE COUNTRY IS MOURNING: THE WONDERFUL ARTIST PASSED AWAY*,”[66] just like misinformation sites did. Dailymigrants.com can take anti-immigrant articles from mainstream news outlets without modification; for example, the headline “*Head of Somalian migrant gang shot to death in Denmark*” comes straight from mainstream pro-government portal Origo.hu.[67]

Of course, much has been written about how the mainstream media, in competition with misinformation sites on social media, have become more sensationalized and clickbait-y. Yet in the Hungarian context in political issues, the similarities do not stop at the writing style. Media investigations as well as studies have repeatedly concluded that “the public and private media (...) under the Hungarian government’s control has made conspiracy theories (...) and pro-Russian disinformation a daily staple of media consumption in Hungary.”[68] The most widely spread of these conspiracy theories claims that Hungarian-born US billionaire George Soros is planning to bring millions of migrants to Europe. On a more concrete, story-level, there have also been documented cases of straightforward manipulation on pro-government mainstream media, such as when a talk show on HírTV recently used a doctored image depicting European Commission president Jean-Claude Juncker kissing a man,[69] or when Origo.hu in 2018 ran a picture of a dark-skinned man urinating in the underground and claimed that it was a migrant in Paris,[70] when in fact

[65] The other main type of articles is the completely made-up stories.

[66] <https://kiskegyed.blikk.hu/most/elhunyt-radnai-annamaria/r022sgc>, accessed on 22 August 2019.

[67] Dailymigrants: <http://dailymigrants.com/szomaliai-migransbanda-vezeret-lottek-agyon-daniaban/>, Origo:

<https://www.origo.hu/nagyvilag/20190627-szomaliai-migransbanda-vezeret-lottek-agyon-daniaban.html>, both accessed on 22 August

2019. Unfortunately, some of the negative tone of the Hungarian term “migránsbanda” (migrant gang) is lost in translation.

[68] Sawiris, Miroslava, Lenka Dušková, Jonáš Syrovátka, and Lóránt Győri. “European Elections in Central Europe: Information Operations And.” Bratislava, Slovakia: Globsec Strategic Communication Programme, National Endowment for Democracy, April 2019. https://www.globsec.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/EP-Elections_Information-Operations-Disinformation-Campaigns-1.pdf, p.

7. See also Bradshaw, Samantha, and Philip N Howard. “Online Supplement to Working Paper 2018.1 Challenging Truth and Trust: A Global Inventory of Organized Social Media Manipulation.” Oxford: Oxford Internet Institute, 2018. http://comprop.oii.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/93/2018/07/ct_appendix.pdf, and Corruption Research Centre: The impact of Russia’s state-run propaganda apparatus on online media in Hungary – 2010–2017. Budapest, 2018. http://www.crcb.eu/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/crcb_2017_mrsrppnm_English_180319_.pdf

[69] For more information, see <https://444.hu/2019/06/03/manipulalt-keppel-akarta-bayer-bebizonyitani-hogy-juncker-szajon-csokolt-egy-ferfit> (accessed on 22 August 2019).

[70] <https://www.origo.hu/nagyvilag/20180228-metro-parizs.html>, accessed on 22 August 2019.

the picture was taken several years earlier[71] in the New York City subway.[72] Further infamous examples of disinformation from the mainstream pro-government media include TV2 manipulating a video in 2016 to make it appear as if then right-wing leader Gábor Vona had admitted that he had attended “gay orgies” in the early 2000s,[73] or several pro-government media outlets reporting in 2017 that two Arab migrants planned to blow up the subway in Vienna.[74] These baseless hoaxes could easily have been published on the misinformation sites reviewed for this study.

[71] <https://www.tineye.com/search/16a34d1919a916e707f39e70422cddbaca75b116?page=1&sort=score&order=desc>, accessed on 22 August 2019.

[72] <https://444.hu/2018/03/01/a-metroba-vizelo-parizsi-migransnak-hazudja-az-origo-a-2015-ben-lefotozott-new-york-i-utast>, accessed on 22 August 2019.

[73] See more at https://media.mandiner.hu/cikk/20161115_durvan_manipulalta_legujabb_vonas_riportjat_a_tv2, accessed on 22 August, 2019.

[74] For example, the daily Magyar Idők, <https://www.magyaridok.hu/kulfold/a-becsi-metroban-tervezhetett-robbantani-ket-migrans-2000773/>;

Origo.hu, <https://www.origo.hu/nagyvilag/20170725-metroban-akartak-robbantani.html>;

888.hu, <https://888.hu/amerika-london-parizs/a-becsi-metroban-akart-robbantani-ket-migrans-4110728/>;

Pestisracok.hu, <https://pestisracok.hu/robbantani-akartak-becsi-metroban-de-veletlen-meghallottak-oket/>

Methodology

The misinformation websites surveyed for this research were primarily found through existing lists compiled by sites such as Urbanlegends.hu[75] and Hvg.hu[76], as well as identified by previous research.[77] After examining the websites, the Facebook pages advertised by them, if any, were looked at. If their Facebook page shared content from other websites or Facebook pages, those were also examined. Websites with similar urls (such as with the same name but ending with .info or .me) were also checked to see if they fall under the category of misinformation websites. If a person/business/email-address was connected to a website, and other websites were also registered with that identifier, those were looked at. If a misinformation website had a tagline or any sentence that was used with every article, the tagline/sentence was googled to find other websites that use it. Certain websites came up regularly as sources of articles posted on the misinformation websites; these were included in the examination. Altogether over 100 websites were studied (excluding those where the site contained no relevant content[78].) The research was carried out during the period May-June 2019.

Once a website was identified, it was searched for an impressum, contact detail or “about us” section to track down its owner. With some notable exception, the websites contained no such information. Various Whois databases were checked to see the registrant, such as the ICANN Whois Lookup[79], the Robtex Lookup tool[80], or the domain search engine WhoXY[81]. For urls ending with .hu, the official Hungarian domain registry[82] was checked; the ones ending with .eu, were looked up in the Eurid Whois search[83]. In most cases, these searches did not return any result, as the vast majority of the registrants use forms of protection (services such as Whois Guard or Whois Privacy) to hide their identity. In some cases, the historical Whois data helped find the person/email-address that registered the website before its registrant was masked. In the cases where the search brought up a name or an email address, Hungarian databases were checked if they can be connected to a business. In the few cases when this was possible, company registries such as Nemzeti Cégtár[84], Opten[85], Céglőny[86], the Ministry of Information’s registry[87] and the Hungarian tax authority database[88] were checked for financial information. In the cases when foundations operate the sites, the National Database of NGO Reports[89] was consulted.

The websites identified were checked for advertisements, which can be a source of income to the website owner/operator. For the analysis of the ads and trackers, the Firefox add-on Ghostery and Chrome’s Adblock extension were used.

Since websites change very quickly, in certain cases internet archive the Wayback Machine[90] was used to check earlier versions.

[75] See more details at <http://www.urbanlegends.hu/2019/01/megteveszto-magyar-hiroidalak-listaja-2019> (accessed on 23 July 2019).

[76] See more details at http://hvg.hu/tudomany/20150119_atveros_weboldalok (accessed on 18 July 2019).

[77] Sawiris, Miroslava, Lenka Dušková, Jonáš Syrovátka, and Lóránt Győri. “European Elections in Central Europe: Information Operations And.” Bratislava, Slovakia: Globsec Strategic Communication Programme, National Endowment for Democracy, April 2019, available online at https://www.globsec.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/EP-Elections_Information-Operations-Disinformation-Campaigns-1.pdf (accessed on 16 July 2019).

[78] Since misinformation websites seem to come and go, the majority of links in the less updated lists are dead. Of the over 200 misinformation websites listed by the Hvg.hu, only about 30 had any content at the time of the research.

[79] See more details at <https://whois.icann.org/en> (accessed on 18 July 2019).

[80] See more details at <https://www.robtx.com/> (accessed on 18 July 2019).

[81] See more details at <https://www.whoxy.com/> (accessed on 18 July 2019).

[82] See more details at <http://www.domain.hu/domain/szabad-e/> (accessed on 18 July 2019).

[83] See more details at <https://eurid.eu/en/> (accessed on 18 July 2019).

[84] See more details at <https://nemzeticegtar.hu/> (accessed on 18 July 2019).

[85] See more details at <https://www.opten.hu/> (accessed on 18 July 2019).

[86] See more details at <http://cegkozlony.hu/> (accessed on 18 July 2019).

[87] See more details at <https://www.e-ceggyezek.hu/> (accessed on 18 July 2019).

[88] See more details at https://nav.gov.hu/nav/adatbazisok/adatbleker/afaalanyok/afaalanyok_egyszeru (accessed on 18 July 2019).

[89] See more details at <https://birosag.hu/kozzetétel-kereso> (accessed 26 August 2019).

[90] See more details at <https://archive.org/web/> (accessed on 25 July 2019).

The list of misinformation websites studied

168-ora.info	harmonikum.co	nlcafe.me
24ora.eu	hatter-story.info	nlcafema.blogspot.com
5percblog.hu	hircsarda.hu	nyugdijasok.com
agyafurt.com	hirhugo.hu	nyugdijasok.hu
alternativhirek.com	hirozon.info	oroszhirek.hu
anephangja.com	hirozon.info	otpercpiheno.blogspot.com
antalvali.co.hu	hirturi.blogspot.com	otpercpiheno.hu
avilagtitkai.com	hirzona24.com	pestibulvar.hu
azeletigazsagai.net	hitel.news7.hu	rejtelyekszigete.com
balramagyar.hu	hitelforum.hu	rtl-klub.me
bekezdes.co	hu.news-front.info	szerencsemano.info
bidista.com	hungaryexpres.com	szinesvilag.com
bovebbenportal.com	hungarypost.info	szupertanacsokblog.hu
bulvar.info	karpathir.com	tenylegtippek.com
buzzblog.eu	kerteszkedek.hu	teljesfilm.hu
civilkontroll.com	ketkes.com	thehungariantimes.hu
dailymigrants.com	kozszolgalat.com	titkokszigete.hu
diabetika.hu	kuffer.hu	titokterminal.com
drabikjanosblog.wordpress.com	legjava.com	tudasfaja.club
dzsihadfigyeli.blogstar.hu	legjava.pro	tudasfaja.com
dzsihadfigyelo.com	leleplezomagazin.wordpress.com	tudasfaja.com
egyazegyben.co	magyarnep.me	tudatosanelok.com
egyazegyben.com	magyarokvagyunk.com	tudnivalok.eu
elfogadom.eu	maivilag.com	tudnodkell.info
ellenszel.hu	ma-reggel.me	tutihirek.org
elmenyorszag.co	mennyeitipp.hu	tv2-friss.com
elmenyorszag.com	mindenegybe.com	tv2-most.ma
erdekescikkek.com	mindenegyben.co	ujvilagtudat.blogspot.com
erdekesportal.com	minden-egyben.com	valovilag1.blogspot.com
erdemesszo.club	minden-egyben.com	vilagfigyelő.com
eztnezd.net	mindenegybenblog.com	vilaghelyzete.blogspot.com
eztnezdmeq.com	mocool.eu	vilagunk.hu
eztnezdmeq.net	napimigrans.info	xtremeblog.net
fejezet.com	napjainkportal.hu	zoldujsag.hu
fem3cafe.me	netbulvar.eu	
figyeld.eu	netceleb.eu	
filantropikum.com	netextra.hu	
fuggetlennemzet.hu	netujsag.info	

About the author

Judit Szakács is a researcher with a background in sociology, journalism, and English language and literature. Her main research interests include minority media and minority representation in the mainstream media as well as in social media. She has collaborated with scholars in international research projects in a variety of topics. In addition, she works as a media monitor, which provides her with valuable insights into contemporary practices in the Hungarian media. She volunteers as a contributor to the Hungarian corruption database compiled by K-Monitor.

About The Business of Misinformation project

The Business of Misinformation project is run by the Center for Media, Data and Society, mapping the individuals and companies that own misinformation websites and their links to institutions, parties and other individuals. It canvasses websites that systematically and methodically create and target false information to persuade audiences to adopt ideas and ways of thinking embraced by their original promoters or their sponsors, be those political, social, economic, health-related or else. It includes players in the misinformation industry consisting of locally run online portals that are presenting themselves and are perceived as independent voices.

To learn more about the project, please visit our website: <https://cmds.ceu.edu/business-misinformation>



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