The Flashnews as a Commercial Session of Political Marketing: The Content Analysis of the Embedded Political Narratives in Non-Political Media Products

Zsolt Szabolcsi

Abstract—Political communication in Hungary has undergone a significant change in the 2010s. One element of the transformation is the Flashnews. This media product was launched in March 2015 and since then 40-50 blocks are broadcasted, daily, on 5 channels. Flashnews blocks are condensed news sessions, containing the summary of political narratives. It starts with the introduction of the narrator, then, usually four news topics are presented and, finally, the narrator concludes the block. The block lasts only one minute and, therefore, it provides a blink session into the main narratives of political communication at the time. Beyond its rapid pace, what makes its avoidance difficult is that these blocks are always in the first position in the commercial break of a non-political media product. Although it is only one minute long, its significance is high. The content of the Flashnews reflects the main governmental narratives and, therefore, the Flashnews is part of the agenda-setting capacity of political communication. It reaches media consumers who have limited knowledge and interest in politics, and their use of media products is not politically related. For this audience, the Flashnews pops up in the same way as commercials. Due to its structure and appearance, the impact of Flashnews seems to be similar to commercials, imbedded into the break of media products. It activates existing knowledge constructs, builds up associational links and maintains their presence in a way that the recipient is not aware of the phenomenon. The research aims to examine the extent to which the Flashnews and the main news narratives are identical in their content. This aim is realized with the content analysis of the two news products by examining the Flashnews and the evening news during main sport events from 2016 to 2018. The initial hypothesis of the research is that Flashnews is a contribution to the news management technique for an effective articulation of political narratives in public service media channels.

Keywords—Flashnews, political communication, political marketing, news management.

I. INTRODUCTION

THE unprecedented media transformation in Hungary in the 2010s may have been the reflection of the political transformation. After the victory of the Hungarian center-right party, with a two-third majority, on the national election in 2010, the rule of politics has been rewritten. Already in their first year of governance, the Media Act 2011 was passed through the legislative system, paving the way for a far-reaching media transformation [1]. The subsequent effect was a new institutional setup for the public service media, called MTVA[1], which incorporated many TV channels and radio stations. The major news channel, call M1, was also redesigned in March 2015.

The restructuring of the public service media system was a step towards a new type of news management with the aim of articulating politically driven narratives. From March 2015, the Hungarian political arena moved into a constant state of campaigning. More than 15 different campaigns, from a variety of platforms targeted voters until 2018 [2]. The media and the management of news turned into a top down, centrally organized machinery. MTVA and other media institutions fulfilled Pfetsch's definition of news management, according to which the media turns into "a strategic variant of public information whereby political actors manage communication in order to influence public opinion by controlling the news media agenda" [3].

One element through which a major characteristic of the new media system can be revealed is the Flashnews. It is a short, quick news session imbedded into non-political media products, appearing as a first block in commercial breaks. The Flashnews has 4 news blocks, each lasts ten seconds and the whole session is about one minute long. The Flashnews in not a chosen product, as commercials are not for entertainment, either, but rather a session pops up unexpectedly or played without the conscious awareness of individuals. Flashnews sessions have the potential for activating dormant but existing knowledge constructs, as Anderson call them [4], that spread through association nodes [5]. Through this process, behavior may change in an unrecognizable fashion leading to political decisions.

The paper focuses on the link between the Flashnews and the 6 pm news sessions aiming to examine whether their tendency in providing narratives for recipients is identical in any sense in the two news products. The link between them implies a centralized media machinery in which different news products fulfil defined functions in the management of news. While the 6 pm news sessions provide the well-articulated, explicitly argued and persuasive narratives, the Flashnews has the capacity to reach a wide range of people, who consume non-political content, and activate their previously built up knowledge constructs, often without their awareness. The paper examines the link between the two news products with a quantitative content analysis on the topics presented and links

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[1] Media service support and fund management (Médiaszolgáltatás-támogató és Vagyonkezelő Alap)

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in the news to other topics. Firstly, based on earlier studies, the paper will outline a definition of news management and the applicability of priming to Flashnews, secondly, the paper outlines the background of the Hungarian media transformation and the polarization of the media landscape in the 2010s and, finally, it presents the results of the analysis on the comparison of the Flashnews and the 6 pm news sessions.

II. THE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF THE FLASHNEWS

A. Defining the Management of News

News management in politics has always been characterized as a struggle for control. Due to its capacity to set the agenda and to form opinions through narratives, the media has increasingly turned into a platform of goal-oriented and strategic political communication. As Zaller [6] highlights, politicians use mass communication to reach voters and pass their message to them. However, as he argues, the interest of journalists, due to the constraints of the market, is to attract the attention of large audiences by being an objective and independent voice. Therefore, the opposing interest of politicians and journalists lead to discomfort for political actors since they can be questioned or framed unfavorably. News management in Zaller's definition, as his 48 codes imply, is the avoidance of the risk of exposure to a media personnel. However, news management, especially in a political milieu with a centralized media machinery, goes much beyond this.

News management is rather the strategic communication of messages toward voters. As [7] argues, media politics is a stage of democracy in which the media takes over some functions of party and government politics to the center of mass media. Subsequently, media institutions and political communication change in accordance with the interest of party and government politics [8]. As a result, the media machinery, set up for the articulation of political narratives, is utilized for a permanent state of campaigning [9] in order to control the public agenda through the control of the media agenda [9]. Political communication, as a result of the scientific research on the impact on the recipient audience, has made a significant difference in the effectiveness of shaping the perception of people [3].

News management in media has four main functions from a political perspective. According to Pfetsch, firstly, it is an instrument to inform citizens about agenda and policy solutions. This function arises from the effectiveness of mass media in reaching people. Secondly, it functions as a tool to construct political reality about political actors and events creating a symbolic environment for political participation and political discourse. Thirdly, news management is a powerful tool for setting the public agenda and thematizing public discourse. Finally, news management in media can turn into a political agent with a strong capacity to voice opinion and to change the beliefs and policy preferences of mass audiences [3]. News management, therefore, can be defined "as a strategic variant of public information whereby political actors manage communication in order to influence public opinion by controlling the news media agenda" [3] as well as media institutions to manage their top down political objectives.

B. Priming in the News, as a Method of Persuasion

A specific aspect of getting messages through toward recipients in news management is the use of the priming effect. Priming is based on cognitive accessibility theory. Accordingly, instead of using and listing all relevant memory bits during a decision-making process, people tend to use shortcuts to make the process less resourceful. Therefore, heuristics and most accessible information are crucial during decision-making [10]. According to this process, once a stimulus activates existing memory bits, it spreads through an associative network with nodes or junctions which determine the direction of association. These schemes, as [4] calls them, depend on the frequency, intensity, and previous experience of earlier activation of the knowledge construct [5]. The priming effect, therefore, can be used in communication to activate, for instance, knowledge, memory bits, sensations, emotions and, thereby, change attitudes without the awareness of the recipient audience of the process.

The research on news priming goes back to the 1980s and has two main directions: Firstly, the analysis of the explicit, deliberative, conscious evaluation of news sessions and, secondly, the analysis of the implicit, automatic, non-conscious impact of stimuli. The former is based on a research design that participants are exposed to news sessions in a variety of ways and their opinion change is measured with deliberative methods. This approach grew out from the agenda-setting literature, through the research of Iyengar and Kinder in the 1980s [11], while studying the subliminal impact of news [13] and impact of news on the judgment of the president [12]. Their research inspired many further studies, for example, on the impact campaigns during war [14], elections campaigns and political behavior [15]-[17]. While a number of mediating variables was identified [18], [19], no consensus was reached regarding the process of the impact of news priming. On the other hand, the latter type of research, which is based on the analysis of implicit, automatic, non-conscious processes, identified several other variables in an experimental research set up. Valentino [20], for example, claims that attitudes can be mobilized through the activation of stereotypic thinking linked to groups and affecting political behavior [21]. Domke et al. [22] focus on the visual stimuli and its non-conscious impact on the observer, while Marcus and Small [23], [24] go into the emotional influence during the priming process. Kam [25] and Hassin [26], on the other hand, analyze the subliminal impact in relation to the priming effect. Considering these examples of priming research, the stimulation leading to the priming effect can happen in two distinctive ways of information processing.

The dual process paradigm of information processing is described by [27]. They highlight that information processing has, on the one hand, a deliberative or conscious route. This is the cognitively resource consuming method during which one aims to evaluate critically the information, consider pros and cons, examine intention and evidence in an objective and

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structured manner. This would be extremely time consuming and resource intensive exercise to conduct in all decisions and its feasibility is questionable. On the other hand, the automatic process uses existing heuristics and associations. It works with habitual actions, happen involuntarily and automatically, using information on the top of one's head. This is fast, spontaneous and takes low resources.

C. Priming in the Commercials

Advertisements based on the priming mechanism usually take an advantage of the non-conscious state of attention and decision-making routes. As Yi argues, previous knowledge can often determine the context of the projection and, therefore, lead to a particular behavioral outcome [28]. Using Yi's example, a suitcase appears as lightweight can mean several things. It can mean that it is empty or, alternatively, for instance, that it is made from low quality materials. What makes the difference is prior knowledge on the situation or, in Yi's example, prior knowledge on the brand. However, this happens only if the contextual effect and the projected object have links to each other. Nevertheless, the process is usually done without the conscious awareness of the person [28], [29]. Similarly to advertisement, the prior knowledge of the Flashnews is also set up through the 6 pm news sessions and, therefore, when a recipient receives the stimulus of the Flashnews, whether it is automatically or consciously processed, the evaluation will be determined by the prior knowledge, due to the built up knowledge constructs and association nodes on the presented topic.

The projection generated by contextual priming effects can lead to behavioral outcomes. Wyer highlights that externally and internally generated stimulus can vary widely. It can be perceptions, thoughts, bodily sensation, or affective reactions resulting in a behavioral outcome, without the conscious awareness of the individual. Even if the decision to perform behavior can be conscious, the cognitive behavior to implement this decision is performed with no conscious monitoring. Therefore, "[i]f behavior-related concepts that have been activated in a recent situation are accessible in memory at the time a decision is made, they can influence the behavior that results from this decision." [30]. Therefore, the priming can activate the knowledge construct and the attached associations, including emotions, such as hostility and fear, that will lead to behavioral outcomes in further decisions, such as political choice and party affiliation. Wyer adds that the priming effect and the link between the stimulation and the behavioral outcome are stronger if the process is performed more often [30]. Accordingly, the constant exposure to news narratives and its priming, can lead to a learning process of routinized behavioral outcome.

D. The Flashnews, as the Focus of the Research

The focus of this paper is the novel type of news management product, called Flashnews, which is an example of news management technique that utilizes the non-conscious, automatic information processing routes of recipients. The Flashnews is a product of the Hungarian TV channel, call Duna TV. This channel is part of the public service media conglomerate, called MTVA, which was established in March 2015. The Flashnews is distributed among 5 channels belonging to MTVA and about 40-50 sessions are broadcasted daily on all channels. Flashnews starts with a greeting from a narrator, then in most cases it has 4 separate news blocks and, finally, a farewell from the narrator. Flashnews are short, one minute long summaries of the main news narratives, communicated in a rapid phase. It appears suddenly and usually in non-political media products, for instance, during sport broadcasts, as the first item in the commercial break.

Due to its position and structure, the Flashnews is likely to have strong peripheral impact on the recipients for two reasons. Firstly, focal attention is still under the influence of the chosen media program of the recipient when the Flashnews pops in. Therefore, Flashnews are not a chosen program by recipients but rather unavoidable side-effects of mass media. Secondly, Flashnews, similarly to commercials, utilize the peripheral attention while the focal attention is on something else. Therefore, it is a potential activation of the priming effect, when the peripheral information-processing routes receive information that activate existing knowledge constructs and launch associations in the recipient, without their awareness about the process.

The content of the Flashnews strongly reflects the governmental narratives on the migration phenomenon. Considering the most popular sport events in 2016, 2017 and 2018, the content analysis of the Flashnews shows that the most common topics in all years are migration, European Politics in relation to migration and state finance topics, usually linked to welfare policies and economic prosperity (see Fig. 1). Flashnews also have a strong emotional message about migration emphasizing threat, cultural distinction and security issues. It is, therefore, a well-founded claim that Flashnews communicate anti-migration content and its content is based on the main news narratives designed by the centralized media machinery of the MTVA media conglomerate. The aim of this paper is the examination of the extent to which the content of the Flashnews is identical to the main news narratives and thereby it has the capacity to function as a reminder to these knowledge constructs. The examination of this question implicates that the Flashnews is a new type of product in the field of news management, specific to the Hungarian political environment.

	Migration	State finance	European politics in relation to migration	Topics related to Georg Soros
2016	23%	13%	12%	1%
2017	20%	10%	13%	8%
2018	28%	6%	19%	12%

Fig. 1 The Most Frequently Used Topics from 2016 to 2018

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III. The Transformation of Media in Hungary in the 2010s

In Hungary, the 2010s started with the legal and institutional transformation of the Hungarian media landscape. The new legal and institutional framework of the public service television has been established by the Media Act 2011. Accordingly, all media services are inspected by the Media Council[2], which has the right to fine media provider or withdraw their license. Delegates of the Media Council are appointed by the government. This institution works with the NMHH[3] that monitors and reports broadcasting tendencies to the Media Council [1]. The new framework induced a change on the Hungarian media landscape and lead to the establishment of the new public service media conglomerate, called MTVA, possible.

The framework, established through the Media Act 2011, was realized on the Hungarian media landscape in March 2015. The previous structure of public fund distribution in the media industry through state advertisement [31] was suspended and funds were directed into the public service media sector. New channels were set up as public service media channels by the MTVA. As a result, two major polarities emerged. On the one hand, the MTVA news channel, called M1, received strong criticism for its bias of articulating governmental narratives exclusively and, on the other hand, the RTL Klub was then part of a German media corporation. The polarization of the media landscape was already visible in the framing of the news in August 2015, during the coverage of migrating people at the Keleti Railway Station in Budapest [32]. However, the transformation went beyond the television news to other media platforms, such as the radio, online media portals, dailies and weeklies, while aggressive political campaign appeared also on billboards. According to Máriás et al. [33], [34], by the end of the decade, the illiberal transformation of the media was realized. Subsequently, the media has changed to a tool which can be instantly activated for the articulation of political narratives.

The media polarization can also be observed in the use of words by online news portals. On Fig. 2, the frequency of the use of word 'migrant' in online news portals shows a significant increase during the first major media coverage of migration in August 2015, at the Keleti Railway Station, Budapest. Although the data are not complete, still, several peaks can be identified before elections, referendums or during new campaigns.

Beyond the use of a single word, the use of cooccurring words also reflects the polarization of the media landscape. The use of words 'migrant' and 'illegal' together and the use of 'refugee' instead, shows the narrative production of online news portals. In Fig. 3, the standard deviation from the average use of 'illegal' and 'migrant' together and the 'refugee' instead, shows two major parties in the spectrum of online news portals[4]. On the one hand, it shows portals framing the migration affected people with the 'illegal' and 'migrant' word combination and portals framing it with the 'refugee' word. The distinction clearly shows that index.hu, 444.hu, 24.hu, NOL, Népszava use frames with the refugee terminology and Origo, Pestisrácok and Alfahír use dominantly the frames based on the 'illegal' and 'migrant' word combinations. Online news portals, therefore, show a strong distinction and polarization in the theme of migration, which is the dominant topic from 2015 to 2018.

The significance of using specific terms in the framing of the migration phenomenon is crucial. As a result of the strong campaigning, the words "refugee", "migrant" and "immigrant" have changed from 2015 to 2018. Janky's survey experiment uses these words to examine the extent to which respondents react to them while answering to survey question. The result shows that the attitude of respondents changed during the campaign period in a way that they show less empathy towards people signified as "migrant" [35]. This experiment highlights the impact of the campaigns on the use of terms that signify migrating people.

Beyond the use of words, the use of visual frames was also crucial from 2015 to 2018. Fülöp examines the visual metaphors appeared on migration. They use AI tools to identify and signify groups of metaphors appearing on migration. Their findings show that the migration phenomenon is dominantly appearing as an aggressive, threatening situation with a mass of people flowing in with strong cultural distinction from the locals [36].

The use of narrative frames also contributes to the polarizing campaigns on migration. Bognár et al. examine the dominant narratives on migration in 2015 and 2016. They identify five dominant frames appearing in this period in relation to the Relocation Quota debate in 2016. Accordingly, the debate involved a power struggle frame, a humanitarian frame, an economy frame, an organizational frame and a security frame; all appearing to articulate provocative points leading to the increase of the salience and the polarization of the debate [37].

As a result of the institutional transformation, a strong agenda-setting capacity was realized and subsequently, political campaigns were frequently launched from March 2015. From 2015 to 2018, 15 different campaigns were launched [2] varying from national consultation surveys to mass media campaigns. These were targeting recipients during the politically significant periods with narratives that all support anti-migration views, criticize EU border control and its migration policies, and establish links with EU policies and the influence of NGOs. As one can see on Fig. 2, a high number of campaigns were launched during which several elections and referendums happened in parallel.

Due to the far-reaching legal and institutional transformation of the media by the Media Act 2011, the government had the capacity to establish the MTVA media

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[2] Media Council (Média Tanács)
[3] National Media and News Authority (Nemzeti Média és Hírközlési Hatóság)

[4] The data for the cooccuring words include the articles of 10 Hungarian online news portals published from January 2015 to April 2018 (with some missing data in the pool).

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conglomerate and involve several platforms, as well. The strong agenda-setting capacity and the centrally led media machinery enabled the increase of the salience of migration related themes and the articulation of a strongly polarizing narrative. Subsequently, narrative frames of threat, visual imagery and threatening attributes were linked to the migration phenomenon through a series of campaigns between 2015 and 2018. The impact of this all-embracing media news

management was that on all politically significant events, such as referendums, municipal elections or national referendums, voters in Hungary acted consistently with the suggestions of the dominant media narratives. The governing party in this period won the Quota referendum in 2016, won the municipal election in 2017, managed to secure its two-third majority in the parliament on the national election in 2018, and won the EU parliamentary election in 2019.
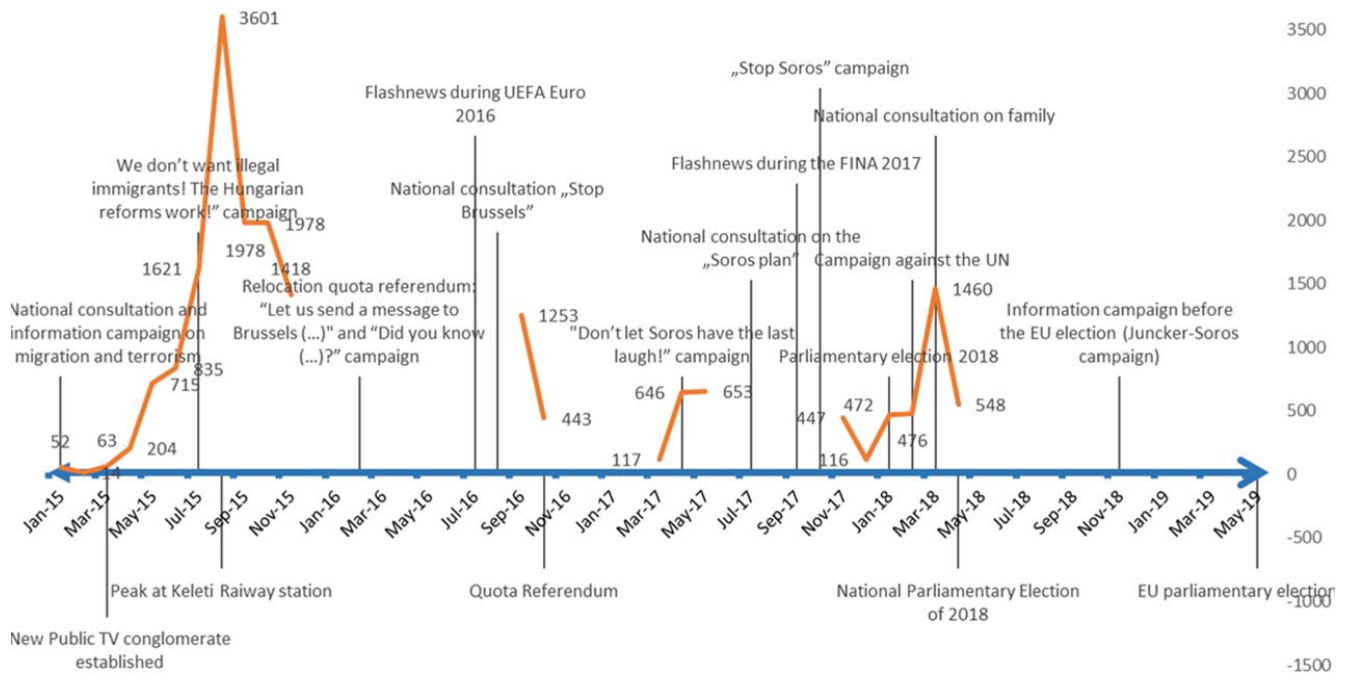

Fig. 2 Main events and major campaigns on a timeline from 2016 to 2019
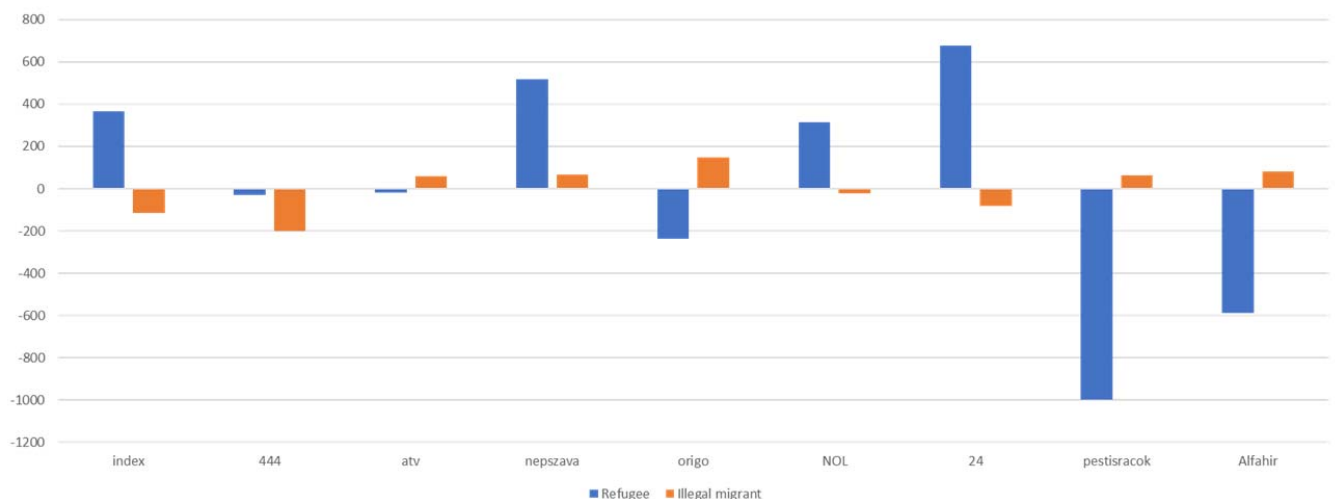

Fig. 3 The standard deviation of the use of words "migrant" and "illegal" together or "refugee" from 2016 to 2018 by online news portals

IV. METHODOLOGY OF RESEARCH

The similarity between the Flashnews and the 6 pm news sessions is examined through the comparative content analysis

of the Flashnews and the 6 pm news broadcast. The examined periods for the comparison are in 2016, 2017 and 2018. In each year, an exceptionally popular sport event took place,

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during which Flashnews were frequently broadcasted. In 2016, the European Football Cup mobilized even the audience that is not particularly fun of football because the Hungarian national football team managed to stay in the championship longer than even before in the last 40 years. In 2017, the FINA World Championship was organized in Budapest, Hungary and, therefore, it received very strong media coverage. In 2018, the World Football Cup was chosen for the analysis. In each sport event, Flashnews was imbedded into the broadcast and appeared in the commercial break as the first block. For the content analysis of the 6 pm news, the 1-hour long Monday sessions during the period of the sport events were examined.

For the comparison, two approaches were used in the Flashnews and in the 6 pm news sessions. Firstly, the theme of each block was determined, counted, and then, we calculated the proportion of each theme from the total. Secondly, since each topic was often linked to other topics, these links were also analyzed to identify tendencies of connections between topics. For instance, the topic of migration was often linked to European border control debates or to the activity of NGOs on the Mediterranean Sea. These links are also included in the analysis but only in the case of the most common topic that was migration.

Beyond the quantitative analysis through categorization, two other methods were also used for the comparison. Firstly,

images were also sought in the Flashnews and in the 6 pm news to examine any visual similarity. Secondly, the method of argument creation and persuasion was also analyzed and compared in both news types.

V. RESULT OF THE ANALYSIS

The results of the comparison of the Flashnews and the 6 pm news stem from three years period. In 2016, during the European Football Cup, 50 Flashnews were found, in 2017, during the FINA World Championship, 68 Flashnews were found and in 2018, during the World Football Cup 63 Flashnews were found. This makes 171 Flashnews for the analysis. The one hour long 6 pm news sessions are from the same period as the Flashnews. From 2016, 5, from 2017, 3 and from 2018, 4 news sessions were analyzed for the comparison of content.

The comparison shows that the Flashnews and the 6 pm news have similar tendencies. On Fig. 4, migration and state finance related topics are compared and on Fig. 5, European politics and Georg Soros related topics are compared for the three examined years. The proportional representation of these topics shows that in each period, the observed topics change in a nearly identical fashion.
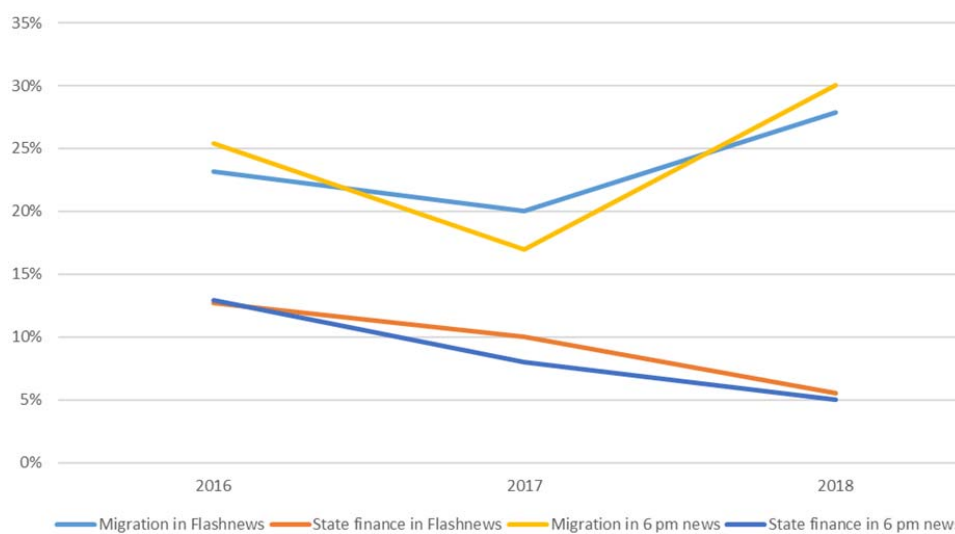

Fig. 4 The tendency of the change of migration and state finance topics in the Flashnews and the 6 pm news from 2016 to 2018

Migration related topics show some level of inconsistency, as it appears on Figs. 6 and 7. The topic of European politics in relation to migration shows opposing tendencies in all the three years. However, the topic of border control and Georg Soros, both in relation to migration, with some proportional difference, shows similar tendencies in the whole examined period.

The similar tendencies in the content and in the linked topics to migration implies that Flashnews and 6 pm news sessions are designed for the same purpose, namely, to articulate the same narrative. This finding is also supported by the fact that the two types of news sessions use the same

imagery representation (images are too lengthy for this article but upon request, it can be provided). Consequently, the comparison shows that the Flashnews and the 6 pm news articulate topic in a similar proportion and their proportion changes similarly to each other.

The idea of centrally planned news management is also supported by the quantity of the types of arguments in the Flashnews (see in Fig. 8). Reaching the end of the migration phenomenon in 2018, for the topic of migration, Flashnews sessions communicate increased amount of achieved solution arguments, while internal security issues dropped significantly. The EU-foreign risks are still on the agenda,

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however. Comparing these to the early phase of migration, the problem statement and internal security arguments were much higher and solution arguments were much lower. This implies a narrative of successful management of the migration phenomenon.
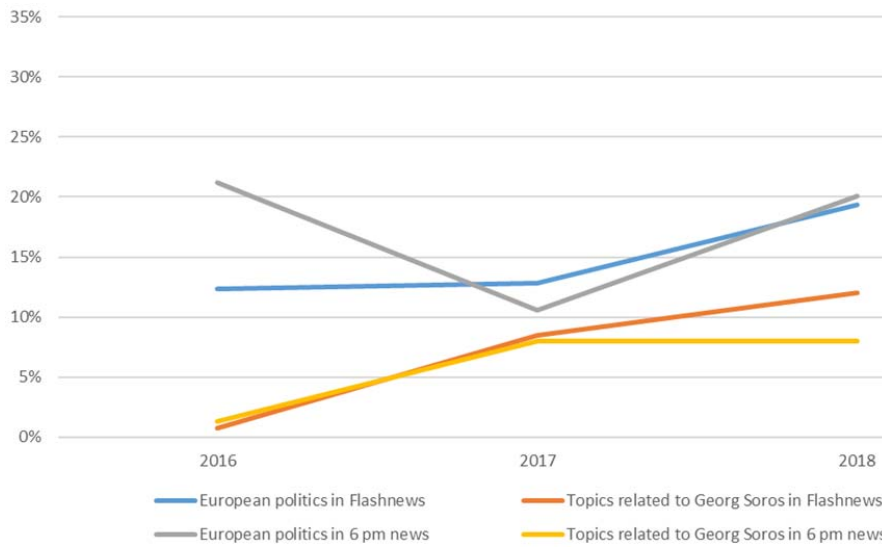

Fig. 5 The tendency of the change of European politics and Georg Soros related topics in the Flashnews and the 6 pm news from 2016 to 2018
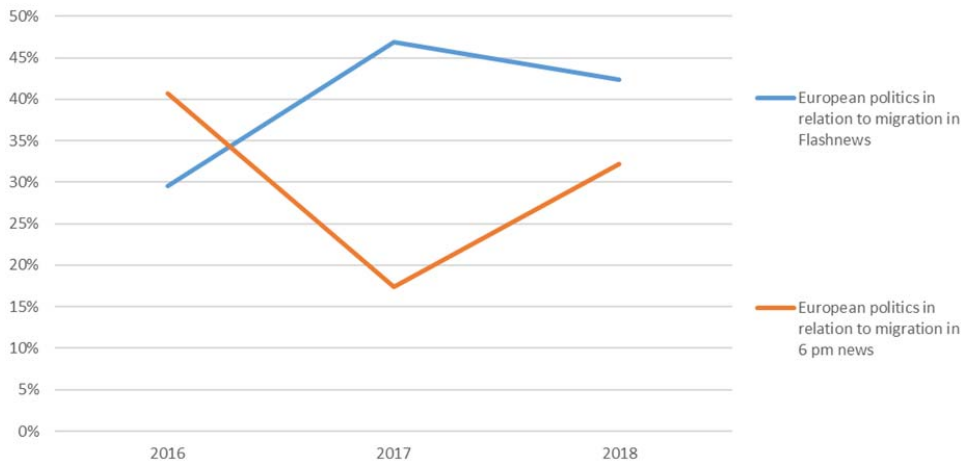

Fig. 6 The tendency of the change of European politics in relation to migration in the Flashnews and the 6 pm news from 2016 to 2018
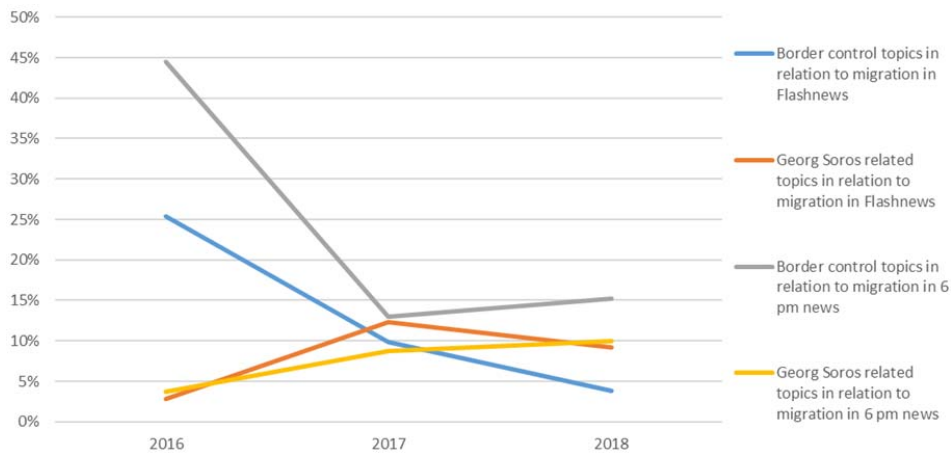

Fig. 7 The tendency of the change of border control and Georg Soros related topics in relation to migration in the Flashnews and the 6 pm news from 2016 to 2018

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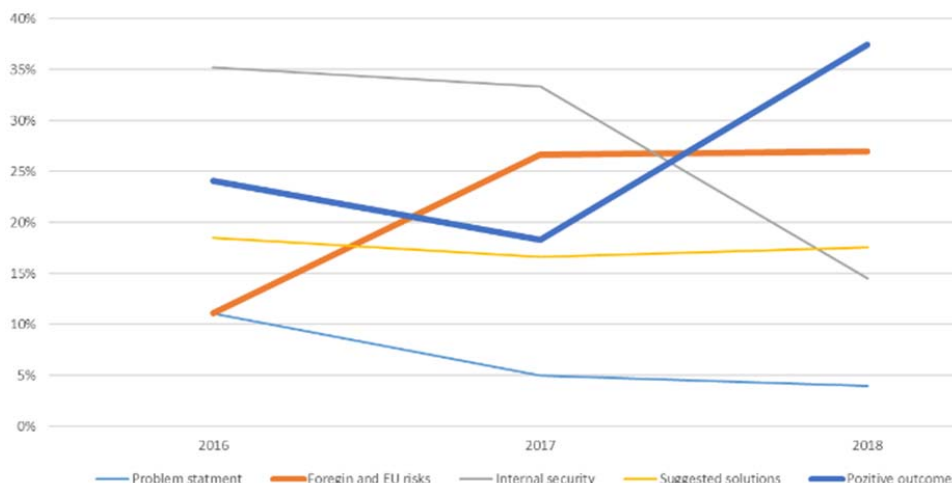Vol:14, No:10, 2020

Fig. 8 The tendency of the change of arguments in the Flashnews and the 6 pm news from 2016 to 2018

Although topics and narratives are the same in the 6 pm news and Flashnews, the latter rather works as an activation of knowledge, while the former functions as the constructor of knowledge. The 6 pm news sessions during the one hour long broadcasts have the time and the capacity to provide convincing lengthy arguments and imagery support that is capable to persuade the audience and, thereby, generate the contextual background for the Flashnews activation. On the other hand, Flashnews rather functions as a reminder of the existing knowledge constructs previously built up in the mind of the audience through the 6 pm news sessions. This method generates an effective combination of news management.

VI. CONCLUSION

This paper argued that the Flashnews shows similarities or it is even identical to the main news narratives of M1 News channel. The comparative content analysis of the Flashnews and the 6 pm news sessions, for the most frequent topics, which are migration, state finance, European politics and Georg Soros related topics, show the same tendencies of change from 2016 to 2018. Furthermore, the analysis also showed that topics in relation to migration are also almost exclusively consistent. Except for European politics in relation to migration, the topic of border control and Georg Soros, both in relation to migration, with some proportional difference, show similar tendencies from 2016 to 2018. Beyond that visual imagery is also identical in the Flashnews and the 6 pm news for the same broadcasted topics. Therefore, the Flashnews and the 6 pm news can be considered as news products edited and designed for the articulation of the same narrative.

Although the narrative of the Flashnews and the 6 pm news are the same, their function is different. The 6 pm news, due to its length, has the capacity to articulate topics in detail with several persuasive elements and, therefore, establish knowledge constructs. The Flashnews, on the other hand, has the potential to activate this built up knowledge, activate the association nodes that recipients have and experience the contextual priming effect that lead to the potential change in

political behavior. As a result of the peripheral route processing of information, this activation can happen even without the conscious awareness of the process. The comparative content analysis of the two news products highlights that the arguments articulated in the 6 pm news are appearing in the Flashnews. However, as the narratives change from 2016 to 2018, arguments articulating problem statement and internal security issues in the Flashnews shift towards the articulation of EU-foreign security issues and solution statements. In other words, Flashnews reflects the shift in the changing argumentation of the 6 pm news. Therefore, the Flashnews is a potential contributor in the centralized media machinery fulfilling a defined function in the management of news. The emergence of this media system is perhaps the reflection of the new political environment of the 2010s in Hungary, in which the public service media fulfils the goals of political actors and, as a result, it becomes a mere instrument in shaping the reality of voters.

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