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ZSÓFIA NAGY \*

## Repertoires of Contention and New Media: The Case of a Hungarian Anti-billboard Campaign

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\* [[lnzsofia@gmail.com](mailto:lnzsofia@gmail.com)] (Eötvös Loránd University, Hungary)

### Abstract

The so-called refugee crisis has had a profound effect on discourses all over Europe. While the issue of migration is a contested one everywhere, discourses are quite different in Central Eastern Europe than in the ‘old’ EU countries. A sharp increase in the number of refugees crossing Hungary during 2015, coupled with the Hungarian government’s agenda-setting strategy, led to a powerful and public anti-migrant campaign which sought to frame asylum-seekers as external threats to the country. While this campaign was by and large unchallenged by the Hungarian parliamentary opposition, the Two-Tailed Dog Party, a mock Hungarian political party, launched a counter-billboard campaign, attacking the governmental discourse. Taking the latter as a case of digitally supported civic action, the paper first discusses two theoretical problems related to digitally enabled social movements: the problem of voice, and the problem of participation. In both areas techno-pessimist authors have made strong claims: namely, that the internet creates ‘echo chambers’ that function as discursive enclaves, and that it leads to ‘slacktivism’ – a form of feel-good activism without significant impact. Afterwards, the paper presents the case of the Hungarian counter-billboard campaign and through the examination of its repertoire of activities reevaluates the above claims. It argues that the campaign’s action repertoire innovatively connected acts of feel-good activism in order to address wider audiences. With the help of the counter-billboard campaign, people with minority opinions were given a platform and visibility in the public. It also challenged official statements about the governments’ campaign through revealing inconsistencies in government communication. Through a process of mimetic engineering the original messages were altered and mocked in a satirical manner and the outcomes were brought back to the streets of Hungary. The campaign used an innovative combination of several low-cost activities, which proved to be a successful strategy. On a deeper level, the counter-campaign challenged hegemonic views about public discourse. The campaign effectively contrasted the government’s one-to-many, top-down approach to political communication with one that relied on many-to-many communication and a bottom-up approach.

*Keywords:* social media, social movements, refugees, Central Eastern Europe, memes.

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## 1. Introduction

Migration has become a central political issue on the agenda of the European Union, and the different approaches of its member states raise a number of significant questions as they are often closely linked to domestic political issues. These domestic issues, on the other hand, are often parts of another international trend: the rise of autocratic politicians in the West. Country case studies help us examine these interlinked issues in the light of the discourse on refugees.

Anyone arriving in Hungary during the summer of 2015 would have been surprised to find a significant number of billboards on the streets that targeted newcomers. Messages stating 'If you come to Hungary, respect our culture!', 'If you come to Hungary, don't take away our jobs!', and 'If you come to Hungary, respect our laws!' could be seen on the streets nationwide. The newcomer would have been even more dumbfounded to find that - mocking the style and visuals of these billboards - a similar number of very different messages were also framed in posters along the streets, one of them simply stating: 'Sorry about our prime minister!'.

The apparent addressees of the message were people who were indeed arriving in Hungary in the hundreds of thousands: refugees taking the Balkan route and crossing the country towards Western Europe, whose arrival led to significant public reaction in Hungary. Nevertheless, both campaigns specifically targeted Hungarian audiences in a political debate that played out not between host populations and asylum seekers, but among Hungarians against the backdrop of 'the refugee-problem'. Given the strong anti-migrant sentiment of the Hungarian public (Sik, Simonovits and Szeitl, 2016) and the overwhelming government campaign that was built on it and fueled it, the fact that this campaign was openly challenged was an unexpected development. Other than being a curious political event, the counter-billboard campaign initiated by the Hungarian mock political party, the Two-Tailed Dog Party, suggests a number of implications for scholars of social movements as well.

There appears to be general consensus within social movement scholarship that Eastern European social movements are considerably weaker in all aspects than their Western counterparts in Europe (Howard, 2003). Even when social movements do emerge, they tend to be oriented towards less disruptive, lower-threshold activities (Jacobsson and Saxonberg, 2013). Emergent forms of civil activism in Eastern Europe are therefore an important field of study as they provide insight into how some initiatives can overcome such obstacles.

Social movements often start off from a disadvantageous position in the public discourse, given that they lack the resources and discursive opportunities that the power they aim to challenge has access to. Classic works about the coverage of the anti-Vietnam movement (Halloren et al., 1970) and the anti-Iraq War movement (Murray et al., 2008) provide an empirical basis for understanding this matter. The phenomena is also explored in the classic work by Todd Gitlin, *The Whole World Is Watching* (1980), in which Gitlin convincingly explores how the media frames social movements, focusing on their radical elements. What is often articulated in the academic literature is that the media representation of social movements is driven by an asymmetrical relationship between two actors: movements need to rely on media in order to meet their goals, but the same is seldom true for the media ('most

movements need the media, but the media seldom need movements' (Rucht, 2004: 35). Accordingly, numerous empirical studies have investigated how the mainstream media trivializes the messages of social movements, offering a negative interpretation of their activities.

This is even more true in the case of Hungary where the unbalanced nature of the public sphere has raised significant concerns in previous years. Freedom of press metrics show that the growing concentration of power in the media and the near-zero opportunity for dissident voices to appear in the media indicate a move away from a pluralistic towards a hegemonic public sphere controlled by the government (Karlekar and Dunham, 2014). It is not a coincidence, therefore, that notable protest movements in the past years have often been internet-supported, trying to make up for their disadvantages by utilizing affordances provided by social networking sites. The counter-billboard campaign itself was no exception: it heavily relied on and innovatively used social media for its purposes, from inception through to execution. Therefore the present paper argues that this digital context is central to understanding the campaign.

The rapidly expanding academic literature that deals with the relationship between social media and social movement organizations is quite often conceptualized as a debate between techno-optimists (Castells, 2012) who regard the emergence of social media as providing voice and organization affordances to social movements and therefore having a liberating effect on social movements, and techno-pessimists who contest the above statements (Morozov, 2011). These two opposing views can be further broken down into radical and moderate stances. Those who accept the innovation hypothesis within the optimist camp believe that the positive aspects create novel, never before existing tools and opportunities for social movements (Benkler, 2006), while those who agree with the reinforcement hypothesis only go as far as to claim that new affordances strengthen previously existing strategies and action repertoires (Van Laer, 2010). Within the techno-pessimist camp, a radical viewpoint emphasizes the ways in which social media allows for oppression and surveillance and the creation of 'echo chambers'; phenomena that in fact weaken the power of social movements (Morozov, 2011). The skeptical viewpoint, meanwhile, is more moderate and calls attention to the surviving barriers and obstacles to social movement organizations (Gladwell, 2010).

While the above-described dichotomy has had a large and lasting effect on scholarly discourse about the issue, some authors have called for a more nuanced view, claiming that binaries are themselves misleading as they often result in overgeneralized and oversimplified approaches (Lim, 2012). For the sake of the present article I will highlight three such approaches that focus on critical approaches, context and content, thereby attempting to bypass the optimist-pessimist dichotomy.

First, the critical approach put forward by Kellner argues that online spaces are neither benevolent nor malevolent in themselves, but are places of contestation and conflict. In such spaces of contestation repressed individuals and groups take advantage of the democratic potential to enhance their visibility and organizational opportunities, but these spaces of contestation are neither free nor fair because of the structural inequalities they involve (Kellner, 1999).

Second, those who stress the importance of context argue that one of the shortcomings of the aforementioned debates has been caused by an artificial distinction between online and offline spheres, or what Treré calls a ‘one media bias’, where a single platform of communication – social media in the present case – is singled out and studied, disregarding other communication channels (Treré, 2012). In this article I instead propose that an empirical investigation of hybrid movements that operate both on- and offline and their use and presence on different platforms give us insight into the complex relationship between technologies and collective action.

Finally, one analytically useful approach is a focus on content – on the message of the social movement and how it is affected by social media. Bennett and Segerberg (2014) argue that movements that originate from social media are examples of ‘connective action’, where participants engage with issues on highly individual terms. The key to such a common sense of direction, in their view, is therefore the use of personalizable action frames shared on social media. This personalization of content is central to understanding the transformations that social media allows.

This article presents the case of the Hungarian anti-billboard campaign organized by the Two-Tailed Dog Party with the above considerations in mind. Therefore it aims to take a critical approach which situates the case in the Hungarian discursive field in which preexisting power structures and powerful players primarily shape the outcomes of the activities of social movements. Second, the paper situates the campaign of the Two-Tailed Dog Party, which relied heavily on social media, within the media ecology that surrounded it. Finally, the personalized content at the center of the campaign took the form of memes that provided not only an understanding of the issue on individual terms, but strategic advantages for the movement, as we will see.

Notwithstanding the general disagreements in the field, there appears to be consensus in the literature that social media capacities affect social movements in more than one domain. This situation is summed up by Sandor Vegh’s classification (2003) that distinguishes between awareness and advocacy effects (the potential to bypass traditional media gatekeepers) and mobilization and organization effects (the lowering of risk thresholds and organizational costs).

Based on this distinction, the paper first discusses two theoretical problems related to digitally enabled social movements: the problem of voice and the problem of participation. In both areas techno-pessimist authors have made strong claims; namely, that the internet creates discursive enclaves, and that it leads to ‘slacktivism’: feel-good activism without significant impact. Afterwards, the paper presents the case of the Hungarian counter-billboard campaign and through an examination of its action repertoire re-evaluates the above-described claims. It argues that the campaign’s action repertoire innovatively connected instances of feel-good activism in order to break out of the counterpublic’s enclave and address wider audiences.

## *2. Echo chambers - The problem of ‘voice’*

The problem of ‘voice’ in the present context refers to whether the internet and social media have democratic potential for pluralizing the public sphere.

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The concept of the public sphere, as elaborated by Habermas, describes a space where ideas are deliberated through communication. Central to the concept is that the exchange of thoughts in the public space takes place in a non-coercive manner. According to Habermas, twentieth century developments, and most notably the rise of mass media, have led to the deterioration of the public sphere as described above. The question is whether digital platforms bring us closer to the Habermasian normative idea of a public sphere (Habermas, 1989).

One of the central tenets of the Habermasian concept that has received considerable criticism is the claim that there exists a singular public sphere. Instead, as Nancy Fraser and others have argued, we should conceptualize discourse as consisting of a plurality of publics in which counterpublics that resist hegemonic discourses emerge and exist as well. According to Fraser, the assumption of a singular public sphere is both analytically mistaken and normatively undesirable (Fraser, 1990).

Habermas himself responded to critiques regarding the concept of a singular public sphere and expanded the notion of the 'public sphere' to capture the possibility of a 'pluralistic, internally much differentiated mass public' (1992: 438).

In her discussion about counterpublics, Fraser differentiates between stratified and egalitarian multicultural societies (1990). Following this distinction, the Hungarian case appears to be closer to the former situation, whereby the government's hegemony in public discourse and in the media and a strong public anti-migrant sentiment leads to subaltern counterpublics, as opposed to a peacefully coexisting plurality of publics. As Fraser claims, '(...) in stratified societies, subaltern counterpublics have a dual character. On the one hand, they function as spaces of withdrawal and regroupment; on the other hand they also function as bases and training grounds for agitational activities directed toward wider publics' (Fraser, 1990: 124). Dahlberg emphasizes the need for a space of withdrawal, claiming that counterpublics succeed if and when they can use 'critical-reflexive spaces of communicative interaction' to 'contest dominant discourses that frame hegemonic practice and meaning' (Dahlberg, 2011: 861).

Whether a counterpublic becomes an enclave or enclaved is also strongly interrelated to the question of a movement's media strategy. In Rucht's conceptualization (2004), the choices a movement faces in this regard are abstention (keeping away from mainstream media), adaptation (accepting the rules of the game and participating in the mainstream media), attack (explicitly challenging and criticizing mainstream media) or alternatives (creating the movement's own media platforms). The factors that influence these choices are many, ranging from endogenous ones - like the identity and strategy of the movement - to exogenous factors - such as the available resources, or the society's degree of openness. Rucht himself concludes that the emergence of digital platforms has made the option of creating an alternative media platform more probable and favorable for social movements (2004). Rucht's conceptualization, like any other, is context-dependent and fits better into a pre-internet era media ecology than that of the present, but is analytically useful as it points to how movement strategies appear in a terrain of contestation.

Indeed, proponents of digitally enabled protest movements often emphasize the internet's ability to broaden the repertoire of communicative action. Such optimistic viewpoints usually posit a direct positive relationship between digital

communication affordances and deliberation (Benkler, 2006; Holt, 2004; Singh, 2013). Techno-pessimists, on the other hand, claim that the affordances of digital media lead not to more but to less deliberation. Gromping states that social networking sites polarize users and lead to the emergence of 'echo chambers', where critical reflection is seriously hindered (Gromping, 2014).

The stance of Habermas himself is rather skeptical with regards to the effects of the internet. The author states that 'the rise of millions of fragmented chat rooms across the world instead lead to the fragmentation of large but politically focused mass audiences into a huge number of isolated public issues' (Habermas, 2006: 423).

Simply put, the techno-pessimist claims that if social movements choose an alternative from among Rucht's options - which is made more likely by digital affordances - they run the risk of creating echo chambers, therefore reducing the likelihood of wider influence on society. In this paper I propose that different media strategies coexist and build on each other: the use of an alternative media platform can become a stepping stone towards inclusion in mainstream media, even if the boundaries between the two are not necessarily clear-cut. Social movements are often hybrid; they function both on- and offline, and through a wide variety of media channels. The question then becomes how can a movement effectively utilize social media in order to make the transition and reach wider audiences.

### *3. Slacktivism - The problem of 'participation'*

The relationship between activism through social movements and social media has been at the center of academic attention with the rise of such platforms and their use in collaborative action. Some celebrate the coming age of 'participatory culture' characterized by (a) low barriers to participation, (b) strong support for creating and sharing creations, (c) the presence of informal mentorship, (d) members believing that their contributions matter, and (f) a feeling of social connection with others (Jenkins, 2009: 5-6).

Critiques of these two techno-optimist approaches argue that the internet only favors activism based on a low-threshold for participation, as it is only able to create weak links (Gladwell, 2010), and that participation generated online cannot have significant political impact. This phenomenon has been referred to as 'slacktivism' (Christensen, 2011).

A simple example of slacktivism that costs no more than a few clicks of a mouse is the generation and sharing of memes online. As defined by Shifman (2013), an internet meme is a unit of popular culture circulated, imitated and transformed by internet users, creating a shared cultural experience.

An internet meme, according to Knobel and Lankshear, has three main characteristics: it contains elements of humor, a rich kind of intertextuality and anomalous juxtaposition (2006). An important built-in feature of the internet meme is the humor that derives from the juxtaposition of the viewers' expectations based on the template and the actual altered outcome. As internet memes are predominantly non-serious, quite rarely political and naturally stay within the boundaries of the online world, their political impact can at first glance be conceptualized as relatively insignificant. However, while relatively under-researched, memes can contain

humorous elements and social critique at the same time, and more importantly, actors can consciously undertake mimetic engineering; that is, can identify harmful memes and release counter memes into the discourse (Godwin, 1994).

This paper posits that the creation of internet memes is indeed what Morozov (2011) would coin as slacktivism or feel-good activism in the sense that it requires relatively little of the participant's resources. Nevertheless, such memes – if and when they go viral – are able to help a social movement break out of its immediate environment and reach wider audiences. Accordingly, they are of value. It is not only the potential for the dissemination of memes that is important from a social activist perspective, but their ability to turn passive audiences into active participants. As Lankshear and Knobel conclude: 'If we don't like their contagious ideas, we need to produce some of our own.' (2003: 37). As we will see, one such innovation in the Hungarian case was the identification of the government's anti-refugee campaign as a harmful meme, the creation of counter-memes, and taking these memes 'offline' – back to the streets.

#### ***4. Data, approach, methods***

A number of significant empirical works have dealt with the case of the Hungarian 'refugee crisis' and how the discourse was shaped by the government during 2015. One of the first studies to analyze the issue, written by Bernáth and Messing, situates the problem in the theoretical framework of 'moral panic' and argues that the strong and rather aggressive campaign was not set back or questioned by agents other than the government, so the inaction of mainstream media and opposition parties should also be considered an explanation for the campaign's success (Bernáth and Messing, 2015). Other works situate the question in a framework of securitization. In a work describing the legal framework of the 'refugee crisis', Nagy introduces six characteristics that describe the government's securitization approach: denial, deterrence, obstruction, punishment, free-riding (lack of solidarity), and breaching superior law (Nagy, 2016). Sik and his colleagues focus on the effects of the securitization discourse and the campaign in general, situating it in a broader historical context and arguing that while xenophobic sentiments are at an all-time high in Hungary, they are relatively unchanged over time, and that anti-immigrant sentiment is strongly correlated to xenophobia in general (Sik, Simonovits and Szeitl, 2016).

As discussed above, this paper takes a threefold approach – a critical perspective, and an emphasis on context and on content – towards the issue of social media and social movement relationships. This approach provides the framework for the methodology as well. A critical approach towards the issue places the emphasis on the discursive opportunity structure, heavily shaped by the government's agenda-setting during the 'refugee crisis'. Accordingly, the paper relies on preliminary press research to provide an overview of the government's approach to the issue, and measures issue salience by comparing important keywords utilizing Google Trends. A focus on context drives the empirical research in its attempt to overcome one-media bias and develop a multi-site ethnography approach. Crowd-mapping was analyzed using data available from Zoomaps, while data about crowd-funding that was employed during the campaign are from a Google Spreadsheet created by the Two-

Tailed Dog Party. Finally, as Facebook was central to the campaign, the Facebook Fan Page of the Two-Tailed Dog Party was analyzed. Data from the Fan Page were scraped using Netvizz, a piece of software that provided important metrics for the study. Through Netvizz both the text contained in posts and comments, the number of post likes and shares, and the so-called 'pages like network' that are discussed below were collected, while images were chosen manually.

To create an overview of the Two-Tailed Dog Party's activities, content analysis was applied (Krippendorff, 1980), which consisted of a close reading of posts, note-taking, and identifying emergent issues and patterns. To identify the potential reach of the Two-Tailed Dog Party on social media, link analysis was used. According to Hogan (2008), one useful distinction in network research is that between the analysis of whole networks, personal networks, and partial networks. The present study's approach fits into the partial network model, as it situated the Two-Tailed Dog Party in the context within which it operated. This approach in general is usually referred to as link analysis. While potential reach would be best measured by identifying linked together individuals who shared the campaign's messages, Facebook's privacy settings do not allow for data collection of this kind. Instead, link analysis provides the organizational network within which Two-Tailed Dog Party is situated. A piece of network visualization software, Gephi, was used to provide an overview of this link analysis.

## *5. Background*

During the summer of 2015 the issue of refugees arriving to the European Union, and especially Hungary, became central to the political agenda. For a number of interrelated reasons the number of refugees heading towards Europe using the so-called Balkan route has been growing steadily in previous years, and increased rather sharply in 2015. While the details and explanations for this increase reach beyond the scope of this paper, one characteristic of this drastic change is that Hungary became an important transit point for most refugees, the majority of whom passed through the country towards Western Europe.

Immigration towards Hungary does not in itself explain the harsh stance of Orbán, since the country - until 2014 - had neither been a target nor a significant transit country with regards to migration. Therefore, in order to interpret Orbán's words, a general and a more specific preliminary point needs to be addressed. Regarding the general trends, while analysts often disagree about the proper definition for Orbán's right-wing government which has been in power since 2010, there is general consensus that it has involved moving from a liberal democratic set up towards a more autocratic regime, in which a consolidated party system, the rule of law, and freedom of the press have all been undermined (Bánkuti, Halmai and Schepelle, 2012; Fukuyama, 2012; Kornai, 2015). Since the latter is of significance for the present study, it is worth considering how the government proactively shapes not only the content but the structure of the Hungarian public sphere. Whether it is the media, intellectual forums or university workshops, Orbán has employed a threefold institutional strategy. First, by creating or taking over preexisting public institutions that are extremely well-financed in exchange for representing government views (the

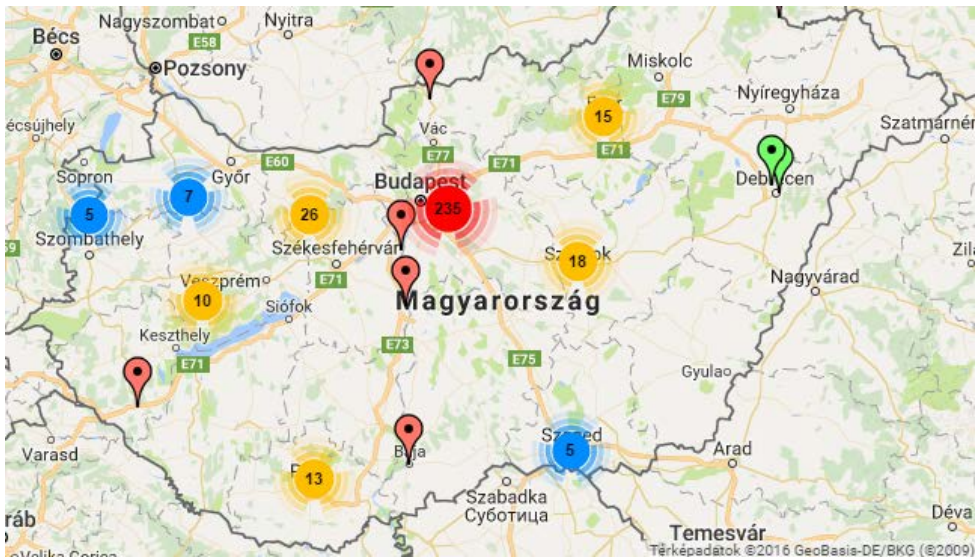
Hungarian Academy of Arts, Hungarian Television, theaters, etc.). Second, by creating or supporting right-wing, pro-government media outlets, blogs, research institutes, think tanks, etc. Third, by identifying leftist-liberal entities and institutions and making sure that their material position becomes unsupportable. Moving from the general context to the specific antecedents of the 'refugee crisis', analysts interpret Hungary's prime minister, Viktor Orbán's words as a communication offensive, triggered in response to the considerable drop in popularity of the party caused by domestic scandals such as the American entry ban of a number of Hungarian citizens, including the head of the Hungarian tax authority, or the failed initiative to introduce a so-called internet tax which mobilized tens of thousands of citizens against the plan (BBC, 2014).

The governing Fidesz implemented a political agenda-setting strategy that framed asylum-seekers as undeserving, threatening, and culturally incompatible with Europeans. Refusing to use the word 'refugee', the Hungarian government's claim is that migrants have become the central problem of Europe, and Hungary in particular. This framing of the issue has also allowed for the construction of internal and external enemies - opposition parties and EU institutions - namely, those who cooperate with or accept the arrival of refugees.

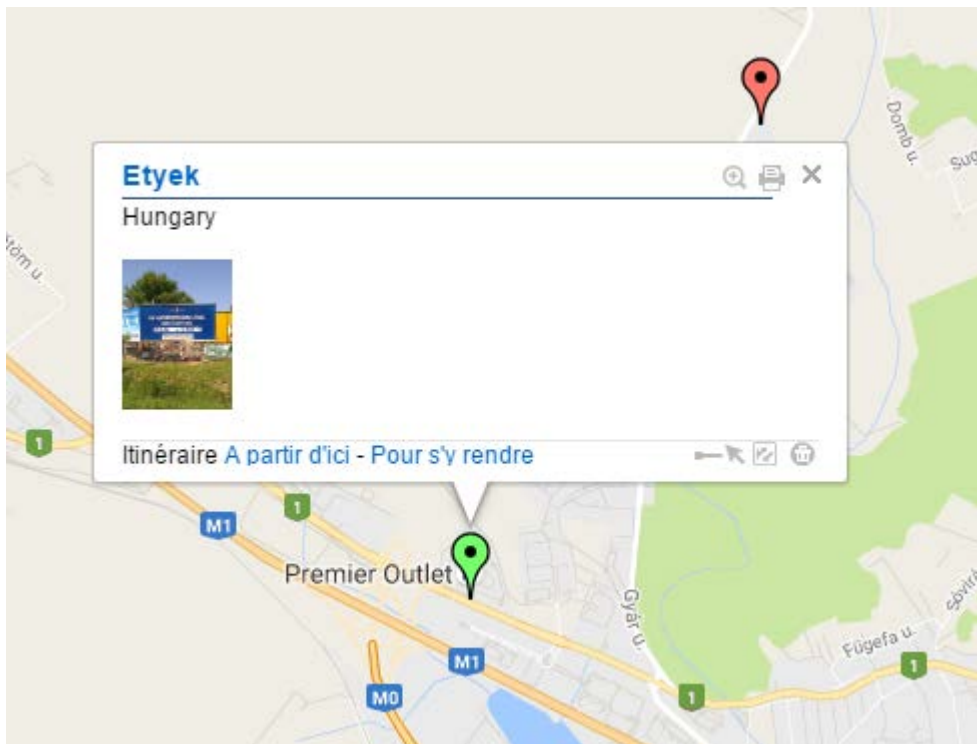
However, this strategy in fact preceded the so-called refugee crisis. Following the terrorist attacks against Charlie Hebdo, two million people took to the streets of Paris to honor the victims. Among them was Viktor Orbán, who was already blaming migration, and economic migration in particular, for the attacks (Reuters, 2015a).

Orbán's words were later echoed by a number of state officials. A number of political and communication tools - a working group, and a so-called process of 'national consultation' - were applied to reinforce this message (Hungarian Spectrum, 2015). A month after this, the government unleashed a major billboard campaign with three basic messages: 'If you come to Hungary, respect our culture!'; 'If you come to Hungary, respect our laws!'; and, 'If you come to Hungary, don't take away our jobs!'. Shortly after this announcement, the government also announced the building of a fence on the Hungarian-Serbian border (Reuters, 2015b).

The government's first billboards were set up on June 6, 2015. When these hit the streets, an outburst of memes followed. But the reaction this time did not stop there. As a prelude to the forthcoming counter-campaign, many of the billboards were damaged or altered by self-appointed street artists. While these acts of outrage were spontaneous in the beginning, they soon gave rise to cooperative activities. First, a crowd-sourced map (created anonymously) made it possible for those who were interested to track which government billboards had already been altered or damaged, and which ones were still untouched (Figure 1). Participants could also upload pictures about the 'results' of their work (Figure 2). Second, those altering messages on billboards often uploaded their work to social media and these photos became widely shared memes in their own right (Figure 3).



**Figure 1.** Crowd-sourced map showing the location of intact (red)/altered (green) /damaged (ble) governmental billboards. Source: <https://www.zemaps.com/map?group=1485171>



**Figure 2.** Picture uploaded to the crowd-sourced map of an altered governmental billboard. Source: <https://www.zemaps.com/map?group=1485171>



**Figure 3.** 'If you come to Hungary, don't take away Viktor Orbán!' Picture uploaded to the crowd-sourced map of an altered governmental billboard. Source: <https://www.zemaps.com/map?group=1485171>

According to press reports, hundreds of the 1,025 governmental billboards were vandalized in one way or another during what the Hungarian public soon nicknamed 'the billboard-wars' (Átlátszó, 2015a). While these acts led to intense discussions about whether billboard vandalism constitutes an act of free speech, they were soon followed by much more sophisticated and contentious activities. On June 8, the Two-Tailed Dog Party, a mock political party specializing in urban performances and street art with a strong emphasis on social satire, announced that it would launch a so-called 'anti-anti-immigrant campaign' for which it was awaiting donations. The party is not a conventional political project but a spoof party established by street artist Gergely Kovács, whose slogans include 'More everything, less nothing!', 'Eternal life, free beer, tax-deductions!' and 'We promise anything!'. Kovács maintains that he has no intention of joining or forming a 'serious' political movement.<sup>1</sup> While at its inception the original goal of the counter-billboard campaign was to set up no more than a few dozen billboards, the initiative soon escalated into a much wider protest. On the very first day, the party succeeded in collecting 6.5 million forints (20,700 euros) through a crowd-funding campaign, and within ten days the amount donated had reached 34 million forints (108,000 euros) which made it possible for the group to create and set up more than 900 billboards nationwide – and a few billboards abroad. The crowd-funding campaign was organized on Facebook, but the digital component of the

<sup>1</sup> Recently, the mock-party has been registered as a political party. See: <http://budapestbeacon.com/news-in-brief/hungarian-two-tailed-dog-party-run-2018-elections/40362>

campaign was not limited to this platform. The content and visuals of the billboards were also co-created: anyone with an idea could upload their version online, and finally, decisions about billboards were also outsourced as people could vote about the best pieces on social media too. This does not mean, nevertheless, that the mock party did not have their say in their own campaign – during the establishment phase they often emphasized that they wanted the counter-billboard campaign to be centered on three core messages. First, solidarity with refugees (Figure 4); second, raising awareness about the nature of the campaign and the need to redirect attention to issues of corruption and poverty (Figure 5); and finally, an apology for the xenophobic messages of the government in the form of a number of messages especially targeting foreigners (Figure 6). The billboards hit the streets in two waves, on July 1 and July 16. Some of the formerly created online memes went to print, but brand new suggestions were also displayed. Famously, the Two-Tailed Dog Party set up billboards in Viktor Orbán's native town of Felcsút with the message: 'Space station to be built here soon!' This reference mocked the prime minister's obsession with football and his go-ahead for the building of a 3,500-seater stadium immediately next to his country estate in Felcsút, a village with a population of less than 1,700.

By the end of the campaign, 1,025 governmental billboards were being countered by 900 Two-Tailed Dog Party billboards. The often satirical messages attracted wide coverage in the press – both Hungarian and international – and on social media, and successfully altered the direction of public discourse.



**Figure 4.** 'For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat; I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink; I was a stranger and you invited me in', Matthew 25-35. A counter-billboard set up by the Two-Tailed Dog Party. Source: <https://www.facebook.com/justanotherwordpresspage>



**Figure 5.** 'If you're Hungary's Prime Minister, you have to respect our laws!' A counter-billboard set up by the Two-Tailed Dog Party.

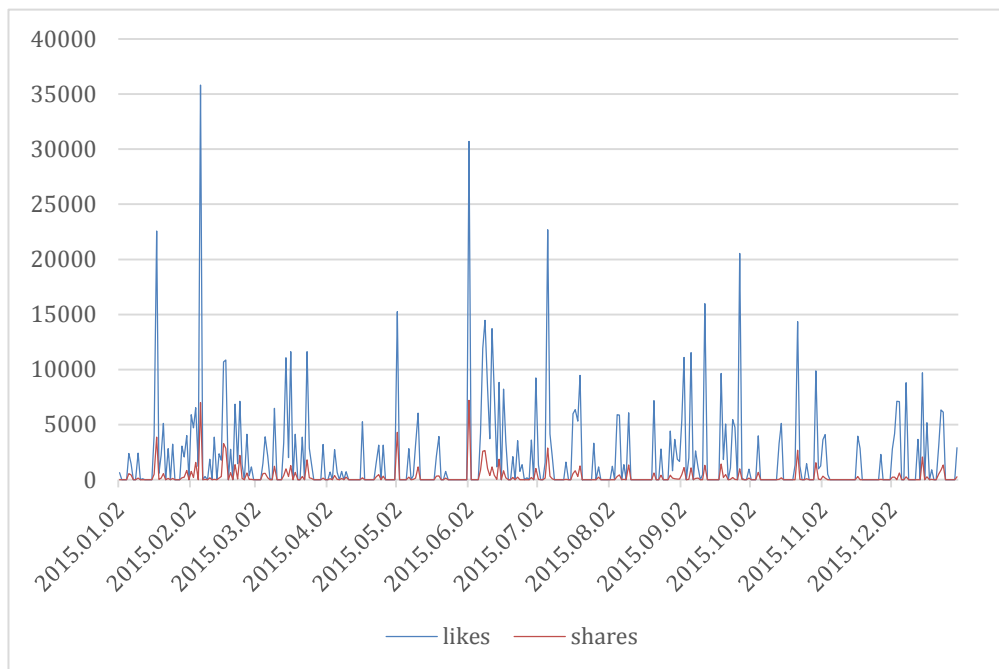
Source: <https://www.facebook.com/justanotherwordpresspage>



**Figure 6.** 'Sorry about our prime minister!' A counter-billboard set up by the Two-Tailed Dog Party. Source: <https://www.facebook.com/justanotherwordpresspage>

## 6. Discussion

A look at the overall performance of the Two-Tailed Dog Party's Facebook Fan Page in 2015 helps us situate its campaign among its broader activities. The present study's focus is on examining 'likes' and 'shares', as these provide sufficient insight into user engagement. The data in Figure 7 show that while the billboard campaign obviously attracted an audience for the Two-Tailed Dog Party, their popularity at this time was far from unprecedented (Figure 7). Staying within the realms of social media, the significance of the campaign is difficult to explain.



**Figure 7.** Number of post likes and shares on the Facebook Fan Page of the Two-Tailed Dog Party during 2015. Source: <https://www.facebook.com/justanotherwordpresspage>

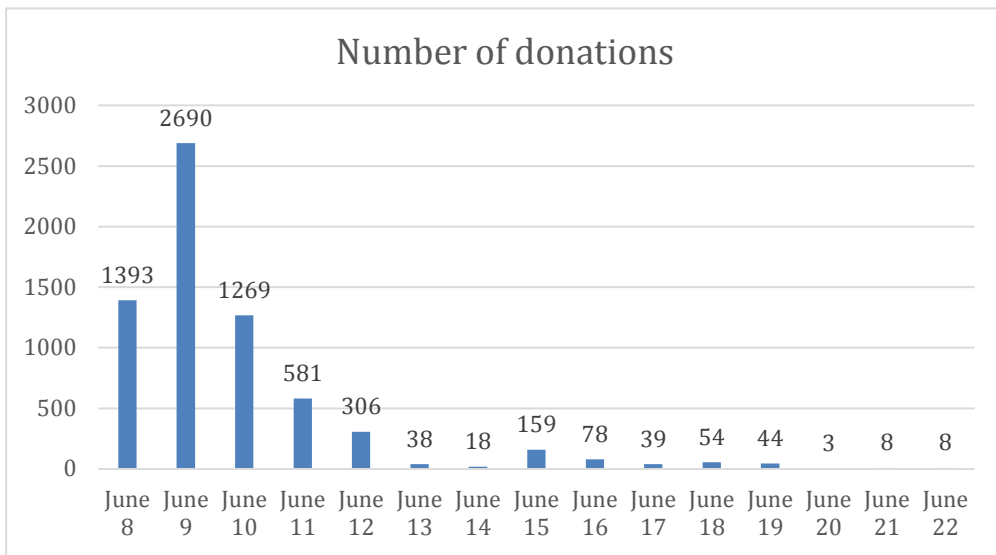
Among the 20 most popular posts on the Facebook Fan Page of Two-Tailed Dog Party in 2015, 15 contain pictures, which is a clear illustration of the visual nature of the party's style of communication. Five from these twenty most popular posts were written within the time frame of a week (the first week of June). The second most shared and liked post by the Two-Tailed Dog Party in 2015 contains no textual content; it is a meme, a variation of the billboard campaign that states: 'Come to Hungary, we are already working in London!' (4572 shares; June 2, 2015). While the third most shared post of 2015 predates the billboard campaign, it is a mockery of the government's national consultation on immigration, aptly titled: 'Who do you hate more?' (3730 shares; May 2, 2015). The post which received the largest number of comments (854) in 2015 and triggered hundreds of suggestions asks the question: 'What billboard should we put up in Felcsút?' (June 12, 2015), referring to the prime

minister's hometown. Responses included: 'Hungary: Closed on Sundays!', 'For a mediocre Hungary!', 'If you're Viktor Orbán, give back the money you stole from us!', and 'If you have come to Hungary, it's not too late to turn back!'. The second most commented-on post of the year (723 comments; July 6, 2015) shares a photo of a poster from the Two-Tailed Dog Party's campaign in Vienna that says in German 'Thank you Austria for not closing your borders in 1956!'. In contrast to the previous examples, this post provoked considerable controversy and numerous people expressed their distaste for the parallel that was being drawn by the message on the billboard.

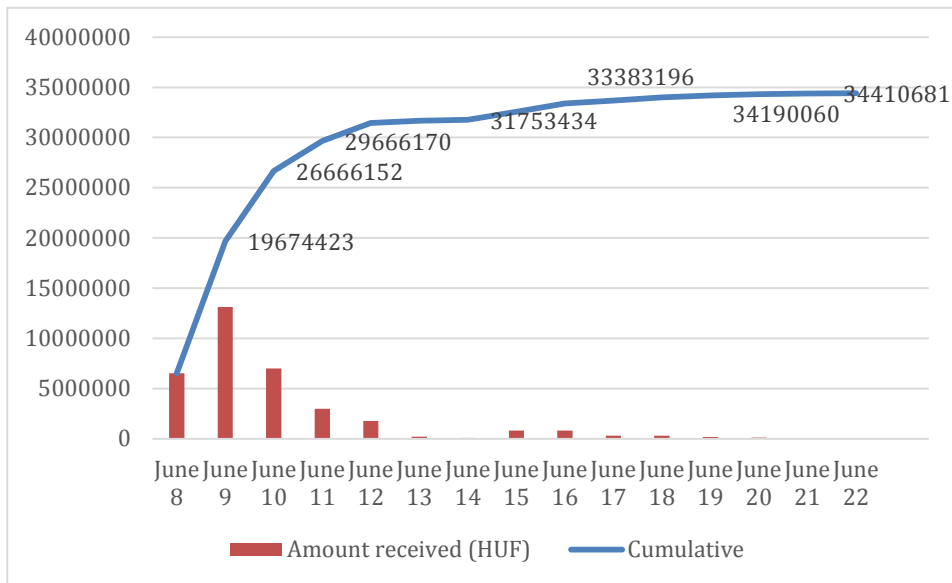
### *6.1 Breaking the 'spiral of silence'*

The spiral of silence in the Hungarian case refers to the fact that on the one hand the government proactively targeted asylum-seekers as potential threats to the country, while those who disagreed with such a stance had little to no representation in public discourse, partly because of the inactivity of opposition parties and a lack of strong social movements in the field. The spiral of silence was also created by the fact that the power asymmetry between anti-refugee and pro-refugee groups was coupled with another fundamental form of asymmetry: the anti-refugee campaign had access to mass communication techniques to reach its wider audiences, while the latter group had rather a limited set of resources to get its messages across. These asymmetries often lead to 'preference falsifications' (Kuran, 1995) when minority groups lack knowledge about others' political preferences and are in turn less likely to speak up. While social media may foster the creation of homophilous groups that strengthen the so-called 'echo chamber' effect, it can also be strategically used to generate resources in order to transcend the boundaries of such counterpublics, as the case of the counter-billboard campaign shows.

In a counterintuitive way, overcoming the barriers of such 'echo chambers' and reaching a wider audience was made possible, not retarded, by such feel-good activism. Participants were encouraged to engage in low-cost and low-risk activities that required very little commitment, while the appeal of the campaign was based on its humorous, satirical nature. As the Two-Tailed Dog Party launched its crowd-sourced, anti-billboard campaign at the beginning of June, 2015, it also recorded each donation in a Google Form; the available data show both features – low-effort contributions and the success of the campaign – rather clearly. In 16 days, the campaign generated 34 million forints from 6,688 donors, the average contribution from each being 5,128 forints (about 16 euros). Data also show that within the first four days, 89 per cent of all donors contributed, and 86 per cent of funding was raised.



**Figure 8.** Number of donations to the Two-Tailed Dog Party during the crowd-funding campaign. Source: <https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1Faqcki4Woh85wOQdl0P9rDKWaCvIG5r4woth0dkCMew/edit#gid=0>



**Figure 9.** Donations collected by the Two-Tailed Dog Party during the crowd-funding campaign. Source: <https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1Faqcki4Woh85wOQdl0P9rDKWaCvIG5r4woth0dkCMew/edit#gid=0>

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### *6.2 Revealing the nature of the governmental billboard campaign*

The counter-campaign had a number of cognitive effects; that is, in itself it challenged a number of assumptions about the government's campaign that manifested itself in the form of a national consultation in May, 2015 and a billboard campaign in June-July, 2015. The official message, that the campaign sought to address asylum-seekers arriving to Hungary, had already been discredited by the very fact that the language of the messages was Hungarian. But the crowd-sourced map created during the so-called 'billboard wars' during May-June, 2015 – during which time individuals vandalized government posters – made it clear to a wider audiences that the placement of the billboards did not correspond to the locations of arrival of asylum-seekers: very few, in fact, were located near the borders or different asylum institutions, while the majority were put up in downtown Budapest. While the strongly manipulative nature of the campaign had always been suspected, the map provided a clear and factual demonstration of it.

The counter-billboard campaign also contributed to uncovering serious inconsistencies in the government's claims of how much it had spent on its own campaign. While the official budget shows that the 1,025 billboards put up by the government cost 74 million forints, the Two-Tailed Dog Party spent less than 50 per cent of this amount on around the same number of billboards (900). This finding further undermined the credibility of the government's campaign which was effectively framed as overpriced for questionable reasons, to say the least (Átlátszó, 2015b).

### *6.3 Memetic engineering*

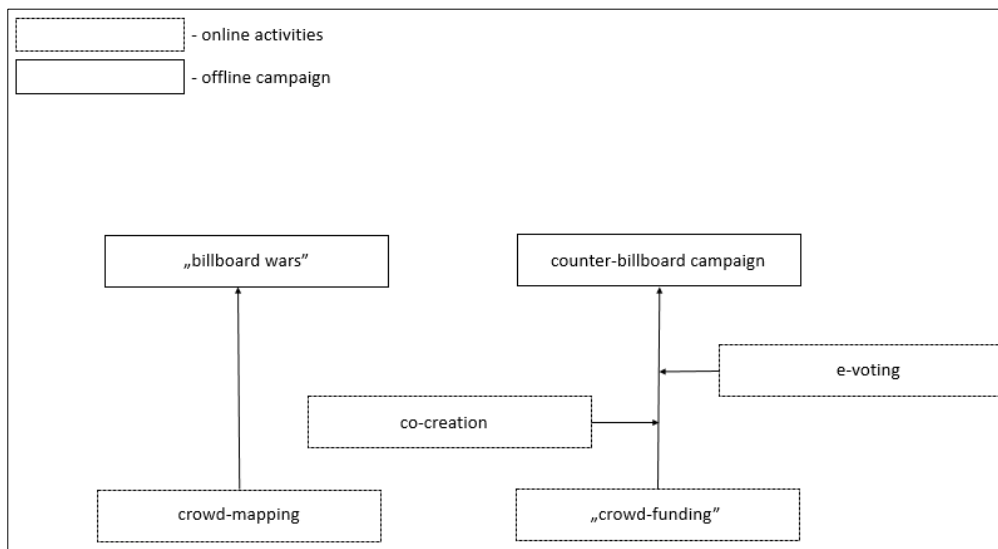
Framing political messages as potentially alterable memes is rather common in the online world. So it is only natural that when the first governmental billboards appeared, memes that satirized the original messages started appearing in social media.<sup>2</sup> The government's billboards proved to be rather suitable bases for mimetic engineering in the sense that the recognizable visuals could be coupled with a simple and easily replaceable sentence. In a way, it can also be argued that it was also in the government's best interest to create such alterable messages, as with each replication the original messages became units of popular culture. What the government did not and could not expect was that, in terms of fecundity, anyone could rival their position and presence on the streets. What the initiative launched by the Two-Tailed Dog Party did was provide two essential spaces that made success more likely: a critical-reflexive space for communicative interaction (Dahlber, 2011), and later, a wider form of visibility through which reflections could be shared with the general public. The innovative element in the campaign was taking the campaign back to where it came from: having identified the government's billboard propaganda as harmful, and having invited people to crowd-fund, co-create and co-select countermemes, the counter-campaign then moved offline and reached out to mass audiences.

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<sup>2</sup> While it is close to impossible to count the number of memes that reflected on the campaign, a Google search for the general term 'Ha Magyarországra jössz...' ('If you come to Hungary...') yields hundreds of related images.

#### 6.4 Combined acts of slacktivism

Examples of crowd-enabled collaboration often include the distribution of a larger task among many participants, who then execute the task from remote locations, leading to a lowering of the personal costs of involvement. The organizational logic of the counter-billboard campaign effectively utilized the advantages of such forms of collaboration, but it also combined them in a way that created a sophisticated chain of activities (Figure 9). During the ‘billboard-wars’ this chain of action was rather short: information about the location of the billboards was crowd-mapped online, and using this knowledge a number of offline activities followed (with the potential to provide feedback about the ‘results’ online). However, the counter-billboard campaign developed and extended this short chain of action: it built on (a) crowd-funding activities that generated resources and hype for the campaign; (b) the co-creation of the billboards that allowed for the mimetic engineering described above; (c) an e-vote about the billboards that strengthened the sense of participation in the campaign; and, (d) the offline campaign that reached a wider audience. This interconnectedness of activities was partly made possible by the new modalities of participation afforded by social networking sites.

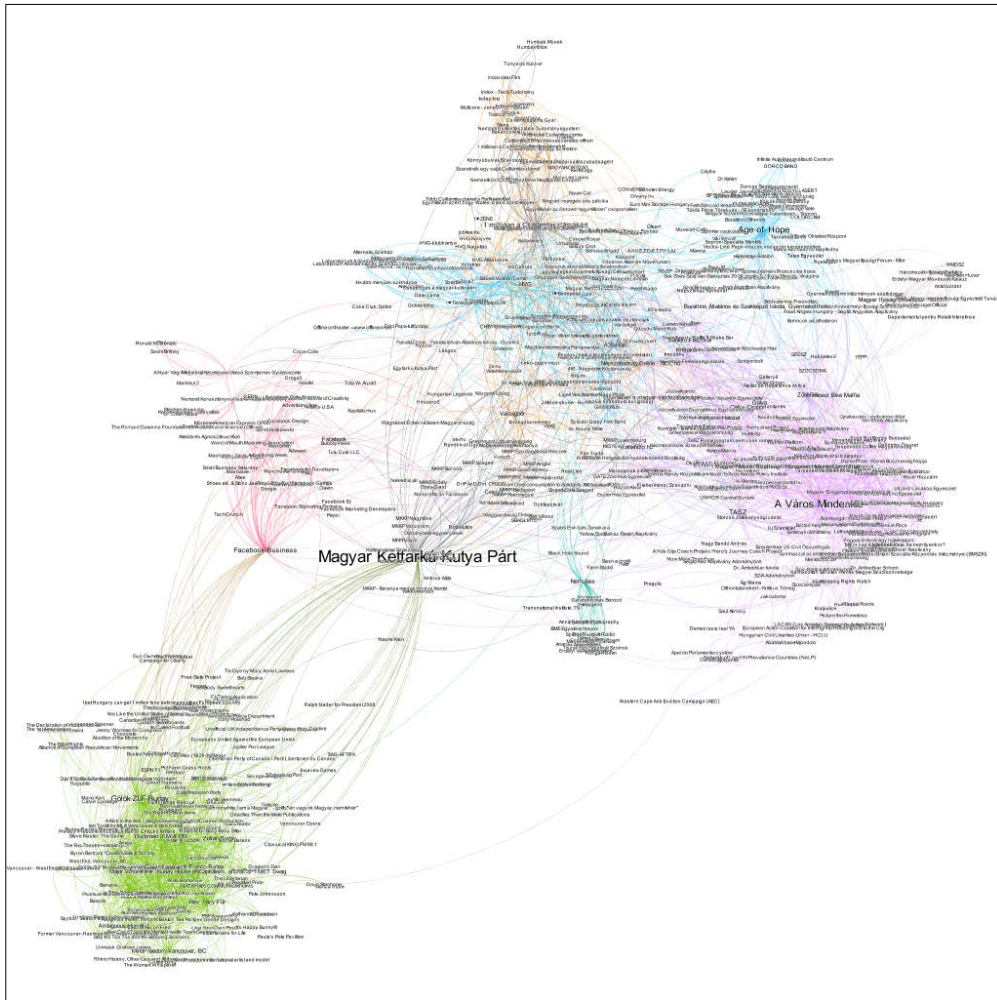


**Figure 10.** Combined acts of slacktivism

#### 6.5 Challenging the structure of the discourse

Neither the average size of the contributions (5,128 forints), nor the number of participants (6,688 donors) are significant in themselves – nevertheless, the combined effects allowed for a national campaign just as large as the one it was countering. While at the surface level the counter-campaign was a non-serious, non-political prank which had unexpected success, it also provided a contrast to the wider public about the nature of the political discourse.

One way to visualize the potential reach of the Two-Tailed Dog Party's messages is through link analysis (Figure 11).

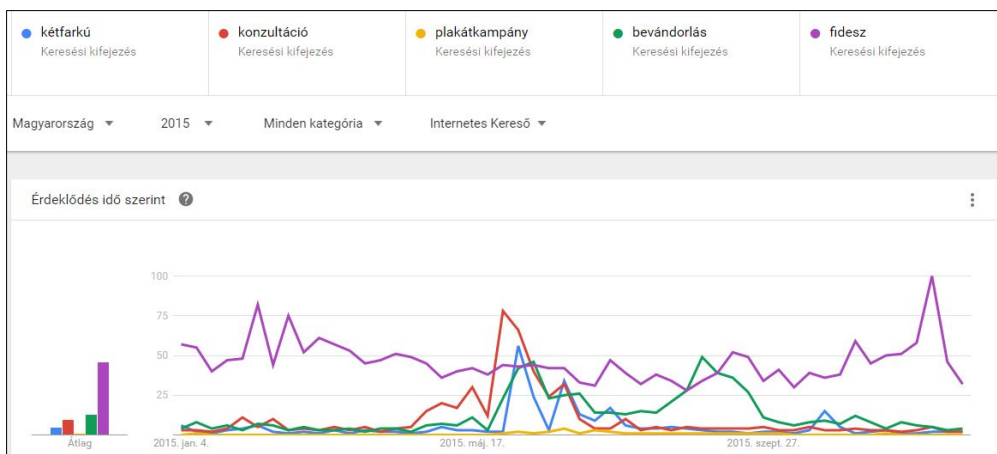


**Figure 11.** Network map of the Two-Tailed Dog Party on Facebook

The network consists of pages liked by the Two-Tailed Dog Party and pages liked by the owners of those pages: it contains 673 nodes and 3063 edges. The average path length is 3,876. The different colors represent clusters of nodes that are more densely connected together than with the rest of the network. Node label size represents influence (the bigger the label, the higher the node's betweenness centrality). The large, rather separate light-green cluster connects mostly non-Hungarian (mainly American and Canadian) libertarian-liberal groups. The purple, densely connected cluster on the right-hand side of the network illustration consists mostly of Hungarian NGOs and social movements critical of the government. The light-blue cluster in the upper-right corner consists of charities whose focus is poverty amelioration. The magenta cluster on the left hand-side of the picture consists of pages with a

technological focus, while the blue cluster in the upper-central side of the network contains pages that belong to the Hungarian blogosphere and journalists. One can clearly see that the network of the Two-Tailed Dog Party is far from being densely connected, and the party in fact is located at the intersection of numerous spheres otherwise remote from each other.

In the Hungarian discursive field of the ‘refugee crisis’ the effects of the anti-billboard campaign are impossible to analytically distinguish from the plethora of other influences, including the original government campaign, the presence of refugees, the international climate and the coverage of the story by traditional media. One way to illustrate the claim that the Two-Tailed Dog Party’s presence indeed impacted issue salience during the ‘crisis’ is to examine data from Google Trends which collected data about search terms used by Hungarians during 2015 (Figure 12).



**Figure 12.** Issue salience measured by Google Trends during 2015 [two-tailed (*kétfarkú*); consultation (*konzultáció*), billboard-campaign (*plakátkampány*), immigration (*bevándorlás*), Fidesz (*fidesz*)]

The Figure compares the salience of five search terms. In order of appearance: two-tailed (*kétfarkú*), consultation (*konzultáció*), billboard campaign (*plakátkampány*), immigration (*bevándorlás*) and Fidesz (*fidesz*). During the launch of the Two-Tailed Dog Party’s campaign, it can be seen that searches related to the party increased significantly until mid-August – at one point (the first week of June), even exceeding those for Fidesz. The term ‘billboard campaign’ is never extensively searched for online, while searches for ‘consultation’ – referring to the national consultation initiated by the government – reach a peak at the beginning of the summer, and declined from that point onwards. The figure shows that the number of searches for the Two-Tailed Dog Party exceeded searches for ‘immigration’ during the summer of 2015 three times. These figures all point to the conclusion that the anti-billboard campaign had a significant influence on Hungarian migration-related discourse.

At a deeper level, the counter-campaign challenged hegemonic views about public discourse. It effectively contrasted the government’s one-to-many, top-down approach to political communication with a campaign that relied on many-to-many communication and a bottom-up approach. Many-to-many communication is, in a

way, inherent to social media discourses, while the bottom-up approach meant that successful authors could see their own billboard-designs appear on streets. The characteristics of participatory culture (Jenkins, 2009) thus create a sense of empowerment and a radically different interpretation of how collective action problems may be approached by political actors. By introducing mimetic engineering into its action repertoire, the campaign also showed at a deeper level the differences between passive audiences and active participants in political discourse. The traditional assumption that the general public's role in shaping the relevant narrative is merely reactive was thus effectively questioned by the counter-campaign. On an emotive level, the counter-campaign also offered an alternative emotive frame – as a built-in feature of the memes, the campaign was humorous and satirical in tone and contrasted with the fear-mongering character of the government's messages.

## *7. Conclusion*

The counter-billboard campaign successfully broke the 'spiral of silence' as people with minority opinions were given a platform and visibility in the public eye. It was also effective in revealing the nature of the governmental billboard-campaign: that it had no intention of addressing asylum-seekers arriving in Hungary, and that billboards were paid for at above-market prices. On a deeper level it challenged hegemonic views about public discourse by contrasting one-to-many, top-down messages about fear with many-to-many, participative messages based on humor. The traditional assumption that the general public's role in shaping the relevant narrative is merely a reactive one was questioned by the counter-campaign. It also challenged perceptions about how to address collective action problems in society, offering a participatory alternative.

However, based on Gladwell's claim (2010) – which does not rule out the possibility of successful digital social movements, but rather states that such movements do not challenge the status quo – the limits of the campaign should not be overlooked. While the campaign was part of a political discourse about migration, it was a rather self-restricted one. It never offered a substantial critique of the government's activities and views, instead focusing on satire and mockery. It was also limited in the sense that it was not part of a sustainable long-term effort to counter governmental discourse, but a short campaign of mobilization and action. (However, during 2016 when the government initiated a national referendum against the EU quota scheme for hosting refugees, its renewed billboard campaign once again mobilized the Two-Tailed Dog Party and its supporters – a repeated call for donations leading to the same enthusiastic support.) Finally, however visible, the counter-billboard campaign did not mobilize a broad spectrum of Hungarian society, the majority of whom are staunch supporters of the government's migration policy. Nevertheless, the innovative action repertoire made possible by digital affordances contributed to effectively resisting the hegemonic discourse about the refugee crisis, and more generally, the 'boundaries' of the political. In a broader context the campaign was an example of prefigurative politics where, instead of making claims that address the government, contentious groups act out practices that are in accordance with their picture of the ideal functioning of politics: engaging in activities that are creative, participatory, critical and autonomous.

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