

“It is always easier to believe when I am not the only one who feels that way”

Emotional factors of credibility in the news consumption of university students

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**Abstract (“It is always easier to believe when I am not the only one who feels that way”
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This study seeks to examine how the emotions of news consumers and their group-belonging can influence the credibility assessment of news. The empirical research consists of interviews with university students between the ages of 20 and 25 subjected to qualitative content analysis. In the first part, the author focuses on the political and public affairs news consumption habits of the students, in which Facebook and other social media sites, such as YouTube, play an important role. In the second part, their everyday judgements regarding the credibility of news are in the centre. However, at the end of the paper, the issue of credibility is examined in the framework of the coronavirus pandemic, which provided an unexpected opportunity to investigate these questions under extreme circumstances.

Keywords *credibility; credibility assessment; news consumption; emotions; group-belonging; social media; coronavirus*

Rezumat (Este întotdeauna mai ușor să am încredere dacă mai sunt și alții care simt la fel. Factorii emoționali de credibilitate în consumul de știri al studenților)

Studiul examinează modul în care emoțiile consumatorilor de știri și apartenența acestor la grup pot afecta estimarea credibilității știrilor. Cercetarea empirică a constat în interviuri cu studenți având vârsta între 20 și 25 ani, interviuri care au fost supuse analizei calitative de conținut. Prima parte a articolului focalizează asupra obiceiurilor de consum de știri cu conținut politic ale studenților, în care platforma Facebook și celelalte platforme social media joacă un rol important. Cea de-a doua parte focalizează asupra judecăților zilnice ale studenților despre credibilitatea știrilor. Ultima parte a articolului tratează problema din prisma pandemiei generate de coronavirus, ceea ce reprezintă o oportunitate excelentă pentru o analiză în condiții extreme.

Cuvinte cheie *credibilitate, estimarea credibilității, consumul de știri, emoție, apartenența la grup, social media, coronavirus*

Rationality vs. emotions

Cognitive processes and abilities provide the basis for our mental operations, which is why they indisputably play a major role in processing information, including those situations in which we consume news. However, when we encounter public affairs news, our information consumption typically involves a pronounced emotional dimension.¹ In these situations, information plays the same

emotional role which is being satisfied when we watch reality TV or a movie: In addition to capturing our attention, it also elicits an emotional response on our part.² The key aspects behind this phenomenon are the human need for cognition, the political/ideological preferences of individuals, as well as the fact that humans have a predilection for information that meshes with their own values, in other words information that qualifies as attitude-consistent.³ This also implies that they are generally more likely to regard information as credible if it reinforces their own preconceived notions. The credibility attached to information is generated by – often informally organized – communities whose members are linked to one another by the similarities in their worldviews, their life situations, and their social environment. This so-called belonging-based credibility⁴ operates in strong intertwinement with the filter bubble phenomenon.⁵ All of this allows us to conclude that these days news consumption has emerged as a tool of sorts, which helps us to emotionally “recharge” ourselves and reaffirm our affiliation with the community we belong to. This is consistent with the viewpoint of the uses and gratification model⁶, which claims that people use the media to satisfy their own psychological, social, and cultural needs.⁷

Staying on the ground of media use paradigm, according to the approach of the two-step flow of influence,⁸ the media exert an impact on the media consumers’ thinking in two steps. These days, the persons who directly influence our consumption are no longer necessarily in our immediate local environment, but, among other places, they may also be in the social media. It is enough to share a single article and to thus ensure that it reaches even a single other person, and this already triggers the second step of the two-step flow. According to a joint poll by the Hungarian media monitoring NGO Mérték and the polling company Medián, only a fraction of Facebook users, ca. 4-5%, regularly share articles on political issues.⁹ If certain news do not reach the other consumers directly through news portals, they are typically conveyed to others by way of these social media disseminators.

Factors of credibility

According to the most general definition, credibility refers to a quality that inspires us to believe a claim and is strongly intertwined with trust. In practice, credibility refers to both objective and subjective elements of the credibility of content. Generally, media scholars tend to make a distinction between source (or in some researches message¹⁰) credibility and medium credibility. According to Hovland et al., expertise and trustworthiness are the key components of source credibility, but media credibility includes more components, like the degree to which the media are perceived to be fair, unbiased and accurate.¹¹ As Strömbäck and his co-authors noted, there is no agreed-upon measurement or operationalization of media trust and credibility. Despite the fact that the relationship between media trust and media use is very complex, there is only limited research directly addressing this question.¹²

From the viewpoint of our research, the elaboration likelihood model (ELM) plays an important role.¹³ With the help of ELM Petty and Cacioppo sought to explain how people are persuadable. The model suggests that the recipient's attitude and the cognitive process going on in them determine whether they will be open to logical reasoning. In the given context, the world elaboration refers to the depth in which information is processed. The main thesis of the theory is that there are two ways which can influence the information recipient's attitude towards information. The central route requires a careful weighing of numerous informational factors, such as for example the contents of the information and the strength of the argument. The peripheral route, by contrast, requires less cognitive work and focuses on the factors that are irrelevant from an information standpoint, but which are nevertheless used by the information consumers when assessing information.¹⁴ To simplify this line of thought, we might say that while the former is primarily preoccupied with the objective factors underlying credibility, the latter considers the recipients' subjective judgements. Put differently: Since too much information reaches us in the online sphere, if we want to tackle the torrent of data that we need to process, then we might have to turn to heuristics, which can take the form of focusing on recognizable patterns.¹⁵

The framework of the empirical research

During my research I focused on the emotional factors of news consumption: although we may be tempted to believe that our news consumption is fundamentally driven by rational motivations, in fact we are much more likely to pick and choose among the news we consume on an emotional basis, preferring items that are more likely to satisfy our emotional needs than our rational needs. This is especially true of social media, where various types of contents follow one another in quick succession. According to my research hypothesis, the content that will be more likely to capture our attention depends largely on the communities – be they offline or virtual – to which we belong. In other words, we attach great importance to the people close to us and/or to people who profess values similar to ours, and they play a pivotal role in our assessment of the credibility of individual news items.

The target group of the research was university students between the ages of 20-25. I conducted 8 structured interviews with students enrolled in 7 different faculties and 8 different departments of the University of Pécs. It was important for me to ensure that the research is not limited to students who specialize in the humanities and social sciences, in order to make the circle of interview subjects be as diverse as possible. The interviews were organized around three fundamental subject areas: the consumption of pop culture and entertainment contents; news media and news consumption; and the assessment of the credibility of news.¹⁶ In this study I focus on the two latter categories. My primary goal was to compare and contrast the media consumption patterns of students with different academic specializations, and to find out whether in addition to the objective factors of credibility, the interview subjects also view certain persons or communities as pivotal when it

comes to the assessment of the credibility of individual news items. To this end, I performed qualitative content analysis to ascertain how the interview subjects use the media platforms they mentioned most often. The coronavirus pandemic, which began just before the interviews were conducted, also provided an opportunity to examine the underlying questions in the conditions of the extreme circumstances wrought by the epidemic.

News and emotional reactions

Unsurprisingly, the internet predominates with respect to the consumption of both, popular culture as well as news/public affairs contents. However, our everyday experience as well as the empirical research on the topic both suggest that the generations of youths and young adults today are either indifferent about or evince outright hostility towards politics and public affairs. The majority do not trust traditional political institutions and activities, they keep their distance from political participation.¹⁷ According to the abovementioned Mérték-Medián poll from 2018, only 2% of 18-29-year-olds profess an intense interest in politics, while 41% take no interest in public affairs whatsoever.¹⁸

The interviews conducted in the framework of the present study also show that except for one or two of the subjects (including a political science student), the rest of those interviewed were not especially interested in politics, and hence they were also not interested in traditional public affairs/political news. Nevertheless, since they prefer to stay informed, they feel that they need to follow these types of contents in some form. Despite the apparent apathy, these news – depending on the topic – are indeed capable of eliciting emotional reactions on their part, which can span the entire range of the emotional spectrum. The majority of students reported that depending on the news item in question, they might feel either annoyed or pleased/happy: *“So... there are some topics that I follow and I have some expertise about them. And then I see something about these issues that I don’t really like, something that is not well-founded and that’s when I tend to get annoyed. But usually this only goes so far as to utter a few harsh words to the effect that I don’t like it. Generally, I don’t tend to get riled up about this type of news. And at other times the news can also be a source of pleasure; these are two extremes.”*¹⁹

It is also not unprecedented for them to regard a news item as downright ridiculous or its title as clickbait, which can serve as a source of amusement: *“It may just as well happen that I can only laugh about items that do not seem true or which only want ... which only want people to see the item and to click.”*²⁰ News that contradict one another can lead to anxiety and tension, however, and increase the feeling of insecurity: *“It annoys me that I can’t decide which one to believe (...) political news tend to annoy, and sometimes they make me feel helpless, they leave me with a sense that I’m not a big enough fish in the pond to influence these things.”*²¹

Typically, they react considerably more sensitively to an item of news if it affects something that they have a personal attachment to, such as the university or the place where they live. *“The feelings I get differ. If I stumble onto something that, say, affects me personally, because it concerns the university, then that elicits a much stronger emotional reaction on my part. But if it has no bearing on me, then even though I might still see it as something stupid, or just as something moronic, or simply as irrelevant, I won’t feel such a strong sense of outrage (...).”*²² One respondent mentioned that he is completely averse to the consumption of any political contents: *“I don’t follow politics at all. In other words, I block politics on Google, on any news site or sharing site. I go to settings and just do it immediately.”*²³

Platforms to get political and public affairs news

Facebook

Based on the poll conducted by Mérték-Medián in 2018, Facebook appears to play a major role in informing the public about politics “since a quarter of Facebook users encounter public affairs articles/contents on Facebook every day, while a further 21% do so several times a week.”²⁴ The students took very different positions as to whether they considered the news stream on Facebook as the starting point of their news consumption. For some of them, however, it is definitely an important platform to track the news. My political scientist interview subject, who is very deliberate when it comes to assembling her newsfeed, said the following on the subject: *“I basically always inform myself from Facebook. Sometimes it happens that I’d like to go back to check out an article I saw on Facebook; or maybe I just saw the title but didn’t have enough time at the moment to read it, and then I search for it on the internet.”*²⁵ But Facebook was also a determinate point in the news consumption of another student: *“So it may be a bit embarrassing that I get almost all of my information from Facebook, but when I start the browser my finger will immediately move towards that F button.”*²⁶ But there was a significant difference between the two respondents with respect to whether they themselves follow news sites (the first student mentioned above) or whether they keep abreast of the news through the items shared by their Facebook friends, potentially through ads (the other student). According to data collected by Mérték-Medián, 59% of Facebook users never share political contents on the social media site; the overwhelming majority of the target group investigated also falls into this category.²⁷

Those who are less likely to use Facebook for news consumption primarily cite Facebook’s character as a forum where users waste a lot of time as a reason for not getting their news there: *“At one point I realized that I spent an inordinate amount of time on Facebook’s newsfeed, and I did not even see real issues of substance on it..”*²⁸ Some took an even more radical stance towards news on Facebook, and this position refers back to a kind of scepticism which will be discussed later: *“The news we see on Facebook are not news. At most, they are reminders, saying ‘hello, there is this issue out there’, and what we actually write about it, that’s our own viewpoint.*

*And it's possible that someone else will see this issue from an entirely different perspective, and that it could impact someone completely differently. So when I see them, I make a mental note saying 'all right, so someone has this position.'*²⁹

Sources considered reliable

Every interview subject indicated that they rely on information from several online news sites in informing. Index, 24.hu, and Origo were mentioned most often by name. One interesting observation was that several interview subjects also mentioned Google in discussing their news consumption patterns. When they are interested in a given issue, they often just type the keywords into the search field and they choose from the resulting articles because it makes them feel less influenced by the particular viewpoint of a given news site.

While for some respondents the major news sites are their primary source of information, others only see them as a starting point. When a given issue elicits their interest, they prefer to watch longer videos that feature an entertaining style of presentation or they listen to it in the background while they do other things, *"because, ultimately, a half-page article does not reveal much."*³⁰ Among the political/public affairs channels on YouTube, they emphasized Partizán, a left-wing show, and Kötöttfogás, which is associated with conservative magazine Magyar Hang; both of these are critical of the Hungarian government. *"I watch Kötöttfogás because there they actually discuss what was said by those affiliated with the governing party, even if they don't always quote them verbatim. So I am aware that I am not listening to an independent source of information, that they add their own arguments and opinions and the like. But I don't need to verify whether the things they claim have actually transpired or been uttered."*³¹ They also mentioned some other prominent persons who are known for their political engagement, such as the former leader of the Jobbik party, Gábor Vona, and the media pundit Róbert Puzsér. *"If there is a single podcast I listen to when it comes to political issues (...), it's Róbert Puzsér, not necessarily because of his political views but because of his critical attitude. He is someone who criticizes in a way that proves that he actually understands the things he criticizes (...) that does not necessarily mean I agree with every word he says, but his style of presentation, the way he expresses his criticisms... well, that reflects a very high level of quality; he is a real critic."*³²

In several of the interviews the subjects mentioned that especially when it comes to healthcare issues, they trust experts more than journalists, since the latter generally have to write articles about too many issues to delve deep enough into a single issue.³³ *"If I find something interesting or determine that it is something that I should take a closer look into, then I will check it out. And in that case it may well happen that I visit YouTube and explore longer videos, detailed explanations by people who may work in the profession and who have references."*³⁴

The role of meme sites

While surveys suggest that youths are especially likely to lack an interest in and be passive when it comes to traditional political institutions, the members of the current young generation typically consume a huge amount of humorous and parodistic content that also often reflect on social and cultural issues as well.³⁵ Meme pages and/or groups (primarily, but not exclusively on Facebook), which often feature a public affairs/political dimension, play a role in the media consumption of almost every student in our sample. Although the memes primarily want to mock someone or something, they can indisputably also fill an information function of sorts since they have some basis in reality. This is how one of the subjects put it: “(...) Interestingly, there is a tremendous amount of information that can be gleaned from the Facebook group called Council of Illiberal Memes (*Illiberális Mémek Tanácsa*). They share countless articles about the current political situation in Hungary. (...) So just by producing all these political memes, they allow people to learn a lot. They take the interesting gaffes of [surgeon general Cecilia] Müller [who led the government’s communication on the corona pandemic] and turn them into memes (...) and they can also produce memes about Paragraph 33 [the recently enacted restriction of the rights of trans people]; so they use memes to express a wide variety of social criticism, and thus in the process people also learn information, by seeing it.”³⁶

Another interesting terrain for political information is the page 9GAG, which is also primarily known for its memes. Some say that although the page raises some serious issues, too, on the whole “it tilts more towards entertainment,”³⁷ others say that it has emerged by now as an important source for obtaining information. “I consume a lot of news from 9GAG (...). It’s what I see as credible because in the comment section they discuss whether something’s true or not – I mean whether it’s real – and not only what kind of emotions it triggers in someone.”³⁸ My interview subject suggested that the comment section on 9GAG differs from that of the comments on other social media sites, such as Facebook, for example, because in addition to laypersons it also features a lot of comments from persons who seem like genuine experts. “That is what makes 9GAG so interesting and exciting, that it is used by very different kinds of people, including researchers, on all sorts of topics. And there were several commenters who claimed to be such researchers and they shared things that they presented as their research results.”³⁹ The interview subject also found about the coronavirus outbreak from 9GAG, but the news on that page clearly suggested that the pandemic would not reach Hungary. “(...) [I]t provided reliable information on the whole, saying that it is survivable. A great many videos were posted about people, even people in Wuhan, showing what they were doing during the quarantine. Another issue that I saw a lot about was for example the quarantine in Italy, when they asked people what had happened when the first city was put under quarantine. So there was this type of information, and hence when the panic began in early March, back then it did not seem ... it still did not seem... it seemed like this entire thing would skip Hungary and all the Balkans, really.”⁴⁰

The assessment of credibility

The role of groups and the people they trust

Although in the case of university students, objective criteria of credibility, such as the use of a variety of sources, an impartial presentation, and a neutral tone play a vital role in judging the credibility of news items, certain groups or friends also exert a significant impact on them. In the case of the students in the sample, the importance of group belonging was most likely to manifest itself in the context of their university community. Typically, they were members of university-related groups on Facebook which they mostly used to share information about courses and exams. Among the established, non-university related Facebook groups, those affiliated with meme pages tend to be popular, including the previously mentioned Council of Illiberal Memes, which is managed by the page called Illiberal Memes. *“Illiberal Memes is a page, but the page also has its distinct group. So this is a fairly common phenomenon, that the more popular meme pages have their own dedicated group where the followers can upload their own contents (...); the people in this group hold a wide variety of views that span the spectrum, and they correspondingly share a variety of news, but obviously these tend to feature irony.”*⁴¹

Furthermore, several of the interview subjects indicated that they have joint Messenger groups with certain friends and acquaintances, and these are also typically organized around similar values: *“There is the Dog Party-related Messenger group [the name “Dog Party” refers to a satirical political party in Hungary], which includes many members, and that’s where people really discuss these issues. ... [T]hat’s where I get my information to ensure that it’s credible.”*⁴² Another student is a member of an LGBTQ community on Messenger, and she said she does not separately perform distinct searches for news involving the LGBTQ community, but she is glad that through the group she can find information, such as for example when the Pride in Pécs will be held – or if it is going to be held at all in a given year, for that matter.⁴³ It seems, therefore, that the types of groups that typically play an important role in their news consumption tend to be those that communicate within an organized framework and are also active in the offline space, as a result of which the members tend to know one another.

When they were asked whether they are more inclined to believe the claims in an article if it is recommended by an acquaintance, almost all of the interview subjects responded in the affirmative, provided the acquaintance was someone they trusted for some reason. This contradicts the results of the Mérték-Medián survey, which found that “33% of users said that they found it relevant to consider who had shared a given post, while 35% did not find that relevant at all”.⁴⁴ *“Well, obviously if it is an acquaintance who holds similar values as I do, then I pay attention to the news they share, that’s obvious. But in the same vein, when another acquaintance shares an article from [the pro-government tabloid] 888.hu, saying*

that Greta Thunberg is Satan's ambassador, then in the majority of cases I will read that, too, and I will make a mental note that that acquaintance has been added to another list, and I continue to go about my affairs."⁴⁵ Some respondents indicated that the person who recommends an article is even more important than the journalist who authored it or the media outlet that published it: *"It is always easier to believe – I am more inclined to feel this way – that what was written in the article is true when I am not the only who feels that way, when the feeling is also shared by someone whose ideas I find credible. This is important to me, far more important than the question of who wrote the article, in fact."*⁴⁶ Others pointed to their perception of the presence of professional competence in the article or the lack thereof when it comes to evaluating recommendations, noting that a recommendation implies that the article in question has been vetted by at least one filter which they consider relevant: *"That's a good question because if the article they shared is somehow related to their professional expertise, then I feel that it has gone through a filter already (...) And I think that they have already checked into the issue and found that it is valid. That's the way I operate, and thus I assume that that's the way they operate, too."*⁴⁷ Others took a similar view: *"If I know it's ridiculous, then I will say so openly. But generally speaking, when they send me something they tend to do so for a reason. Because they, too, have looked into it."*⁴⁸

As has been outlined in previous chapters, the experts on a given issue are also liable to exert a substantial impact on the respondents' news consumption and in the respondents' assessments of the credibility of news items; in their eyes, experts command greater authority than journalists. *"I'd much sooner believe what the doctor [the respondent referred to the prominent physician Hunor Novák, M.D., who often comments publicly on medical matters] writes than, whatever ... For example, I would believe that expert more than any report on Origo or Index; it doesn't really matter which one, it doesn't depend on the platform (...) There are journalists there, after all, and there are so many of them. And the doctor, he does have quite a few accomplishments under his belt, and I believe he can be trusted professionally."*⁴⁹ But there are also situations when the personal acquaintance weighs more heavily, and it is the factor that makes them trust a given media outlet or journalist: *"I don't know the people who write the articles on Index, but there is one, for example, a former classmate, he was in the year above me in high school, he is now writing articles for Index. So that's positive in a sense, that matters."*⁵⁰

Credibility during the coronavirus

In connection with the outbreak of the coronavirus epidemic, I also asked how the respondents' news consumption and their assessment of the credibility of news had changed during the epidemic. The interviews showed that practically all of the respondents experienced the same emotional rollercoaster.⁵¹ The outbreak of the epidemic in Hungary and the announcement that universities would be closed struck them as a shock at first: *"That day everyone [shared some news] every five minutes ...we just kept jumping from news site to news site. And we asked*

everyone to monitor some news site. And of course we were also tracking what's happening on the university's websites and many others; we really tried to monitor everything at once. So that was a peak in my news consumption. That's when it started, but then it stayed like that for a long while."⁵²

They tried to alleviate all the uncertainty stemming from the sudden unexpected event by consuming as many news and virus-related contents as possible to stay informed. The government's official information website, [koronavirus.gov](http://koronavirus.gov.hu), was followed by most of the students, even some who do not otherwise consume pro-government contents; in this situation, they still saw it as the primary point of information about the situation in Hungary. *"That was because they were saying everywhere that we should be reading the news on koronavirus.gov.hu because every important piece of news was being uploaded there, all the [corona-related] restrictions and all the changes are there, everything is limited to a single platform, so to speak. And whatever news was being shared during this time, if it did not come from there originally, it could not be regarded as official.*"⁵³ At the same time, not everyone necessarily trusted the data disseminated on the official site: *"Well, so I'm not sure how seriously I should take the fatality figures or the number of infections. The most recent [mass] screening seemed more positive than the previous data, so I wasn't sure whether to believe or disbelieve it.*"⁵⁴

In the case of those who had previously regularly informed themselves from other sources, they kept following those, while for the time being they also consulted official platforms as complementary sources of information: *"Basically, I continued to regard the news sites that I had trusted previously as credible.*"⁵⁵ They saw scientific news as their favourite type of news anyway, and the virus situation reinforced their interest in such types of articles and videos: *"Everyone [prominent personality] I follow posted Covid-related videos and shared their opinions about this because they got so many comments [from followers] on YouTube urging them to 'make a video, make one, make one;' and well, the people have power, so in the end they did. And there are quite a few who have something to do with healthcare (...) I think even the Zállatorvos [the Vet] posted two-three videos about Covid. So I watched these, just as I had watched them previously. Because ...I've never been disappointed in them thus far and I think their data are relevant.*"⁵⁶

At the same time, however, all of the respondents reported that after a few weeks, the intensity of news consumption gave way to a jadedness.⁵⁷ *"I've experienced a serious decline in interest in recent weeks, a jadedness, so to speak, in the sense that I hardly pay attention to the news anymore.*"⁵⁸ The intense tracking of news, which initially served to soothe those who consumed them, was increasingly felt as monotonous and burdensome: *"I saw that the news are always the same, nothing ever changes, so I stopped thinking about this constantly. (...) Thinking about reading up on the news leaves me with this sense of bitterness, even though I used to enjoy it. It became too much.*"⁵⁹ The respondents were not unequivocally pleased about the easing of the restrictions introduced just as the

interview series was being conducted: *“Well, the fact that they have ended the lockdown in Budapest makes me feel positive, but at some level I’m still somewhat anxious that if I go out now it might come back, everything might revert back.”*⁶⁰ Others felt that what was going on with the easing of the lockdown was completely nebulous: *“My sense is that this is not ... I don’t know, it’s all very chaotic (...) I find all of this very odd now.”*⁶¹

With respect to informing themselves about the virus, those who had acquaintances working in the frontlines of the crisis or other acquaintances with healthcare expertise regarded information from these persons as credible. *“I’ve close acquaintances who work in the vanguard, on the frontline, so to speak [this referred to healthcare workers and researchers alike], and so their information is somewhat more credible than that disseminated by people writing these articles while sitting at their desk at home.”*⁶² Another student also referred to physicians she knows: *“I obviously considered everything they had to say about this as credible; after all, it was said by someone I know. And it was also confirmed by other physicians I know.”*⁶³

Conclusions

The interviews did not suggest striking biases in favour of any given media outlet in the media consumption of the students in the sample. Instead, it appears that in general they strive to find diverse information, and they try to focus on objective criteria during the process of credibility assessment. This may owe to their common background as university students, as a result of which they regularly encounter various scientific texts that they need to work on autonomously. This work process in itself is liable to elicit some type of relationship to the underlying texts, and it undeniably fosters their ability to think critically. However, in some cases we cannot be sure that they can distinguish the so-called experts who are mostly known from YouTube and other social media sites from the real ones.

Similar to the statements of Strömbäck and his colleagues, we can say that trustworthiness and (assumed) expertise are key aspects in the case of credibility for the students in our sample. However, it turned out, these aspects are not independent from the feelings of the students that can be irrelevant from the standpoint of the given news, as suggested by the elaboration likelihood model. Emotional attachments, such as group-belonging can also play important roles in news consumption, in addition to rational thinking and cognitive abilities. For example, it was apparent in the reactions to the epidemic that respondents were more likely to consider information disseminated within the university community as credible.⁶⁴ On some issues, a personal acquaintance with the source of the information is considered pivotal when it comes to the assessment of credibility, and they more likely believe any news item if it was sent by a person who they trust and who shares similar values.

In addition to being mostly aware of the limitations of their information consumption, the interviews also revealed that in practice the subjects' critical thinking often involves a sense of scepticism directed at the entire profession of journalism. This is especially true of public affairs/political contents because to a greater or lesser degree they believe that every media presents such contents in a biased manner, in line with what they consider as the interests of their own side. *"I'm extremely sceptical about any single news because, after all, how could I know what goals its creators wish to achieve by disseminating the given item; how do I know what exact sources they relied on in their work when the articles often don't even mention sources (...) I know, however, what side everyone stands on and it allows me to ascertain who is biased in favour of whom."*⁶⁵ This is consistent with the idea which claims that when political polarization and a more or less authoritarian type of political populism are on the rise, it becomes even more difficult for traditional news media to be seen as credible, as players who are not part of the political game. Thus, people often tend to trust information from openly partisan players more⁶⁶, and this was especially true with regard to the target group investigated in this study. Respondents were more likely to look at expert content producers – or persons who portrayed themselves as experts – and prominently-known opinion leaders as credible sources as compared to journalists.

Those few students who had more pronounced political preferences tend to regard the news sites they follow as more credible. They deliberately use the filter bubble phenomenon to look for news that confirm their own views, and, as one of them put it, they like their own bubble.⁶⁷ In her comments about news media articles, the student in question said, for example: *"I like that I see my own opinions reflected in them. If I see more of my own opinions in the article, then I like that, and if not, then I think to myself 'hm, maybe I should not be following this news site because its followers do not agree with my views.' So I tend to reinforce the impact of the bubble on myself."*⁶⁸

The information processing and information assessment processes that are performed by the individual persons tend to be very complex and follow unique patterns, which is why it would be both difficult and also wrong-headed to draw far-reaching and general conclusions about them. What the present study tried to do was to gauge the presence of emotional factors in the university students' news consumption as well as to see how important group-belonging is in their assessments of credibility. Looking at other target groups, the research would likely yield different but nevertheless extremely valuable results about the role of emotions and values in shaping news consumption patterns.

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Endnotes

- 1 Kavanagh & Rich, 2018; Chabris & Simons, 2010
- 2 Gábor Polyák: Demokratizálhatók-e a tények? Előadás a TedxBuda-pestSalon keretében [Can facts become democratic? Presentation at the TedxBuda-pestSalon] : <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tAVVEnLmNsA> (4th October, 2020)
- 3 Strömbäck et al., 2020: 7
- 4 This expression is borrowed from Gábor Polyák.
- 5 Pariser, Eli, 2011: *The Filter Bubble: How the New Personalized Web Is Changing What We Read and How We Think*. London: Penguin Books
- 6 Blumler & Katz, 1974
- 7 In Hungarian: Bajomi-Lázár, 2006
- 8 Lazarsfeld, 1948
- 9 A politikai tájékozódás forrásai Magyarországon [The sources of political information in Hungary], 2018: <https://mertek.eu/2018/11/26/a-politikai-tajekozodas-forrasai-magyarorszagon-trendek-2015-18/> (4th October, 2020)
- 10 For example, Li - Suh, 2015
- 11 Strömbäck et al., 2020: 3
- 12 Strömbäck et al., 2020: 6, 8. They give a more detailed overview of credibility-related researches in the referred study.
- 13 Petty and Cacioppo, 1986
- 14 Li - Suh, 2015: 315-316
- 15 InfoGrund Képzési anyag a kritikai médiaműveltség fejlesztéséhez [Training material for developing critical media literacy], 2019
- 16 Because of the appearance of the coronavirus in Hungary, the interviews that had been originally planned as in-person interviews administered in focus groups had to be conducted individually in the form of online interviews. I selected some of the interview subjects based on personal acquaintance, another group based on recommendations, and the rest based on snowball sampling. The entire sample was made up of four male and four female interview subjects. The distribution of the interview subjects based on age, gender, and academic specialization: A.: 24-year-old female, political science, B.: 23-year-old female, business and management; C.: 24-year-old male, computer science; D.: 20-year-old female, sociology; E.: 23-year-old male, law; F.: 25-year-old male, electronic music; G.: 24-year-old male, ambulance officer; H.: 24-year-old female, general practitioner.
- 17 Glózer, 2013: 3
- 18 Polyák-Szávai-Urbán, 2019: 64
- 19 E., 23-year-old male, law
- 20 D., 20-year-old female, sociology
- 21 H., 24-year-old female, general practitioner
- 22 D., 20-year-old female, sociology
- 23 G., 24-year-old male, ambulance officer
- 24 A politikai tájékozódás forrásai Magyarországon [The sources of political information in Hungary], 2018
- 25 A., 24-year-old female, political science

- 26 F., 25-year-old male, electronic music
- 27 Polyák-Urbán-Szávai, 2019: 76
- 28 E., 23-year-old male, law
- 29 C., 24-year-old male, computer science
- 30 C., 24-year-old male, computer science
- 31 B., 23-year-old female, business and management
- 32 C., 24-year-old male, computer science
- 33 For a more detailed discussion, see this study's chapter on the assessment of credibility.
- 34 C., 24-year-old male, computer science
- 35 Glózer, 2013: 2
- 36 A., 24-year-old female, political science
- 37 F., 25-year-old male, electronic music
- 38 B., 23-year-old female, business and management
- 39 B., 23-year-old female, business and management
- 40 B., 23-year-old female, business and management
- 41 A., 24-year-old female, political science
- 42 B., 23-year-old female, business and management, is also a so-called "passivist" of the satirical Two-Tailed Dog Party.
- 43 D., 20-year-old female, sociology
- 44 Polyák-Urbán-Szávai, 2019: 77
- 45 A., 24-year-old female, political science
- 46 D., 20-year-old female, sociology
- 47 G., 24-year-old male, ambulance officer
- 48 E., 23-year-old male, law
- 49 G., 24-year-old male, ambulance officer
- 50 H., 24-year-old female, general practitioner
- 51 I conducted the interviews between May 13 and May 21, which is why the responses only reflect reactions to the events leading up to that time.
- 52 D., 20-year-old female, sociology
- 53 G., 24-year-old, ambulance officer
- 54 H., 24-year-old female, general practitioner
- 55 H., 24-year-old female, general practitioner
- 56 G., 24-year-old, ambulance officer
- 57 Several respondents specifically used the term "jaded" to describe the situation.
- 58 A., 24-year-old female, political science
- 59 D., 20-year-old female, sociology
- 60 H., 24-year-old female, general practitioner
- 61 F., 25-year-old male, electronic music
- 62 C., 24-year-old male, computer science
- 63 H., 24-year-old female, general practitioner
- 64 It is worth noting that the university is a special test environment regarding the issue of credibility, so relying more on the information spread by the university groups can both confirm the objective and subjective factors.

- 65 C., 24-year-old male, computer science
- 66 Strömbäck et. al, 2020: 13
- 67 B., 23-year-old female, business and management
- 68 B., 23-year-old female, business and management