

Two Journalistic Cultures in One Country

The Case of Hungary in the Light of Journalists' Discourses on Fake News

We argue that in Hungary—a country evincing a very high level of political polarisation and a very low level of public trust in the media—two media systems have emerged with two distinct journalistic cultures. The journalists of the state media system play a *collaborative*, while those of the market media system a *monitorial* role. Based on in-depth interviews with award-winning journalists and editors-in-chief, we explore how media professionals perceive the problem of fake news and suggest that fake news accusations have been instrumentalised as a discursive strategy to discredit the rival understanding of ‘good journalism.’ According to our findings, journalists think that fake news stories, including disinformation campaigns serving Russian interests, are widespread in Hungary and make the voter unable to decide which of the competing media narratives is more accurate. Because of a high level of political polarisation and a low level of public trust in the media, the Hungarian case shows like a magnifying glass some of the problems associated with fake news.¹

Key words: elite interviews, fake news, Hungarian media system, journalistic culture, political polarisation

1. Fake news: a fuzzy concept

Fake news has been in the focus of academic research in recent years, albeit the phenomenon is not a novelty. It has a long and well documented history in a variety of countries, going back to the rise of the mass press. Some of the best-known cases include the Central Park Zoo Escape (US, New York Herald, 1874), The Protocols of the Elders of Zion (Russia, Znamya, 1903), the ‘Spaghetti-Harvest’ (UK, BBC, 1957), and Hitler’s ‘diaries’ (West Germany, Stern, 1983). [These examples reveal that ‘fake news’ is an umbrella term covering very diverse occurrences ranging from satire via the April Fool’s Day joke to the conspiracy theory and evincing different motives and outcomes.](#)

The proliferation of digital platforms and channels has boosted disinformation in recent years: a global study has found evidence of organised disinformation campaigns in 28 countries in 2017, in 48 countries in 2018, and in 70 countries in 2019, including in Hungary (Bradshaw & Howard 2019). The Russian military aggression launched against Ukraine in February 2022, coupled with a massive [disinformation campaign](#), has re-directed attention onto the political effects of fake news. In Hungary, Russian disinformation has been echoed and amplified by pro-government

¹ This paper has been written as part of ‘Hungarian Digital Media Observatory,’ a European Commission-funded project headed by Agence France-Presse and involving the publisher Magyar Jeti and the think tank Media Universalis Foundation (2020–2022).

media in the first months of the war (Lakmusz 2022) and has spectacularly divided public opinion: 64 per cent of the opposition voters but only 3 per cent of those voting for the governing parties hold Russia responsible for the aggression against Ukraine (Papp 2022).

According to a frequently quoted definition, the term fake news refers to “news articles that are intentionally and verifiably false and could mislead readers” (Allcott & Gentzkow 2017: 213). According to another, it describes “news stories in which the story itself is fabricated, with no verifiable facts ... These stories are manipulated to look like credible journalistic reports” (Berg 2022: 380). While these are widely accepted definitions, they are of limited use for empirical research for at least three reasons. First, they focus on the intentions of the sender, which may or may not be known. Second, they create a false dichotomy: as fake news stories contain an element of truth (which is necessary to make them believable), and as accurate news stories include some bias, there is a grey zone between ‘fake’ and ‘accurate’ news stories, including half-truth, innuendo, rumour, exaggeration, wishful thinking, and speculation. And third, the very term fake news covers a variety of highly different topics, including political news, click-bait tabloid stories, and other content (such as disinformation related to the COVID pandemic).

Because of the fuzziness of the concept, it has been argued that fake news is best defined by its socio-political context (Aczél 2017). Another approach would identify (online) fake news in terms of its recurring features such as the lack of author and dating, references to unidentifiable sources or to other fake news sites, and URL addresses mimicking real news sites (Veszelszki 2017). Yet another approach suggests that the term ‘fake news’ should be avoided altogether as it is often used as a political label, and ‘disinformation’ should be used instead (Bódi et al. 2022).² In this paper, however, we opted to use the ‘term fake’ news because, unlike ‘disinformation,’ it suggests that the stories in question mimic accurate news stories, and because it has been accepted and used in its current form by Hungarian journalists. That said, we will, in an attempt to facilitate future research, put forward another definition of

² Disinformation has been defined by the European Commission’s High-Level Group on Fake News and Online Disinformation as “false, inaccurate, or misleading information designed, presented and promoted to intentionally cause public harm or for profit.” The main difference between fake news and disinformation hence lies in the scope of the two concepts: disinformation covers all sorts of fabricated information, while fake news only refers to information that is mimicking accurate news stories (Belli et al. 2021: 119).

fake news in the light of our interviews with senior journalists, *re-defining it as a news story whose core information is false.*

2. Research method: elite interviews

We ask the question of how senior journalists perceive the problems *associated with* fake news in contemporary Hungary. Based on semi-structured interviews with twelve award-winning journalists and editors-in-chief, we attempt to identify the competing concepts of ‘good journalism,’ the recurring elements of fake news, the strategies to fight fake news, and to assess how senior journalists see the political impact of *fake news*. The interviews were conducted between January and August 2022 either in person or via Skype. The oral interviews, each lasting 30–60 minutes, were transcribed and submitted to thematic analysis.

We selected our respondents using the snowball sampling method. The twelve interviewees, including ten male and two female journalists, have gained experience in television and radio *broadcasting* as well as online and print journalism, and work for daily and weekly outlets. The journalists interviewed represent various nationwide newsrooms and have consented that we quote them under their names. Our interviews did not cover local and regional outlets. Independent newsrooms are largely over-represented in our sample, as most of the journalists of the government-affiliated media have declined our interview requests, with the exception of one respondent. At the same time, our respondents represent ideologically diverse newsrooms: eight of them work for outlets that the public associates with leftist views (including the investigative site *Átlátszó*, the political-economic weekly *HVG*, the news site *HVG Online*, the online news and talk station *Klubrádió*, the political-cultural weekly *Magyar Narancs*, the now defunct broadsheet *Népszabadság*, the broadsheet *Népszava*, and the news site *Telex*), and four for outlets commonly described as rightist (including the news sites *Hungary Today/Ungern Heute* and *Pesti Srácok*, the political weekly *Magyar Hang*, and the online magazine *Válasz Online*). For a list of all respondents, see the Appendix.

The Russian military aggression against Ukraine was launched after the first few interviews were conducted. We decided not to include in the interview guidelines any specific questions about the information warfare coupled with the actual war as we proceeded with the interviews, yet our respondents have repeatedly raised the issue of Russian *war disinformation*.

Why could a case study of Hungary be of interest? Growing political polarisation and declining trust in traditional news organisations raise concerns across the globe (Reuters Institute 2021, Zelizer et al. 2022). The case of Hungary, a country evincing a very high level of political polarisation and a very low level of public trust in the media, shows like a magnifying glass the problems associated with fake news. Within the European Union, Hungary exhibits one of the highest levels of political polarisation (Patkós 2016) and, according to the latest Digital News Report (Reuters Institute 2022), is the second in terms of perceived news outlet polarisation, with 44 per cent of people thinking that news organisations are far apart (as opposed the Portugal with the lowest level of media polarisation at 16 per cent). The same report reveals that public trust in the media is extremely low in Hungary, with only 27 per cent of people trusting the media (as opposed to Finland with the highest level of trust at 69 per cent).

While we are aware that comparative media systems research usually takes countries as the units of analysis and comparison (e.g., Seymour-Ure 1974, Chalaby 1996, Hallin and Mancini 2004), we will argue that, in a context of extreme political polarisation, two parallel media systems with two distinct journalistic cultures have emerged within Hungary in the 2010s. The journalists of the first media system play *a collaborative*, and those of the second media system *a monitorial role*; at the same time, they mutually accuse each other of fake news dissemination (see Sections 4.1. and 4.4.). As a result, the voter is often unable to decide which of the competing media narratives is more accurate and accepts misleading statements. For example, a recent survey shows that even opposition voters tend to believe pro-government media on some issues: 63 per cent of the voters of the ruling parties and 28 per cent of those of the opposition parties subscribe to the government narrative on ‘sanctional inflation’ blaming the European Union for Hungary’s outstandingly high inflation rates (Vicsek 2022).

Our elite interviews suggest that the issue of fake news is high on the agenda in journalists’ discourses, and our respondents have some elaborate strategies to fight disinformation, yet they are extremely sceptical about the efficiency of their efforts. Our findings also suggest that, in the context of two competing journalistic cultures, fake news accusations have been largely instrumentalised, or weaponised, as a discursive strategy to discredit the rival understanding of ‘good journalism.’ An important limitation to our research is the biased composition of our sample. Hence

our findings are mainly valid for the journalists of the market media system, yet they also highlight the cleavages dividing the two journalistic cultures of Hungary.

3. The context: two media systems in one country

After the Fidesz/Christian Democrats party alliance assumed office in 2010 with over two-thirds of the mandate in parliament, it set out to redistribute media resources, including radio licences, funds for public service programme production, and state advertising, promoting pro-government outlets and discriminating independent ones (Bajomi-Lázár 2017) in an attempt to establish ‘media balance,’ i.e., to improve the positions of rightist voices in the media.³ As a result, PM Viktor Orbán’s successive governments, re-elected in 2014, 2018, and 2022, first took control of MTVA (the Media Services and Support Trust Fund, an umbrella organisation of 14 public service radio stations and television channels as well as the national news agency) and then gradually of a number of private outlets on all platforms, united under KESMA (the Central European Press and Media Foundation, an organisation coordinating the news services of 476 private outlets across the country). In the meantime, several independent outlets have either ceased publication (e.g., the broadsheet *Népszabadság*), or have been transferred into the hands of government cronies (e.g., the news sites *Origó* and *Index*, and the nationwide commercial television channel TV2), or have lost their terrestrial broadcasting licenses (*Klubrádió*) (Bátorfy and Urbán 2020). The favouritism of the government’s media policies has turned pro-government journalism into an adaptation strategy and even a profitable business model, while independent journalism is now hardly sustainable.

Pro-government voices, mainly funded from the taxpayers’ money, are in a dominant position in the markets of regional dailies, local radio stations, and news agencies, while a number of independent outlets deriving their revenues from [commercial advertising](#) have also persisted, especially in the markets of news sites (*24*, *444*, *Telex*, *HVG*, *Szabad Európa*), nationwide commercial television channels (*RTL*),

³ Since their first term in office between 1998 and 2002, the Orbán Governments have argued that the political transformation of 1989/1990 was a failure in that the former communists have maintained their positions in the media. This argument has been repeatedly used to legitimate government interventions in the media aimed at improving the positions of rightist voices. As István Elek (1999: 184), media policy advisor of PM Orbán’s first government put it, “affirmative action in support of rightist values in the press is morally warranted by the ruthless discrimination of these values under state socialism.”

and weekly magazines (*Élet és Irodalom*, *HVG*, *Jelen*, *Magyar Hang*, *Magyar Narancs*, *Válasz*) (Urbán et al. 2017, Bátorfy 2019).

According to the global press freedom index issued by Reporters Without Borders (2022), Hungary gradually moved from position 26 in 2009 to position 85 in 2022. A recent report by the UN Special Rapporteur (2021) has observed that government interventions aimed at creating “media balance ... have undermined media diversity, pluralism and independence” in Hungary. The Rapporteur voiced “serious concerns at reports of recurring campaigns of hate speech, harassment, or stigmatisation of journalists.” The same report described the current media landscape as a “toxic environment deliberately created by political leaders to sow social divisions and hatred.” The Hungarian government, however, has rejected these claims. As PM Orbán put it in a recent interview, accusations that the Hungarian government is restricting press freedom are “ridiculous. More than half of the media are extremely critical of the Government” (Prime Minister 2020). Minister of Foreign Affairs Péter Szijjártó has refuted the statement of the UN Special Rapporteur arguing that the critics do not speak Hungarian, which explains why they fail to see that all market leading outlets are critical of the government (Minister of Foreign Affairs 2021).

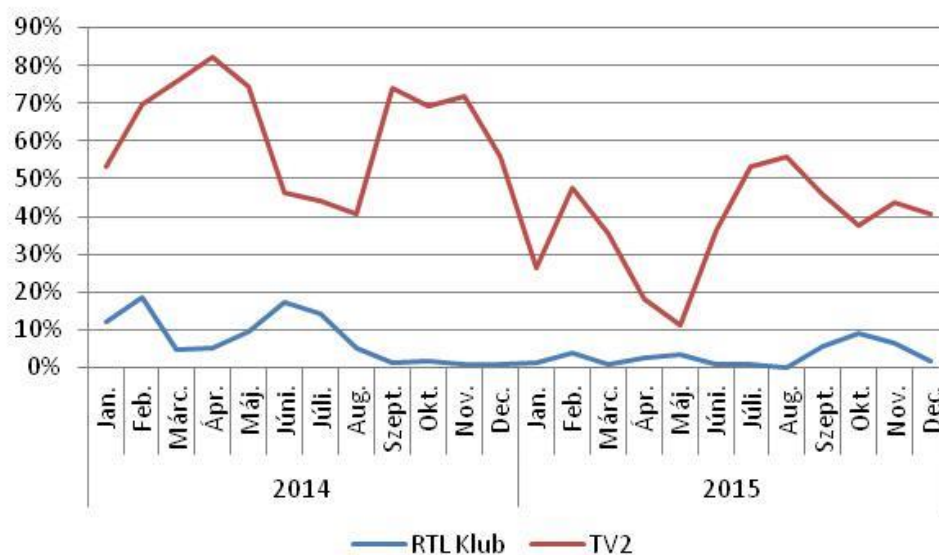
How to describe, then, the media in Hungary? Different authors advocate somewhat different approaches. For some, it is an “authoritarian media system” (Bátorfy 2019), for others, it is a “clientelist media system” (Bajomi-Lázár 2022), yet others call it a “propaganda state” (Sükösd 2022). We think, however, that these descriptions are inadequate in that they focus on the media under MTVA and KESMA but ignore independent outlets. If we accept the narrow definition of the media system following Parson’s 1951 theory, which describes it as all media guided by a “*commonly shared* system of cultural symbols” (quoted in Rantanen 2013: 269; emphasis added),⁴ then we must say that, owing to extreme political polarisation and to government intervention, two separate media systems have emerged in Hungary in the 2010s. Likewise, if we define journalistic culture as a “particular set of ideas and practices by which journalists legitimate their role in society” (Hanitzsch et al. 2019, 34) whereby “*shared* practices, values, and normative assumptions” (Harrison [2000] quoted in Hanitzsch et al. 2019, 34; emphasis added) provide journalists with a

⁴ A broader approach to media systems would suggest that “systems are not homogeneous ... A media system is typically made up of many different institutions, different sectors that often operate to quite *different logics* ... they do, however, interact with one another” (Hallin 2020: 5777–5778; emphasis added). Hence the narrow definition insists on shared norms, whereas the broader is more permissive in that it focuses on interactions between actors who may follow different norms.

common identity, it is safe to suggest that these two media systems evince two distinct journalistic cultures. These journalistic cultures are, of course, permanently reconstituted and reaffirmed as a result of discursive struggles between actors advocating competing logics of appropriateness (Hanitzsch et al. 2019, 31).

Are there really two media systems with two journalistic cultures in Hungary, or is it just one, hybrid, media system? We believe that we are dealing with two different media systems and journalistic cultures because the differences between them are greater than the similarities (cf. Mancini 2012). To begin with, in the first media system, outlets largely depend on state funding, while in the second media system, newsrooms struggle to survive on the market (Bátorfy & Urbán 2020). The different funding models of the two media systems are illustrated by the revenue split between TV2, a pro-government commercial television channel, and RTL Klub, and independent one. As Figure 1 shows, the former earned up to 80 per cent of its revenues from state advertising, while the latter earned less than 20 per cent from the same source in the mid-2010s.

Figure 1
Share of state advertising on RTL Klub and TV2 in 2014 and 2015



Source: Urbán (2016) based on Kantar Media data

Further, in the first media system, the level of parallelism between parties and outlets (cf. Seymour-Ure 1974) is high, while in the second, it is low: while pro-government outlets, largely depending on state advertising, promote the governing parties'

agenda, independent outlets, deriving their revenues mainly from the market, are critical of both the ruling and the opposition parties. In the first media system, outlets echo the government's messages and hence pursue the logic of collaborative journalism, while in the second media system, newsrooms attempt to hold the government transparent and pursue the logic of monitorial journalism (cf. Hanitzsch 2019).⁵ The lack of consensus between those advocating these two journalistic roles is also reflected in the lack self-regulatory mechanism binding all journalists; in fact, not only nationwide journalists associations, but most outlets are also lacking efficient self-regulatory means.

In the first media system, outlets evince ideological homogeneity, all outlets advocating rightist views, while in the second, media display ideological pluralism, including both rightist and leftist perspectives. The autonomy of outlets in the first media system is restricted, as they are centrally, albeit informally, coordinated by the government via MTVA and KESMA, while the freedom of newsroom in the second media system is relatively unrestricted. The newsroom logic of the first media system is closed, as journalists do not as a main rule give interviews to independent journalists and researchers, while the newsroom logic of the second is open as the journalists there are willing to speak about their profession. For the sake of simplicity, we will hereafter refer to these two systems as *the state media system* and *the market media system* (for a comparison of the two, see also Table 1 in the Summary and conclusions section).

The differences between the two media systems seem to be irreconcilable. The state-affiliated media refer to independent publications and broadcasters as “propaganda outlets” or “Soros media” (cf. Bátorfy 2019/2022),⁶ while the market media call the publications and broadcasters of the state system “servant media” and the journalists there “mercenaries” (Dési 2021), i.e., they mutually imply that the journalists of the other camp are not doing proper journalistic work.

⁵ According to Standaert et al.'s global typology of normative journalistic roles (2021: 928–931), the journalists subscribing to *the monitorial role* consider themselves the ‘Fourth Estate’ or the ‘guardians of democracy’ who hold powers to account. By contrast, those of *the collaborative role* do not consider themselves distinct from but part of the state apparatus and find their primary role in ‘educating the people on government policies,’ ‘bridging between the government and the people,’ and ‘promoting national unity.’

⁶ According to an official Government narrative, Hungarian-born American billionaire and philanthropist George Soros is the mastermind behind the ‘Soros plan,’ a conspiracy designed to remove the Hungarian government and funding a number of non-governmental organisations and independent media outlets in Hungary.

The ratio of journalists belonging to the two camps seems to be even. According to the Hungary chapter of the World of Journalism Study (2017), 43.7 per cent said that it was “very” or “extremely important” to “monitor and scrutinize political leaders.” (At the same time, 23.5 per cent said that it was highly important to be “an adversary of the government,” and 18.3 per cent said so about being in “support [of] government policy.”)

Audiences are also divided. According to a recent study, 59 per cent of the supporters of the Fidesz/Christian Democrats party alliance held in 2022 that the supporters of the opposition were ‘brainwashed,’ and 63 per cent of the supporters of the united opposition believed the same about the supporters of ruling parties. Likewise, 85 per cent of opposition supporters were concerned that the state-affiliated media disseminated propaganda rather than accurate information, and 58 per cent of Fidesz/Christian Democrats voters thought that the market media were propaganda channels (Policy Solutions 2022).

4. The interviews

4.1. ‘Good’ vs. ‘bad’ journalism

In an attempt to map journalistic cultures, we first asked our respondents to define their professional objectives and their understanding of ‘good’ vs. ‘bad’ journalism.

When asked to define ‘good journalism,’ a recurring notion, mentioned by several of our interviewees, was factual journalism that provides people with information. Fact-checking and fairness have also been listed as key features of good journalism.

Károly Vörös T. (*Népszabadság*) suggested that a good journalist is “to inform, to orientate, and to integrate.” Dániel Deme (*Hungary Today/Ungern Heute*) argued that good journalism “reflects upon the everyday life and the aspirations of its audience. ... Journalism is a service.”

Some of our interviewees had a perspective different from those described above. János Dési (*Klubrádió*) argued that good journalism cannot be defined because the audiences are diverse, and society does not have a homogeneous set of interests. A similar suggestion has been made by Tamás Bodoky (*Átlászó*) who identified good journalism with investigative reporting but added that for most of the public good journalism simply means infotainment. In short, all of our respondents quoted above,

whom without exception represented the market media system, [including both leftist and rightist outlets](#), identified good journalism with the service of the audiences and linked the functions of journalism with their needs.

How do those representing the state media system define good journalism? Lacking a sufficient number of interviews of our own, we can only rely on the observations of external analysts and the rare public statements made by the journalists of pro-government outlets. As for the former, let us quote Bátorfy (2019, 41, emphasis added) who describes the journalists of MTVA and KESMA like this:

...pro-government journalists ... are *political players* who wish to assert these interests at any price. ... Their writing is often characterized by militaristic rhetoric: racist, ethno-centric, and national-chauvinistic ideology; anti-Liberalism and anti-Communism; glorification of masculinity and willpower; and disdain for feminism, efforts at finding compromise, and the acknowledgement of error, the latter of which they consider to be a sign of weakness.

A similar observation has been made by Rényi (2022, emphasis added):

Editors within the pro-government media sphere view themselves as *political actors*, soldiers rather than media professionals bound by journalistic ethics. They don't care about facts, routinely falsify stories and even ignore the verdicts of the courts when they are forced to issue corrections.

Figures confirm this assessment: between 2017 and 2021, pro-government outlets lost a total of nearly 400 libel suits, while independent outlets only 40 (Erdélyi 2022).

As for pro-government journalists' understanding of their own role, we may quote Gábor G. Fodor, editor-in-chief of the news site 888, who said this in an interview: "I am one of those whose job is to defend the truths of the regime" (in Nagy 2015). In another interview, he stated the following: "We do politics. We are fighters and we have no reason to be ashamed of it. ... If needed, we will shoot without delay" (in Czopf 2018). This position largely identifies good journalism with the service of the government.

That said, the picture should be nuanced by what Gergely Huth (*Pesti Srácok*), the only journalist working for a pro-government outlet at the time our interviews were conducted, said to us: "Good journalism is honest journalism, because we work first and foremost for the benefit of the readers, the viewers." This approach also identifies good journalism with the service of the audiences, which indicates that the line between the two journalism cultures is sometimes blurred. At the same time, Huth rejected the idea of fact-based journalism, stating that "objective journalism

does not exist.” If economists, lawyers and other influencers are free to share their views on social media, he added, then professional journalists should also do so.

When we asked our respondents to define ‘bad journalism,’ they referred to the lack of curiosity and scepticism, and described it to as ‘superficial.’ Bad journalism, they said, does not follow the rule that all information must be confirmed by multiple sources before publication, and is often ‘one-sided.’ Further, it has been described as ‘unprepared,’ ‘irrelevant,’ and ‘boring.’ Bad journalism has also been defined as being ‘dictated from above,’ and identified with partisanship and propaganda. While the descriptions above, put forward by journalists of the market media system, implicitly identified bad journalism with the practices of state-affiliated media, one of our respondents also observed that journalists independent from the state may also be partisan.

When asked whether audience expectations are in line with journalists’ own understandings of their societal role, some of our interviewees said that the public is rarely conscious in their choices and merely reads the news as a means of entertainment. Two of our respondents, however, observed that, owing to new digital technologies and applications, audience expectations are more easily transferred to date than before. Csaba Lukács (*Magyar Hang*) said this:

We use an opinion poll every year to assess what our readers want. Every one of them says they want to get impartial and balanced reporting. But the readership figures of our articles suggest otherwise. And so do the comments that we receive. ... [\[Society\] is increasingly polarised, and people are unwilling to look at what is beyond their opinion bubbles.](#)

Commenting on the same issue, János Dési suggested an unusual parallel:

Politics is like football. If you are a devoted fan of the Ferencváros Sports Club, you are not interested in how poorly your team plays. You want to make sure that your team is the best ever, and all your opponents are lame. Yes, you [as a journalist] may want to seek objectivity, but nobody really wants you to.

In contrast to this, Attila Tóth-Szenesi (*Telex*) argued that

...we receive readers’ letters, and we reflect upon meaningful criticism, but we do not do journalism that meets the needs of the readers. Journalism has its own set of rules ... and our job is to play by these rules, rather than please the reader.

In short, our respondents’ answers link the emergence of two media systems with the political polarisation of Hungarian society in general, and audiences’ need for confirmation in particular. That said, some of them also suggested that journalists have

some room for manoeuvring, and do not necessarily need to give in to public expectations.

It has also been noted that, in contrast to journalism in the Anglo-American world and in Germany, opinionated journalism lacking factual analysis occurs quite often in Hungary, because its relative costs are lower than those of fact-based reporting. Most of our interviewees, however, had no problems with journalists overtly voicing a particular political position as long as they distinguish between news and views, and do not spread lies. By contrast, Zsófia Fülöp (*Magyar Narancs*) urged for fair reporting and suggested that journalists' subjective views should not be perceptible: "Let the reader decide what he or she thinks and let the author's position remain hidden."

These views suggest that opinionated journalism is part of the unwritten rules of both journalistic cultures, even though some representing the market media system—notably some leftist outlets—argued for the primacy of fact-based journalism. Hence the cleavage dividing the two journalism cultures is not one between opinionated and fact-based journalism, but one dividing those who seek fair and balanced coverage providing the whole picture on the one hand and those who promote an agenda (that of the government) on the other—at least on the rhetorical level, i.e., in terms of journalists' self-assigned normative roles.

The dualism of fact-based reporting and of opinionated journalism as reflected in our interviews is in line with the findings of the Hungary report of the Worlds of Journalism Study (2017), which observed that, of the 389 interviewed journalists, 86.5 per cent said that it was "very" or extremely important to be "detached observers," and 48.6 per cent said so about "influenc[ing] public opinion." These two, seemingly contradictory, journalistic roles seem to be well reconcilable for many Hungarian journalists.

4.2. What is fake news?

When asked to define fake news, most of our interviewees offered the textbook definition. Thus fake news has been defined as "lies disguised as news" (András Stumpf, *Válasz Online*), "a thing pretending to be a news story but consciously created to misinform people" (Miklós Hargitai, *Népszava*), "intentional and tendentious lies serving particular interests, which however should not to be mistaken for unwitting

misinformation” (Bodoky), “fake news is a lie” (Huth), and “articles that rely partly or entirely on non-real information” (Dezső, *HVG*).

Deme was unwilling to define fake news, suggesting that the expression is mainly used in an effort to undermine the credibility of ‘the other camp:’

The term ‘fake news’ is widely used as a weapon to discredit political opponents these days. ... People label every view they disagree with as fake news. ... Yet only the bigot and the fundamentalist think they have the right to decide what is true and what is not. ... The concept has been abused to such an extent that I would rather not use it at all.

Some of our interviewees were convinced that fake news and accurate stories can be clearly distinguished. Others argued that sometimes it is impossible to disclose the truth for the lack of information, or that some news items may be unambiguously fake, while others may be difficult to identify as such. Tóth-Szenesi noted that “the truth is a complex thing.” Huth observed that

...there is so much chaos and noise in the world of the news, especially as regards the news coming from other countries, that everybody can make a mistake.

A similar point has been made by Serdült (*HVG Online*) who noted that

...every journalist has encountered situations in which they have been misled by their sources, even though they have used every journalistic tool at hand to depict reality in all possible perspectives.

Telling only one half of a story is sometimes seen as almost analogous to telling lies, especially if a key piece of information remains untold. The majority view, however, is that unintended lies should not be seen as fake news but are an indication that the journalist did not do a proper job. In another perspective, it is only the *essential information* serving as the basis of a news story that matters; *circumstantial information*, if lacking or unconfirmed, does not turn an accurate story into fake news.

Because of the ongoing Russian military aggression against Ukraine, Dezső, Fülöp, Lukács and Tóth-Szenesi noted that fake news stories are more easily generated in times of war when both parties involved have a vested interest in disseminating disinformation, and facts are difficult to check. Lukács observed, however, that the fake narrative that praises Russia had been launched in Hungary years before the war broke out. Hargitai also noted that “Russian interest trolls” had emerged in the Hungarian public sphere before the war broke out. Bodoky added that the pro-Russian narrative has successfully changed the orientation of many in Hungary who have turned away from the West and began to embrace Russia in recent years. Huth

has also acknowledged that fake news stories were disseminated in Hungary in the first days of the war but argued that such accounts were only sporadic.

4.3. Recurring elements of fake news

When asked about how journalists can identify a fake news story, it has been suggested that one can ‘intuitively’ recognise it. In addition to this, it has often been noted that fake news stories contain an element of truth. Also, virtually all our interviewees have observed that doubtful sources are a warning sign, as some sources have a bad reputation for disseminating questionable information, expressed in the number of lawsuits lost. Fake news stories do not occur on a random basis, but in specialised outlets, as, in the words of Tamás Bodoky, “fake news is produced intentionally and tendentiously,” especially as the click-bait dissemination of sensational fake news has become a lucrative business strategy. Yet ‘the average reader’ cannot distinguish between professional and fake news sources, and therefore it is also part of the journalists’ job to do some fact-checking in order to meet their educative mission.

It has also been noted that fake news is usually one-sided in that it does not give those covered a voice to comment on the story. Several of our informants have also observed that beyond every fake news there is some political motivation. Stumpf provided a whole list of warning signs, including, in addition to the above, the lack of imprint, author, and links, “bombastic” wording, and conspiracy theories, but he also observed that “the freedom of speech also includes the freedom of lies.”

4.4. The sources of fake news

When asked about the major sources of fake news in Hungary, Hargitai suggested that “most fake news stories come from the government, either directly or indirectly. No other source compares to them,” which point that has been voiced by several other respondents, too. As already noted, many of the fake news stories are believed to serve Russian interests. A similar point has been made by Dezső who observed that

...most fake news come from where most court cases are lost, which means the outlets disseminating government propaganda ... the number of the court cases lost is a very objective indicator.

However, he added that the political left also has some propaganda websites that often [mislead](#) the public, which point has been confirmed by other interviewees.

Lukács has observed that pro-government outlets, including the public service media, use the term fake news as a *political label* to discredit independent media: “The term fake news has become a weapon in the very hands of the government that is eager to disseminate disinformation.” He added that government agencies are reluctant to release public information, and government actors refuse to reply to the questions of what they call ‘fake news media.’

The pro-government journalist Huth had a different position. He observed that “the distortion of information ... has mainly been a practice of left-wing journalists in recent decades.” A similar point has been made by Deme who suggested that the most important fake news in recent years has been *the one* suggesting that the Hungarian government is Fascist and Nazi:

[The outlets criticising the government] have divided mankind in two groups. There are those who agree with them and those who do not and the latter are therefore Nazi and Fascist. ... I do not think there is a Nazi or Fascist political party in Hungary. ... Calling conservative people of a national thinking Nazi is disrespectful of the real victims of Nazism [in World War II].

Bodoky also stressed the risks of fake news accusations:

All this fake news chasing may just serve ideological purposes. ... The liberals have fact-checking teams and workshops, and the pro-government press is also engaged in fake news hunting, and then they quite typically declare each another’s news to be fake news. ... Fake news is defined by the political side of the reporter.

This was also confirmed by Huth, who said this:

The left felt ... that action should be taken against the systemic spread of Russian propaganda, the right felt that action should be taken against left-wing fake news about Hungary’s involvement in the war.

Our interviews hence corroborate the findings of other researchers who suggest that ‘fake news’ has become a political label used in an attempt to discredit the ‘other camp’ (Bódi et al. 2022). The weaponization of ‘fake news’ occurs to be both a product and an agent of political polarisation. *At the same time, the accusation of the other camp of fake news dissemination is a way for journalists in both camps to express and to reinforce the positive features of their own journalistic culture by creating a negative reference point they can contrast their own understanding of good journalism with.*

4.5. The political impact of fake news

When asked to assess the political impact of [fake news](#), a number of noteworthy suggestions have been made:

Fake news ... is high on the public agenda, which means there is no time left for more important issues to be considered (Fülöp).

It brutally distorts people's worldview ... it creates a view that has nothing in common with the real world and yet people base their political and other decisions on it (Hargitai).

People live in opinion bubbles to date which means that the line between news and views is blurred (Dezső).

[Fake news stories] mainly serve the purpose of reinforcing people's existing beliefs (Tóth-Szenesi).

Tóth-Szenesi went on suggesting that "parallel societies" have emerged, whereby "each group writes for itself and reinforces itself."

According to Vörös T., fake news serves the purpose of "disorientating citizens so that they cannot make adequate judgments about social issues." Lukács went even further and suggested that "fake news creates chaos and serves those who like to fish in troubled waters," pointing out that [fake news dissemination](#) is not only aimed at misleading people, but also at creating information overload whereby the truth can no longer be distinguished from the lie.

4.6. Strategies to deal with fake news

Our respondents have repeatedly noted that the dissemination of fake news undermines public trust in the media. Should an outlet be caught two or three times spreading lies, people will no longer believe it.

Once again, some risks have been associated with the outlets dedicated to fighting fake news, which, according to Huth,

...predicts a very dark future, for it is obvious that these fact-checkers owe a lot to an international network representing a particular set of ideological and political objectives. ... We call it the Soros Network, but everybody knows that this is a political network closely collaborating with the foreign network of the deep state of the American Democrats whose activities should be strongly rejected, as they jeopardise national sovereignty by attempting to influence domestic politics from abroad.

A wholly different approach has been voiced by Bodoky who said this:

When it comes to state propaganda relying on a great number of outlets, long-term strategies and brainwashing, I don't know what one could possibly do. ... Yes, a fact-checking webpage may fight the textbook fake

news story, but it cannot do anything when faced with brainwashing propaganda disseminated on the state level.

While it has been observed that fact-checking outlets may not reach those who use the media to find confirmation rather than information, such as those believing in conspiracy theories, it has also been repeatedly stressed that a part of the journalists' job is to fight [fake news](#). This can be done in multiple ways, including genuine fact-based investigative reporting, techniques dedicated to raising public awareness, and education, especially that of the younger generations, enabling them to critically read the news, to consciously choose their news sources, and to recognise their own fears and prejudices.

Serdült, by contrast, argued that journalists themselves can do the most to fight fake news. They must, above all, rely on multiple sources to confirm the story, and triple-check all information before it is released. While stressing the importance of "self-checking," she noted that professional outlets "simply do not have the capacity to check all the fake news stories released via social media." [She also underlined the need to rely on expert sources and hard data](#). In fact, several respondents have observed that journalists have but limited means to fight [fake news](#), especially because the outlets independent from the government are lacking the financial means to double-check the information they publish. When asked what could be done to fight fake news, the most pessimistic view has been expressed by Tóth-Szenesi who said this: "I have no illusions. Nothing can be done." Stumpf was equally pessimistic, noting that:

...only laws [could efficiently fight disinformation]. Education does not help ... It would take a thousand years and we'll all be dead. Laws need to be passed and lying needs to be forbidden. For example, propaganda funded by the state should be outlawed.

Vörös T. was also of the opinion that journalists alone cannot do much without the legislature intervening:

A normal and fair press law could be of help, providing a framework for the Hungarian press in which it could work normally, including in the field of access to information.

Deme was also sceptical, but for another reason:

I am suspicious [of fact-checking sites]. Once again, someone thinks they have a monopoly of truth. What is a fact and what is not is a function of what people believe in ... No one should have the monopoly to decide for us what is true and what is not. ... Saying that some people disseminate fake news is quite dangerous as it means that we have no moral common ground. ... If there is no common ground ... then there is no dialogue. The term fake news is the final nail in the coffin of

dialogue. ... Societal dialogue has been lost, which can only lead to social disintegration and violence.

In other words, he observed that not only disinformation, but fact-checking, *i.e.*, the *confuting and discreditation of the other camp*, may also enhance political polarisation, undermining, in the final analysis, democratic cohesion.

5. Summary and conclusions

We have argued that contemporary Hungary, one of the most politically polarised countries in Europe, evinces two media systems with two journalistic cultures: the state media system where journalists play a collaborative, and the market media system where they play a monitorial role. Our interviews aimed at mapping journalists' perceptions of the problems of fake news have also shed light on these two journalistic cultures and the cleavages dividing them (*for a summary of the two media systems and journalistic cultures, see Table 1*).

Table 1
The state and the market media systems in Hungary

	<i>State media system</i>	<i>Market media system</i>
Main source of funding	state advertising	commercial advertisements
Economic sustainability	profitable	hardly sustainable
Political parallelism	high	low
Autonomy	restricted	unrestricted
Newsroom logic	closed	open
Ideology	rightist	leftist or rightist
Reporting style	one-sided	mostly balanced
Journalistic culture	collaborative	monitorial

An important limitation of our findings, however, is the biased composition of our sample, as the journalists of state-affiliated outlets, with the exception of one, refused to be interviewed. Hence our findings are mainly valid for the journalists of the market media system. That said, the ratio of journalists representing outlets commonly associated with leftist and with rightist views was more balanced. Therefore our interviews suggest that the main cleavage dividing journalistic cultures does not lie between those of rightist and of leftist views, but between those advocating (*at least on the rhetorical level*) balanced reporting and those echoing the government's narratives. Further, while the state media system is made up of rightist outlets, the market media system includes both leftist and rightist ones. This questions the legitimacy of

the government's attempts at establishing 'media balance,' i.e., *to engage in 'affirmative action'* (cf. Elek 1999 in Footnote 4) in defence of rightist voices.

The two journalistic cultures evince competing narratives of appropriateness. Our respondents representing the two cultures mutually accuse the other camp of fake news dissemination, i.e., fake news accusations have been *mobilised as a discursive means* to discredit the rival understanding of 'good journalism.' Even the legitimacy of efforts at debunking fake news has been repeatedly questioned, suggesting that fact-checking is used as a means of enhancing political polarisation and undermining democratic cohesion *by way of confuting the other camp*. At the same time, virtually all of our interviewees agreed that fake news stories are published too often *in contemporary Hungary* which erodes public trust in *all media*, no matter what political views they advocate.

That said, our interviews also reveal some similarities between the two journalistic cultures. Journalists from both cultures stressed that it is easy to make mistakes in the daily routine of journalism and that unintentionally inaccurate reporting should not be considered fake news dissemination, but poor journalistic performance. Opinionated journalism seems to prevail in both camps; albeit this statement must be nuanced by adding that a pro-government journalist observed that there is no objective reporting, while most of the independent journalist argued for fact-based and balanced reporting. Both camps claimed to derive the societal functions of journalism from the needs of the public, even though a pro-government journalist has described himself as one whose job is "to defend the truths of the regime."

When asked specifically about the definition and specificities of fake news, our respondents' answers revealed a great deal of awareness of the issue. Practically all identified fake news with political fake news (ignoring tabloid and other genres) and associated it with *partisan reporting and* political propaganda. They defined a number of recurring elements that allow for the identification of fake news such. Our respondents, *regardless of their political preferences and self-assigned journalistic roles*, also agreed that there is a vast grey area between fake and accurate news stories, and suggested that, given the pressures of news journalism frequently leading to mistakes, it is the key information of a news story that matters, while less relevant information need not necessarily be true. In light of media professionals' experiences, we might therefore re-define the concept of fake news as *a news story whose core information is false*.

Our respondents have largely agreed that fake news is a threat to the democratic processes and undermines voters' political choices. They also agreed that the frequent occurrence of fake news is both an outcome and an agent of political polarisation and is therefore instrumental to the rise of "parallel societies."

Our respondents have listed a number of strategies to fight disinformation, including efforts to raise public awareness, the education of the younger generations, and genuine investigative reporting (as opposed to reliance on official sources). Frequent self-checking and peer-checking have also been listed as potentially efficient strategies. That said, the consensual view was that, given the wide-scale dissemination of disinformation, the impact of the strategies dedicated to fighting fake news is at best limited.

Further research should look into what was actually missing from our respondents' responses. Historically, when trust in the media is eroded, outlets have frequently implemented self-regulatory mechanisms in an attempt to improve the transparency of the news production process and increase the accountability of journalists. Although some of our interviewees have found a link between the frequent dissemination of fake news and low levels of trust in the media, none of them mentioned the role of ethical codes, ethics commissions, and press ombudspersons in improving the credibility of news outlets—but then, journalistic self-regulation has no established tradition in Hungary. Further research therefore should explore how self-regulatory mechanisms could improve public trust in the media and help journalists' attempts at fighting fake news in a deeply polarised society.

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Appendix: Interviewees

Bodoky, Tamás, is the editor-in-chief of the award-winning independent investigative site *Átlátszó*. He has been working as a journalist for various outlets since 1996. Interviewed 25 May 2022.

Deme, Dániel, is the editor-in-chief of the conservative news portals *Hungary Today/Ungern Heute*. Interviewed 15 August 2022.

Dezső, András, is an award-winning investigative journalist. He worked for the independent news site *Index* and currently works for *HVG*. He has published several investigative books on drugs, crime, and the secret services. Interviewed 7 June 2022.

Dési, János, worked as a journalist, columnist and editor for the left/liberal broadsheet *Népszava* and as a reporter and presenter for *Nap TV* and *ATV*. In recent years, he has been acting as an editor and presenter of the left/liberal talk radio *Klubrádió*. Interviewed 13 January 2022.

Fülöp, Zsófia, is an award-winning journalist working for *Magyar Narancs* since the beginning of her career. Interviewed 13 July 2022.

Hargitai, Miklós, is an award-winning journalist specialised in environmentalism. He has worked as a journalist and editor for the left/liberal broadsheets *Népszabadság* and *Népszava*. He also acted as the Chair of the Hungarian Journalists Association between 2017 and 2021. He regularly publishes opinion pieces in various outlets, including the political/cultural monthly *Mozgó Világ*. Interviewed 3 January 2022.

Huth, Gergely, has been working for various outlets for a long time and is now the editor-in-chief of the pro-government news site *Pesti Srácok*, and the programme director of the pro-government talk television *PestiTV*. Interviewed 4 May 2022.

Lukács, Csaba, is an award-winning journalist and the managing director of *Magyar Hang*, a conservative weekly critical of the Orbán Government. He has been working as a journalist for 30 years for a variety of outlets, including *Esti Hírlap* and *Magyar Nemzet*, and as an activist of the Hungarian Baptist Aid for 24 years. Interviewed 27 May 2022.

Serdült, Viktória, is an award-winning journalist. She worked for *Magyar Hírlap* as a foreign affairs correspondent and editor and for *Blikk Online* as a senior editor. Currently she works for the independent news site *HVG*. Interviewed 8 July 2022.

Stumpf, András, is an award-winning journalist and columnist working for the conservative, independent, weekly *Heti Válasz* (later *Válasz Online*). Interviewed 24 March 2022.

Tóth-Szenesi, Attila, is an historian and an award-winning journalist. He acted as the editor-in-chief of the independent news site *Index* between 2017 and 2019, and currently works for *Telex*. Interviewed 7 April 2022.

Vörös T., Károly, is an award-winning journalist. He worked for decades as a journalist and then editor-in-chief for the broadsheet *Népszabadság*. He also worked as a lecturer at ELTE University's Media Department until his retirement. Interviewed 26 January 2022.