Pécs Chatter.
A Digital Anthropological Study on the Impact of a Facebook Group on Local Politics

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Abstract. Research on the political role of digital media, including social media, is often based on the assumption that new communication platforms can contribute to new forms of political participation such as taking part in deliberative political debates more actively and exercising the right to vote more often. Most of the studies focus on national processes: nationwide political campaigns and general elections. In this paper, we offer a different angle on these issues, focusing on a specific locality, more specifically the activities of a politically themed local Facebook group in a middle-sized town in Hungary. We also apply a digital anthropology approach that enables us to use a hybrid methodology combining online and offline tools in our research design. Results are presented in this paper in a research report format. We are far from a final conclusion about the interplay of social media use and political activity, but hopefully the experiences we share will shed some light on the functioning of these types of online communities.

Keywords: local politics, social media, case study, online communities

1. Introduction

The 2019, municipal elections in Hungary brought about an unexpected success for the opposition candidates in several ways. Despite the governing party coalition (Fidesz–KDNP) controlling three-fourths of the seats in the legislation at the time and having a disproportionate amount of financial resources at its disposal, the united opposition has managed to gain important positions (the mayor and most of the district mayor positions in the capital, and the majority in local governments in some larger cities as well as mayoral seats in 10 out of the 23 county centres).

Various new phenomena might have played a role in this outcome: the coordinated nomination of candidates by the opposition parties, the emergence of independent candidates and electoral organizations, the active use of social media in the opposition campaign on Social Network Sites (SNS), and the newly developed preselection process to select the seemingly successful candidates for mayors and municipal representatives (Kovarek–Littvay, 2022).

We presumed that the more extensive and effective use of social media contributed to the opposition's success in local politics in a significant way, and we have decided to do a closer study to extract new insights into local political processes. The hypothesis that taking part in informal political debates on the Internet has a positive effect on political and electoral participation is not at all new in itself (for a recent discussion, see: Vaccari–Valeriani, 2018). The novelty of our approach comes from the fact that the vast majority of political science research deals with political processes on a national scale, while the focus of our research is outside the capital areas and specific localities.

The results presented in this paper are part of a long-term research project that investigates the impact of SNS on local political processes and voter behaviour by studying examples from Hungarian municipalities.[1] These three branches of the research represent the different methodological approaches we apply:

1. analysis of online interactions of mayors and members of local government on Facebook (quantitative research based on representative samples),
2. a detailed assessment of patterns of voter behaviour using a representative study (personal survey with a large sample of participants),
3. examining the operation of online platforms using online and offline methods (digital anthropology).

The observations we present in this paper belong to the third branch. The specific methods we used were participant observation in local Facebook[2] groups, personal and online interviews with participants (members of the local government, journalists, civilians, activists), the analysis of the content of the posts and the community interactions by using the *CrowdTangle*[3] tool.

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1   NKFI Research titled *Networked Locality: Examining the Role of Social Media in Local Politics*, led by Márton Bene (ELKH PTKI) (2020–2024).

2   Facebook is by far the leading social networking site used by Hungarians; according to Meta's advertising resources, about 60 percent of the population are users of this platform. Other social media platforms either attract a smaller audience (e.g. only about 5 percent of Hungarians have a Twitter account) or do not have the same political relevance (27-28 percent of the Instagram and TikTok users tend not to follow political profiles). YouTube has a reach similar to Facebook, and it is an important site for sharing political content, but the related politically themed discussions are among mostly anonymous pseudo-profiles. For these reasons, we have limited the scope of research to Facebook. (Source: https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2022-hungary [Accessed on: 10 September 2022]).

3   CrowdTangle is a tool offered by Meta to follow, analyse, and create reports about profiles and groups and is currently applicable on the Facebook, Instagram, and Reddit platforms.

We argue that the main value of digital anthropology in the study of local politics comes from the fact that trends and tendencies arising from quantitative results could be confirmed, refined, or even overwritten by using soft methods. With this approach, we can validate whether the participant accounts and data coming from the examination of interactions converge, and we can offer alternative explanations. We could also form specific questions about the nature of local politics as seen on the online platforms (Who are the main actors? What kind of topics receive more public attention? Is there any room for deliberative debates?).

Finally, the use of digital anthropology as a theoretical and methodological framework allows us to focus on specific localities. In our case, the actual place of the first fieldwork was Pécs, a middle-sized town in Southern Hungary, and we present our findings in the form of a research report.

2. The Field

Pécs is the fifth largest city in Hungary, the centre of the Southern Hungarian region, with a population of about 140,000, slowly but steadily declining since the 1990s. It is also a characteristic university town with more than 20,000 students enrolled at the University of Pécs (almost a quarter of them are international students), and the university is the largest employer in the region. After the regime change in 1989, Pécs came to be considered a stronghold of the political left, which won most of the national and municipal elections before 2010. The Fidesz–KNDP coalition first succeeded in the 2009 interim mayor election and took all three seats in the national parliament a year later, and then the mayor was also re-elected along with a significant majority in the local government. After 2010, the Fidesz–KDNP coalition managed to win a two-thirds majority in the legislation in all four consecutive national elections and secured the mayoral seats in the local elections before 2019 in all major cities in the country except for Szeged.

In Pécs, however, an independent candidate, Tamás Mellár backed by four oppositional parties took one of the seats in the 2018 election. The result proved that there is room for the cooperation of the opposition parties in the local elections. A new association was formed to support coordinated candidate selection, named Mindenki Pécsért [Everyone for Pécs], with the support of all the major opposition parties except for LMP – Hungary's Green Party, along with independent activists who were also invited to join this organization. In hindsight, this alliance proved to be a very successful venture during the 2019 municipal elections. Attila Péterffy, the independent candidate backed by the association was elected mayor by a significant margin (53%), and Mindenki Pécsért had a landslide victory, winning 18 out of the 26 seats in the local government. Although the winning coalition had been disbanded due to inner conflicts between the parties, the delegates, and the

independent mayor, the multi-party coalition, renamed as Pécs jövője [The Future of Pécs] still controls the local government firmly with 15 seats.

Pécs is a relatively large city with a considerable cultural influence, so it comes as no surprise that there are countless groups on Facebook in connection with the city. There are larger and smaller non-politically-oriented groups such as local marketplaces, work opportunity hotlines, and programme announcing cultural agencies. Compared to other Hungarian cities of similar size, media outlets operating in Pécs are plenty, and many of them have a significant number of followers on Facebook. Non-governmental organizations also operate their own open and closed communities on the site, not to mention countless niche communities for sharing memories, information about sporting events and recreational activities, old and new photographs of the city and its surroundings, and other communities of interest.

To do a more in-depth study, we narrowed down the focus of our research to a single community, the so-called Pécsi Kibeszélő [Pécs Chatter] group, which is a small (at the time of the study, it had around 3,000 members) but active community for those who are willing to talk about local issues publicly, using their name or at least their main Facebook account. We have chosen this group because some of the following types were present in all the groups we were interested in: members of the local government, party and civilian activists, concerned citizens, journalists, and opinion leaders. Right from the start, there were several daily posts, most of which earned a very modest response, but the more successful ones could get about 3-400 reactions and reshares.

The group had been founded by local activists of the recently founded Momentum Movement Party, originally for mobilizing purposes with regard to the 2019 autumn vote. After the election, they reshaped the group as a discussion forum anyone could join regardless of political views or party affiliations. It was envisaged as a safe space where everyone could express their opinion as long as it did not include blasphemy, name-calling, or hate speech. Moderation was supposed to be scarce, and moderators discussed the cases of blocking members (almost exclusively anonymous trolls) among themselves. As the group started to grow, some tensions started to show through, and there were only occasional disputable actions carried out by the moderators, such as the incident we will cover later.

We also narrowed down the original time period of our investigation (posts between autumn 2019 and summer 2022) to do a more in-depth analysis during the late spring and early summer of 2021 to avoid including special events such as pre-election periods and campaign seasons. Parallel to that, we conducted 10 interviews between June 2021 and July 2022, including two of the founders, three members of the local government, three journalists working for local media outlets, and two ordinary residents. With two exceptions, they were all active posters and commentators of the studied period.

3. Observation and Interviews from the Field

Initially, we planned to include the mayor as a participant in our investigation. However, after taking a closer look at the mayor's activity on Facebook, we have found that his social media presence is channelled through the city hall communication staff, and his genuine interaction is limited to posting some interactive videos during the pandemic. On the Pécs Chatter group, one can only find cross-posted content from the mayor's official profile, usually shared by party activists. The absence of the city leader from these discussions seems to be a deliberate choice on his behalf, preferring professionally prepared messages to more spontaneous forms of communication with the voters, even on the social media platform.

Some representatives of the local government are, on the other hand, quite active on the platform, sharing news about their constituencies, writing about development projects for the future, or showing the results of smaller improvements in living conditions. Some members of the former larger coalition, now working on different fractions of the local government, are actively sharing their content on Pécs Chatter and on Facebook in general, but they also rarely engage in conversations initiated by other posters. The representatives of the governing parties (locally in opposition) were initially occasional commentators of the Pécs Chatter group, but they were keeping their distance at the time of our investigations. The fact that apart from the early start-up phase (June 2019), members of parliament representing the city got involved in the discussions very rarely also reduces the significance of the group in the local public sphere.

Those members of the local government who are present on Pécs Chatter use the platform for different reasons, as the interviews suggest. All of them look on this group as an efficient way for directly reaching out and informing their voters, but there was only one representative that looked at it as an actual platform for getting real voter feedback which then can affect certain decisions. One of them stated that the presence on social media platforms cannot replace real-life interaction with voters, and they can find out more about public opinion by having conversations in person or by phone. Content shared on social media is also viewed more as a campaign tool rather than a working solution for keeping in touch with those living in their constituencies.

As we would present later by numbers, the majority of posts are reshared content provided by local media outlets. In rare cases, journalists shared their content directly from their own account, and in most cases they are reposted by some members of the group. One of the interviewed participants acknowledged that social media shares have a significant impact on page downloads at their actual sites, while others stated that they pay little attention to that. According to them, being newsworthy should be enough, and they refrain from expressing

their opinion on Facebook (that does not mean that they do not read readers' comments regularly). It is very difficult to say whether they use different techniques to promote their articles, but direct advertising via the platform is not present according to *CrowdTangle* data. This practice is very unlike nationwide media outlets, where a significant amount of money is spent on advertised posts daily by both sides of the political aisle.

Journalists were generally thought to be central characters in the local public sphere in the past, operating as opinion leaders, gatekeepers, and middlemen between political actors and local citizens. However, these stereotypical conceptions about the role of the journalist were largely missing in our interviews. Values such as providing relevant news and information, avoiding hearsay, and preferring factuality over subjective opinion had been stressed by all of the participants regardless of their different political affiliations. Growing a readership by being trustworthy sounds like a generally good idea, but one can have some obvious doubts about the sincerity of these statements. Fake news and disinformation might not be permanent features in the everyday practice of producing local news, but we have observed conflicting reports of important local events presented in different outlets of the local media.

The majority of active posters and commentators in the Pécs Chatter group are locals (without holding a formal position in organizations) that fall into three categories: political activists, members of non-profit organizations, and concerned citizens. The first group is more likely to share national news content that has been already edited for propaganda purposes: they try to push forward some party agenda that seems to be timely. It is important to note that these posts are attracting the least interactions (shares, responses, comments), but they became more and more frequent during the time of our investigations. Even if we do not identify them as spammers, they are responsible for creating significant noise within the group messages.

Local non-profit organizations usually deal with some social issues such as sustainability, housing poverty, and environmental issues, and their presence on the platform is generally motivated by the lack of resources. For them, Facebook as a platform provides an opportunity to raise awareness, mobilization, and agenda setting. Although they can meet significant backlash when posting about sensitive issues, their activities often lead to important and "real" debates within the group. Concerned citizens' posts are mostly general observations about city life, problems of cityscape, living conditions, or the general way of treating each other – everyday stories. Despite the often naive and commonplace nature of the content posted, they are triggering many reactions.

The largest group of active users mainly repost local news in the media with a short commentary. They also participate in the discussions that take place below the posts, regardless of whether they are their own posts or those of others. However, as

we will try to show it later, these threads rarely constitute a real engagement with other group members, most often being about venting thoughts and feelings.

Last but not least, some trolls try to stir the waters from time to time. They hide their identity, and their posts and comments are politically motivated, often sarcastic, confrontational, and provocative. The posts from anonym, fake profiles are usually swiftly deleted by the moderators along with comments originating from such accounts. Regarding our case, there is a troll profile that fits most of the description, yet it had a positive impact on the community. As a matter of fact, the most frequent poster and commentator during the time of our study was an apparent troll account. Using a manipulated picture of George Soros and Mini-Me as an avatar, a Jewish-sounding name from a 1996 movie and the refusal to reveal his/her real identity were definite signs of that, and this Internet persona had been already active on other local forums before the 2019 local elections. Despite joining the Pécs Chatter group after a few months after its creation, he soon became a kind of undesignated group host very early on. After a period of being an unconditional supporter of the new leadership at the city council, he maintained an ever-critical position about former and active leaders of the local government and voiced his general scepticism about the objectivity of local media outlets. His active and dominant presence in the Pécs Chatter group had a significant effect on maintaining attention, broadening the discourse, and eliciting opinions. Regardless of being an obvious troll, he was well accepted by other members of the group. Eventually, the profile was banned from the group under unclear circumstances, a couple of months after the recall of a deputy mayor. This was the only incident when at least one moderator did not agree with the decision about "kicking someone out". It is important to note that after his leave the volume of group interaction dropped significantly.

4. Results from Content Analysis

The viral nature of political messages is a hot research topic within the context of the relationship between social media and politics. This concept refers to a new phase in the mediatization of politics, where political content is moving out of the control of traditional media. These processes do not only entail that there will be a new logic of distribution, but the expressiveness of those messages will be also a crucial factor (Bene, 2019: 105–115). In the first part of our analysis, we examined the most popular posts to find out about the most popular content.

Using *CrowdTtangle*, Facebook's analytical tool, we collected the top five "overperforming" posts of the Pécs Chatter group every month from its launch (posts between September 2019 and June 2022). *Figure 1* shows the relationship between the topics and sources of these posts.
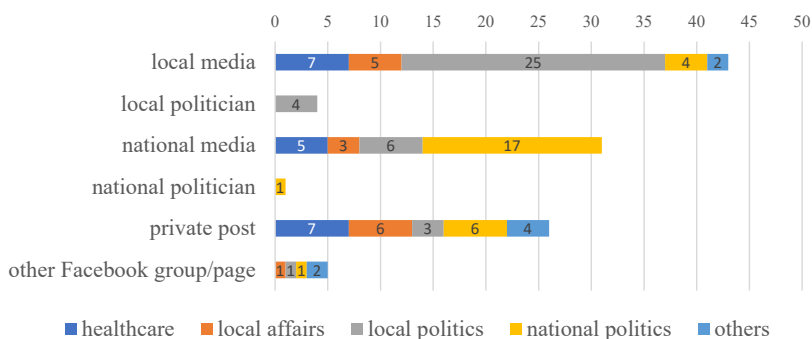
**Figure 1.** *Topics and sources of the most popular posts in the Pécs Chatter group (n = 110)*

Thematically, local (39 posts) and national (29 posts) political topics were the most frequent among the viral posts, but local affairs related to the daily lives of city dwellers (15 posts) also proved to be popular. The remaining topic is also strongly associated with health-related issues (19 posts), which is understandable given the persistence of the coronavirus epidemic throughout the whole period of our study. As you can see, the 110 most popular posts were mostly local (43) or national media news (31), but the group members' original posts were tailing right behind (26).

Looking more closely at the most popular viral content from the group, based on *CrowdTangle* data, we can see that a significant proportion of it was about the epidemic and quarantine. Group members repeatedly wrote morally charged Facebook posts about quarantine rules or mask-wearing routines. The group's most popular and shared post (969 times) was an article published by a local news portal in which a trade union leader in Pécs reported about the forced leaves of absence due to the epidemic in April 2020. Another post that was also widely shared (more than 400 times) in the same month was one in which a local political activist called for volunteers to help the elderly with their shopping during the quarantine. Popular posts on local affairs dealt with issues such as urban transport, parking, or the resurfacing of a piece of furniture from the town's famous confectionery with a historic past after decades of being missing. The most popular political posts had been also mainly of local relevance: i.e. an article commemorating the city's former left-wing mayor or a post about the planned brand new football stadium in Pécs.

The above examples prove that the viral content in the group is mainly about local political matters or issues that the residents of the city can experience in their daily lives, and at times national issues with strong local relevance. The main sources of the posts are news media outlets and the observations of the group members

themselves. They were rarely created by politicians or political organizations, and they do not include political memes or other types of entertainment content. In addition to virality as a concept, it is worth noting that the news value of local political discussion forums is related exclusively to traditional news media. Similarly, as Zizi Papacharissi has found in her research on Twitter's political content, the transformation of events into news stories mixes traditional news values with platform-specific values (Papacharissi, 2015: 42–43).
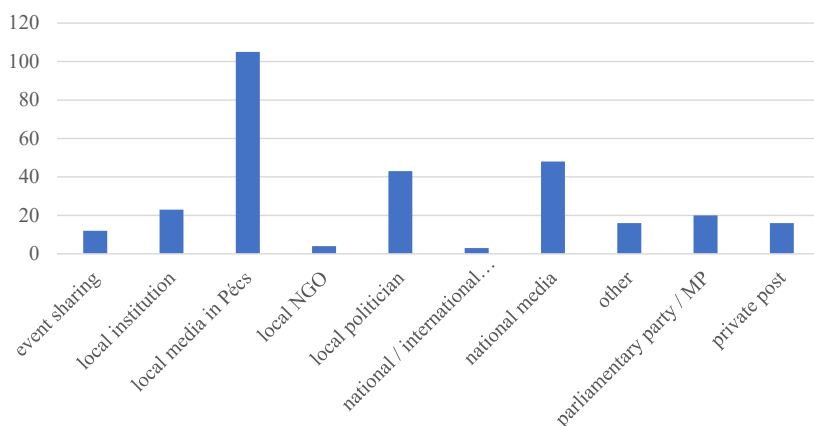
**Figure 2.** *The sources of posts during May/June 2021 in the Pécs Chatter group (n = 290)*

We have examined the communication in the Pécs Chatter group in more detail through a content analysis of posts and comments in May and June 2021. During the two months, group members posted 324 times, which were commented on 1,138 times. As shown in *Figure 2*, the sources of the posts are relatively similar to the viral content mentioned earlier. Of the 324 posts over the two months, 290 were re-posts of some other external content: most were re-posts of local (105) or national media (48) news.

■ BaHír   ■ BAMA   ■ Pécs Aktuál   ■ Pécsma   ■ Pécsi Stop   ■ Szabad Pécs
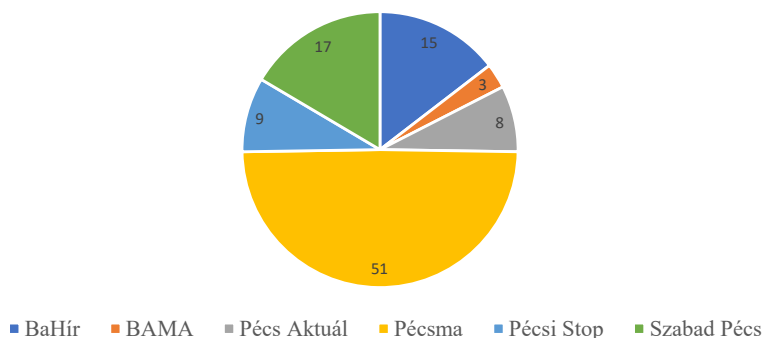
Figure 3. *Local news sites as sources – May/June 2021 (n = 103)*

In the case of local media (*Figure 3*), news from the news portal of the municipality of Pécs (*Pécsma*) were the most often shared, followed by news from independent or left-wing opposition media outlets (e.g. *Pécs Stop*, *SzabadPécs*), while news from portals linked to the government or the Fidesz Party (*Bama*, *PécsAktuál*) were shared only occasionally.

During the two months, most of the posts dealt with domestic and local politics, with a similar share of commentary on these news items (*Figure 4*). A relatively large number of posts covered cultural topics, as one of the group members regularly shared events and programmes of the city's cultural institutions – the figure shows that these were hardly commented on. We can also see that 10 percent of the posts were about everyday urban issues, which we have already mentioned in the context of viral content.
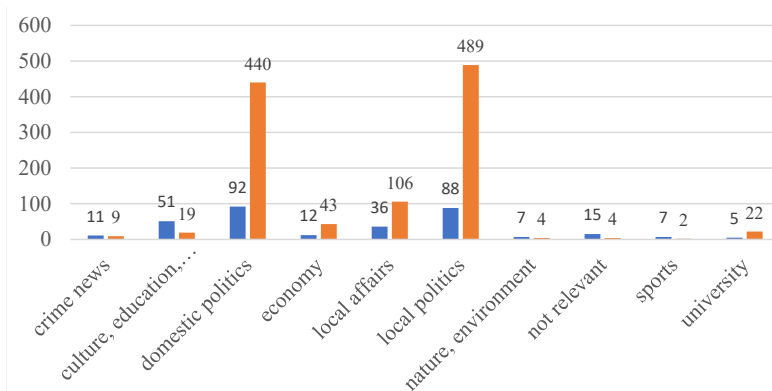
Figure 4. *Distribution of the number of topics and comments (n = 1,138) – May/ June 2021 (n = 324)*

■ Chat ■ General political affairs ■ Local public affairs ■ Political emotions
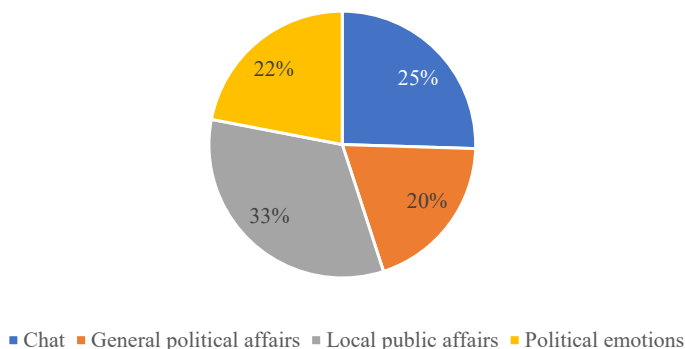
Figure 5. *Thematic distribution of comments within May/June 2021 posts (n = 1,138)*

The thematic diversity of the comments makes it relatively difficult to categorize them, but we have tried it anyway. The analysis showed (*Figure 5*) that most of the 1,138 comments dealt with urban public life, mostly with the relationship between local opposition parties, the activities of the town hall or the mayor, but also with opinions expressing everyday problems of urban life. Another group of comments dealt with more general, not necessarily local political issues: for example, the epidemic situation, identity politics, corruption, higher education, or the media. A similar amount of comments conveyed political sentiments, sometimes in the form of irony, sarcasm, clichés, stereotypes, even emoji, and sometimes in a vulgar tone. The fourth type of commentary was interpreted as neutral chatter, with the phatic function to maintain group communication.

4.1. Genres in the Pécs Chatter Group

Our previous quantitative content analysis can be complemented by identifying the genres of online communication in the Pécs Chatter group. The features of these genres are usually studied from the point of view of social pragmatics (Lomborg, 2014) or within the framework of digital anthropology (Miller, 2011). After all, it is characteristic of all arenas of online communication that different genres emerge and dynamically change based on the intentions of users, the content, and the stylistic elements they share.

The first genre we can identify is *political debate*. It is important to note that Pécs Chatter, despite the original intentions of the group's creators, has gradually become a forum mainly for voters for left-wing parties. Members of the local government, activists of the local NGOs, self-proclaimed political opinion leaders shared their posts regularly, and these posts have been actively debated by the members of the group. These disputes among the members reflected the changes in the local political scenery: the split between the local left-wing coalition leading the city, the controversies about the recall of a deputy mayor, and a growing disagreement between the mayor (Attila Péterfy) and a member of parliament (Tamás Mellár).

On the other hand, the Pécs Chatter group is also an arena for *discussing political news* that allows for a layman to connect to politics, so the second genre could be lay political discussions. During the two months we studied, ordinary users shared a lot of news content in the group and commented and debated about the members of the discussion group. Sometimes they even wrote independent posts, kind of citizen journalist articles about specific public affairs. It was a particularly interesting period in the town's public sphere because several national political issues with local relevance also surfaced at this time: the reorganization of the state university into a private foundation, the announcement of the construction of the football stadium in Pécs, the gay pride march that was also being organized in the city (first time in the country outside Budapest), or the problems of the coordination

of left-wing opposition parties in general and their preparations for the planned pre-elections. In contrast to the debates about issues of local party politics, lay political discussions were characterized by the use of less rational arguments in the comments, and the topics often provoked strong moral indignation and emotions.

The third genre of the Pécs Chatter can be called *disputes about local affairs*. There were a significant number of posts and discussions in the group that dealt with problems of the residents' everyday life. In May and June 2021, for example, members posted about wild boars destroying gardens on the outskirts of the city, the malfunctioning of the local bus schedule application, the changing traffic regulations on a street, and the slow renovation of another one. Discussions on such issues often mixed rationality with moral outrage or negative emotions about public conditions.

The fourth type of online genre appearing in the Pécs Chatter group is what we can call *classifieds*, or *announcements*. These are almost always politically irrelevant shares that elicited almost no reaction from the group members. In the group with a large amount of local cultural programme recommendations, the members tend to share other useful information of public interest such as changes in the local bus schedule or the closure of a parking lot.

5. Conclusions

It is not easy to summarize our results obtained from the field, but it is fair to say that combining general observations, interviews with participants, and the analysis of the content and the interactions on the forum helped us to draw more or less adequate conclusions about the role and the impact of political discussion groups on a social media platform. The group conversations in the Pécs Chatter group revolve around several topics; local party affairs and political issues are surely represented here, but news coming from local media outlets and, to a lesser extent, the postings about everyday urban problems gained more general attention on the part of the community. Some representatives of the opinion-forming political elite are active participants in the Facebook community, but, regardless of some minor issues, that platform has little or no effect on the actual decisions made by the city council. On the other hand, the group offers an opportunity to have meaningful conversations about politics with ordinary people living in and around Pécs, mostly for those who are sympathetic to the current leadership of the city and critical of the right-wing Hungarian government. In contrast to the rational debate on urban issues, the style of these is very often characterized by negative emotional reactions and moral criticism. This exemplifies the instrumentality and the rational and expressive duality of online communication: on the one hand, it provides an opportunity to participate in actual political struggles and debates,

but, actually, this option is limited to expressing opinions and feelings about politics (Dahlgren, 2018: 14).

This brings us to the fundamental question that underlies these dilemmas but which has so far only been a peripheral issue: is it possible to interpret local politics in a way that is independent of national political processes? Are there formal and substantive criteria that are necessary and sufficient to define it? Although a naïve understanding of local politics would suggest to us that it is determined by opinions, arguments, and considerations that are more or less independent of national party political processes, we must be fundamentally sceptical about this.

Doubts are not only caused by the increasing polarization of opinion in the current public sphere and the presence of government propaganda that seems to dominate all communication channels but also by the individualized nature of networked locality (Gordon, 2008) based on ephemeral communities and the fragmentation of the networked public sphere. An examination of online interactions alone could very easily lead us to the conclusion that in the new media environment, the manifestation of issues, positions, debates, and social experiences that originally constituted the content of (local) politics are replaced by emotional commitments to political camps and corresponding reactions. The affective publics that emerge on social media platforms (Papacharissi, 2015) and the new political communication strategies that exploit the operational logic of platforms to dominate the attention economy (Böcskei–Nagy, 2021) seem to confirm the presence of the latter dynamic.

At the same time, further analysis may also reveal that a smaller share of "local politics" takes place through social media platforms, and a significant part of it is still taking place behind the scenes through kinship systems and networks of personal relationships based on commitments.

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