

MEMING UP THE SCANDALS: INTERNET MEMES AS AMPLIFIERS OF SCANDALS

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ABSTRACT *This research investigates the amplifying role of memes in political scandals. This study, therefore, begins with the hypothesis that political scandals originating from mainstream media extend to social networks through memes. Consequently, the duration and impact of a specific scandal are extended as it circulates within these online platforms. The case study examines three Croatian news portals – Večernji.hr, Index.hr, and Slobodnadalmacija.hr – and analyzes memes published on the Megatroll Split Facebook page in June 2022. Findings indicate that despite a smaller number of memes generated within a two-day timeframe, the Megatroll Split Facebook page received more user engagement than Večernji.hr, which published sixteen articles over eight days. This research confirms the significant role of memes in political scandals and underscores the need for further exploration in this area.*

KEY WORDS

SCANDALIZATION, POLITICAL MEMES, POLITICAL SCANDALS, SOCIAL MEDIA,
POLITICAL COMMUNICATION

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INTRODUCTION

Scandals and scandalization, especially in politics, have evolved in the digital age with the influence of social media (Bennett, 2012; Essien, 2017; Haller, 2019; Herkman, 2018; Lee, 2018; Lotan et al., 2011; Shifman, 2014; Vorberg & Zeitler, 2019; Zulli, 2020a; Zulli, 2020b). While journalists previously held a prominent position in shaping political scandals and the processes of scandalization, the digitalization of society has now empowered users of social media platforms to actively participate and become integral actors in this arena. Furthermore, digital platforms in the present era provide easier avenues for expressing opinions and attitudes toward scandalous cases, with the added advantage of a wider reach (Haller, 2019). Consequently, political scandals are increasingly unfolding in a multiplatform environment, encompassing both social networks and news portals (Zulli, 2020a).

Considering the increasing significance of social networks as a crucial channel for political communication, memes have emerged as a distinct and influential means of expression. Politically oriented memes serve as a form of viral political communication, posing a substantial threat to competing candidates (Bebić & Volarević, 2018; Seiffert-Brockmann, 2021). Recognizing the importance of memes in political communication and their role as a visual medium, Dean (2019) emphasizes their significance as a subject worthy of study. This paper, therefore, starts from the hypothesis that memes are one of the ways in which political scandals are transmitted from the mainstream media to social networks. In this way, the life of a particular scandal is extended, information reaches a larger number of people, and keeps users' interest in it longer. If we take a critical look at scandals, we can notice that in the media, a scandal is relevant only for a while, until another scandal comes that fills the media space. Nevertheless, through memes, a political scandal remains interesting to the audience for a longer time and thus becomes common knowledge. This research focuses on the role of memes in political scandals, aiming to establish that memes amplify political scandals created within the media and enable the dissemination of political messages. The research question of this paper is:

IQ: In what way did memes increase the political scandal during the local election in Split?

To achieve this goal, a case study methodology will be used, focusing on the early local election in Split, Croatia in 2022. The election was marked by scandalization, which subsequently transferred into social networks and memes. Following the emergence of scandals on Croatian news portals, the Facebook page *Megatroll Split*, known for its opposition to the Croatian Democratic Union¹ (HDZ), created memes that garnered significant attention from users through comments, likes, and shares over several days. One particular focus of interest was the alleged sex scandal involving members of the political party Centar (*Center*). Centar is a Croatian parliamentary party whose ideas and activities are based on contemporary European liberalism (Hrvatska u Centru, 2023). It was originally created in 2015 in Split under the name Pametno² (Pametno, 2023), and then

¹ In Croatian: *Hrvatska demokratska zajednica*.

² In English: *Smart*.

changed its name in 2020. On the other hand, the HDZ represents Croatia's main center-right parliamentary party (Raos, 2019) and it is also the governing party at the national level. The party was founded in 1989 and formally registered in 1990 (Žižić, 2020). Since the separation from Yugoslavia, it has been one of the largest and most important parties in Croatia (Bebić & Volarević, 2018).

The *Megatroll Split* page defended the individuals involved by using memes, effectively diminishing the significance of the scandal. Additionally, the page's activities can be seen as a form of crisis communication, which ultimately lead to success. Despite the scandalous nature of the intimate communication controversy, the political party Centar emerged victorious in the Split elections. The study consists of a theoretical framework that explores political scandals and scandalization in the digital environment, as well as the role of memes as a medium for viral political communication.

POLITICAL SCANDALIZATION IN THE DIGITAL ENVIRONMENT

The concept of scandal has its roots in Ancient Greece and has evolved alongside the rise of the press. The media has played a pivotal role in shaping scandal as a mediated event, as we know it today (Thompson, 2005). Although Nyhan (2015, p. 436) explains that many scholars define the term as "the disclosure of an ethical or moral transgression", Ekström & Johansson (2008, p. 18) claim that "a scandal is not merely something that is revealed but also something that is shown, reported, staged and kept alive day after day." The phenomenon of scandal as a mediated event marks the recognition and disclosure of certain controversial activity and coverage of the subject in the mainstream media (Nyhan, 2015; Thompson, 2005). Thus, the role of the media in the continuous monitoring and presentation of scandalous events is emphasized, contributing to its significance and influence.

Haller, Michael and Kraus (2018) point out that scandals are happening in all social fields. However, the media, including scientists, pay special attention to political scandals. In point of fact, political scandals are present in countries around the world, and their persistence dates to the beginning of democracy (Essien, 2017). Lee (2017, p. 1) defines political scandal as "publicly revealed transgressions of moral, political, or legal norms by politicians or political institutions." In particular, the political scandal involves "a kind of political corruption that is exposed and becomes a scandal, in which politicians or government officials are accused of engaging in various illegal, corrupt, or unethical practices" (Essien, 2017, p. 162). They are also characterized by a certain form of explosiveness, the capture of various public spheres and forms of visibility (Vorberg & Zeitler, 2019). Also, in such situations, there is a deterioration in the reputation of politicians (Von Sikorski, 2018). Based on the literature review, it is evident that there are different characteristics of political scandals. The authors especially emphasize their prominence in democratic societies, exposure in the media, but also their influence on political reputation.

Before the technological breakthrough, it was journalists who informed citizens about the political scandal, while today digitalization allows social media users to share political controversies and, for the cases themselves, to reach a larger audience (Haller, 2019). Digital platforms have enabled users to actively participate in debates and coordinate different individualized collectives that have emerged around broader political programs, such as the Arab Spring and various uprisings in the US and Europe (Bennett, 2012; Lotan et al., 2011; Shifman, 2014). A survey conducted on a sample of Nordic countries showed that populist political scandals were often represented and visible on social media (Herkman, 2018).

Politicians in the digital environment are less able to separate their public and private lives (Essien, 2017), and party affiliation on social media is getting stronger (Zulli, 2020a). Digital platforms have enabled the emergence of a virtual realm where contentious topics that can evoke strong emotional reactions from the audience effortlessly become prominent, and later develop into scandals that receive significant media coverage (Haller, 2019). Political scandals in the digital space are gaining more attention, and by extension, their narratives in the online environment are amplified. Social media communication, therefore, tends to amplify the transfer of scandals from mainstream media (Lee, 2018).

Zulli (2020a) calls political scandals in the new digital space, according to the analogy of the Thompson scandals of 2000, 'socio-mediated scandals'. It is about the fact that socio-mediated scandals are "facilitated by mediated communication and co-constructed by mainstream media, political elite discourse, and vernacular discourse across a range of media platforms" (Zulli, 2020a, p. 4). Thus, political scandals in the new digital environment are mediated by several platforms such as social media and news portals. This kind of political scandals are viewed as central communicative events that are extremely individualized (Zulli, 2020a; Zulli, 2020b). As political scandals gain significant attention and importance in the online environment, it has become crucial to critically assess the implications of socially mediated scandals. The ability of the virtual environment to effortlessly elevate contentious topics to powerful emotional reactions has made political scandals central communication events with far-reaching consequences. Understanding these scandals in the new digital space is important for navigating the complexities of modern political discourse and media communication.

The term 'scandalization' was certainly formed by derivation from the noun 'scandal'. More specifically, scandalization is the tendency of journalists to convince the public that there is a certain scandal aimed at provoking outrage among the audience (Geiß, 2017; Graßl et al., 2021). According to Graßl et al. (2021, p. 2567), scandalization "does not entail the reporting of a scandal per se, but an attempt to report events in such a way that a scandal is created." Although scandalization can be justified in situations where serious wrongdoing occurs, in this case the main goal for journalists is certainly not to inform the public, but to convince them that there is a scandalous action (Graßl et al., 2021). The media, therefore, in this way can increase their profit and present their power in the placement of information (Demirhan, 2018).

A survey conducted by Graßl et al. (2021) showed that topics related to mild transgressions presented through scandalization caused a lower perception of severity in the audience compared to neutrally presented news. In addition, there has been a significant increase in the frequency of the use of scandalization in political news. Journalists exaggerate the importance of minor mistakes related to political actors and convince the public of the existence of a political scandal (Graßl et al., 2021). Such a pattern was confirmed by research in Germany – the media reported on numerous provocations by the right-wing populist party AfD and used scandalization strongly. Furthermore, the amplified media visibility associated with such scandals has the potential to significantly enhance public familiarity with the implicated political party, as demonstrated by the study conducted by Maurer et al. (2022). Ultimately, the rise of technological advancements has contributed to the escalating prevalence of scandalization, as it encompasses not only the traditional mass media audience but also holds a central position within the realm of digital media users (Vorberg & Zeitler, 2019). Based on these examples, it can be concluded that the prevalence of scandals in the media can potentially lead to the distortion of public perception and the strategic use of sensationalism for media visibility and political influence.

MEMES AS A WEAPON OF POLITICAL COMMUNICATION

The digital landscape has facilitated the rapid transmission of information and increased user engagement. The emergence and widespread adoption of social networking platforms have provided new avenues for political discussions to proliferate. Consequently, political scandals have transcended traditional boundaries and transferred into social media effortlessly reaching end users. A form that is particularly popular with viral political communication are memes (Bebić & Volarević, 2018). The term 'meme' was first introduced by Dawkins in 1976 (Dawkins, 2006). Since then, there have been different definitions and interpretations of memes, which will be described below. Thus, Shifman (2013, p. 41) defines internet memes as "(a) a group of digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form, and/or stance, which (b) were created with awareness of each other, and (c) were circulated, imitated, and/or transformed via the Internet by many users".

Vorberg and Zeitler (2019, pp. 422-423) believe that "memes or tweets that are used to comment on a scandal on Twitter, for instance, may be reintegrated in classic TV news as they can serve as templates for unexpected narrative twists." Although most internet memes rest on a fun feature, some memes "can be turned social media weapons, posing a serious threat to the reputation of an individual, an organization, or an entire social group" (Seiffert-Brockmann, 2021, p. 402). So, memes are formulated as capital: "memes as subcultural knowledge, as unstable equilibriums, and as discursive weapons" (Nissenbaum & Shifman, 2017, p. 484). Thus, memes have a multiple role in contemporary media. Indeed, they are not always just humorous images, but can serve as influential tools that bridge the gap between online and traditional media, while also

carrying the potential to influence reputation and act as cultural and discursive agents in the digital landscape.

Internet memes represent a kind of contemporary, cultural, and digital phenomenon, and they are connected by language, society, and digital communication (Nissenbaum & Shifman, 2017; Ross & Rivers, 2017). These are digital texts that can be visual, verbal, or audible and are subject to repetition (Gal, 2018). Thanks to their form and way of transmitting internet memes, they enable a new way of political expression, persuasion, communication, and participation (Ross & Rivers, 2017) and are now used by numerous political actors (Beskow et al., 2020). Moreover, memes, as a form of digital visual communication, play a key role in creating a political community (Dean, 2019).

Internet politically oriented memes are used for the purpose of persuasion or political advocacy, mass action, and modes of expression and public debate (Shifman, 2013). According to previous research, internet memes used for political purposes have proven to be a useful form of political participation (e.g., Ross & Rivers, 2017). Paz et al. (2021, p. 12) in turn point out that internet memes “reflect the current political situation and the society they refer to.” In the case of a survey conducted in Spain, internet memes were found to have a lot of similarities in criticism, polarization, and icons as far as representatives of right and left political options were concerned (Paz et al., 2021).

Chagas et al. (2019) classified political memes as persuasive memes, grassroots action memes and public discussion memes. Furthermore, their research conducted in Brazil showed that the most used are public discussion memes. Bebić and Volarević (2018) conclude that the media reported more affirmatively about Ivo Sanader³, a politician and former Croatian Prime Minister thanks to internet memes and the satirical Facebook page titled “Ćaća se vraća”. Social media certainly provide fertile ground for political meme wars. Regardless of ideological differences, political trolls use various memes with the aim of dominating online discourses (Al-Rawi, 2021). Using British politics as an example, Dean (2019) concludes that the importance of memefication should by no means be underestimated. Moreover, it is a complex area that scientists need to study (Dean, 2019).

Memes have a visible advantage over ordinary or journalistic texts because they are much shorter and combine references using recognizable visual communication. During the 2016 US Presidential Election, continuous internet memes influenced public perception of Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump (Seiffert-Brockmann, 2019). Seiffert-Brockmann (2019, p. 419) compares their influence with mosquitoes that attack an elephant saying that “one tiny mosquito poses no threat to the giant elephant, but many of them will seriously harm it “. Previous research shows the importance of the role of memes in creating the perception of politicians. Memes represent a kind of commentary on news, additional content that, using irony and cynicism, aims to increase the reaction of target audiences, which is reflected in the number of likes, comments, and shares on social media.

³ Ivo Sanader plays an important role in Croatian politics and is one of the most popular Croatian politicians. He was elected prime minister twice, the first time in 2003, and then in 2007. In 2010, Sanader was arrested for corruption and abuse of power. When it was announced in 2015 that the Croatian Supreme Court rejected the lawsuit against him, this satirical Facebook page was launched (Bebić & Volarević, 2018). Currently, Sanader is in prison on the basis of three final verdicts to which he was sentenced for three different cases (Dešković, 2023).

POLITICAL SCANDALIZATION IN THE CONTEXT OF EARLY LOCAL ELECTIONS IN SPLIT

The local election held in 2021 in Split, the second largest city of Croatia and the largest city of Dalmatia, resulted in the victory of the party Centar against the then governing HDZ. The party Centar's mayoral candidate Ivica Puljak beat Vice Mihanović, the HDZ candidate, in the second round of the election. During the campaign, both political options were involved in scandals. For example, in the media appeared a recording featuring Puljak singing Ustasha songs⁴, and Mihanović's doctoral dissertation was under public eye for plagiarism. In addition to the fact that the media regularly reported on the current situation on the Split political scene, on the social network Facebook, continuous activity was recorded by the satiric page *Megatroll Split*.

In March 2022, Puljak, along with his deputy Bojan Ivošević, made the decision to step down from office, leading to an early local election in Split. Their resignation was marred by a series of scandals, including allegations of mistreatment of a cleaning lady, questionable employment practices in city companies, and Ivošević's aggressive remarks. Particularly concerning was Ivošević's threatening phone call to the editor of the city section of the *Slobodna Dalmacija* newspaper, where he expressed dissatisfaction with a published article by telling her "that he would drink her blood" (Maretić Žonja & Filipović, 2022). Following the resignation, Puljak once again ran for mayor in the early local election, again with Ivošević, yet their primary opponent was Zoran Đogaš, an independent candidate affiliated with the HDZ party.

The early local election was also marked by scandals reported by domestic media. Furthermore, the *Megatroll Split* Facebook page regularly communicated memes against the HDZ's candidates and the party in general. Although Puljak won again in July 2022, only a few days before the first round of the election, his party found itself in the focus of the alleged sex scandal. Studies suggest that political sex scandals in some democracies are largely absent and are rarely reported by the media, while in other democracies their media presence has been recorded (Cervi, 2019; Downey & Stanyer, 2013).

On June 12, 2022, the news portal *Večernji.hr* released a series of correspondences between two candidates affiliated with the party Centar who were participating in the early local election. Specifically, the correspondence involved the former Deputy Mayor Ivošević and former City Councilor Luka Baričić, and two girls from Serbia, one of whom claimed to be a minor (Filipović, 2022a). The published correspondence included text and audio messages of a sexual nature. The media highlighted the correspondence with the seventeen-year-old girl as an act of misconduct, while *Večernji.hr* pointed out that the conversation "unequivocally shows that the member of the Centar party's Presidency, Luka Baričić, arranged sexual relations with the girl by offering her help in finding a job in Split in return" (Filipović, 2022a). However, the news portal *Index.hr* (2022) later published a correspondence where Baričić denied such claims and emphasized that the party Centar

⁴ Ustasha songs are songs associated with the Ustasha regime, which was an ultranationalist and fascist political movement in Croatia during World War II (Tomasevich, 2002).

does not engage in hiring practices based on personal relationships. The party Centar dismissed the scandal as non-existent, arguing that there was no physical contact and suggesting that the entire situation was orchestrated by their political rivals.

METHODOLOGY

For the purpose of research and obtaining answers to the research question, the method of qualitative content analysis was employed. Goran Milas (2005), in the book *Research Methods in Psychology and Other Social Sciences* (2005), emphasizes the importance of content analysis as a non-intrusive method for studying human behavior. According to Milas (2005), content analysis is a research technique that quantitatively describes the content of a specific aspect of communication in an objective and systematic manner. This method is characterized by objectivity, systematicity, generality, and a quantitative nature.

The generality of the analysis refers to the theoretical significance of the results, which should go beyond mere content description. Milas (2005) notes that the application of this method is diverse, but its use has three main objectives: describing the characteristics of communication, drawing conclusions about events preceding communication, and drawing conclusions about the effects of communication. Content analysis enables precise descriptions of communication trends and allows for comparisons of reporting on the same cases in different media or parts of the world.

As mentioned, the research used the method of qualitative content analysis on the specific case and included content on two different platforms – social media and news portals. As stated by Creswell et al. (2007), a case study is a qualitative approach in which a researcher studies a specific case or multiple cases, using detailed and in-depth data collection from multiple sources of information, and reports on a case and the related topic. The case study approach is known in social sciences, including political science. The qualitative scientific research method is used for a deeper understanding of phenomena, processes, and experiences. This method focuses on describing, analyzing, and interpreting qualitative data to obtain a deeper meaning of the area studied. By analyzing and describing these contents, patterns, topics, trends, or details that may be relevant to research can be revealed (Creswell et al., 2007).

The analysis included media articles published on three Croatian news portals - *Večernji.hr*, *Index.hr*, and *Slobodnadalmacija.hr*. For the purposes of this research, *Večernji.hr* was chosen because it was the first to publish an article on the topic of sex scandals. Furthermore, *Index.hr* was chosen because it is the most widely read news portal in Croatia according to the *Reuters Institute News Report 2023* (Newman et al., 2023). Both news portals cover topics from the national area. Finally, *Slobodnadalmacija.hr* was used in this paper because of its geographical component – it is a news portal located in Split, which primarily focuses on topics of local importance from the area of Dalmatia and Split

but also covers important topics of national importance. Additionally, it is the most widely read regional news portal (Newman et al., 2023).

Articles were searched using integrated search tools within the given news portal, searching for keywords: 'sex scandal Ivošević', 'sex scandal Split Center', 'sex scandal Puljak', 'sex scandal Baričić'. The search on *Večernji.hr* identified sixteen media articles directly related to the disputed scandal, *Index.hr* reported on the scandal in a total of ten media articles, while *Slobodnadalmacija.hr* published a total of seven media articles about the scandal.

When it comes to analyzing content published on social media, the analyzed content was taken from the Facebook page – *Megatroll Split*. This page, that was launched on January 20, 2017, uses humor, irony, cynicism, and sarcasm primarily to comment on political situations in Croatia. The page's description states: "Croatia is a country full of political clowns, and we will represent them one by one from each political option. Regardless of whether it is left or right or which way the wind blows" (Megatroll Split, n.d.).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Večernji.hr published information about the involvement of two close associates of the candidate for mayor of Split of the party Centar, and the first news about the scandal on this news portal came out on June 12, 2022. On the same day, three more media articles on the same topic followed. The next day, the news portal published six more media articles on the same topic, and the reactions in the form of readers' comments on the portal itself caused an article: "Puljak: 'This is a mafia showdown.' Baričić: 'I am withdrawing from politics.' Ivošević: 'I know who set us up'" that conveyed information from the press conference that the party leadership had convened to present their position on the scandal (Večernji.hr, 2023). The next day, June 14, *Večernji.hr* announced: "Ivošević is lying! We have a picture and messages he sent to Milica even after she revealed her age, asking her to come" (Filipović, 2022b). On the same day, another article was published. *Večernji.hr* tried to keep the topic relevant in the media space, so the last article on the subject was published on June 20. In the first days of the scandal, *Večernji.hr* reported on statements by the actors involved, comments by opponents, but also comments by representatives of organizations that were directly or indirectly involved in the scandal. Most of the media articles published by *Večernji.hr*, except for the article that presents the content in question to readers, ignore the two main actors of the scandal – Baričić and Ivošević, but focus on the guilt of Puljak as a representative of the party Centar and a candidate for mayor in the local election in Split, for example: "Analysts: The fact that Puljak puts blame on the media is a sign of panic and a political own goal" (Matijević & Boban Valečić, 2022).

To keep the topic relevant in the media environment, in the following days, *Večernji.hr* compared this scandal with other similar scandals whose actors were members of other political options in Croatia in previous years. After the article of June 20, *Večernji.hr*

hr stopped publishing media articles on this topic. When these articles are analyzed, it is evident that *Večernji.hr* sought to reinforce readers' interest in the topic itself by means of sensationalist headlines and through the effects on the photographs accompanying the articles. It is important to note that in one of his statements, Puljak blamed *Večernji.hr* for being part of a group that was deliberately trying to sabotage his own and his party's success in the local election and accused them of being the tool of the "thieves" and "mobsters" behind the scandal. Furthermore, he added that "the real culprits should be sought in that media outlet and the criminal underworld of the city of Split", thus claiming that the scandal was instructed by the party's political opponents (Matijević, 2022).

The analysis also includes articles published on the *Index.hr* news portal, which is recognized in the Croatian media space as a medium that strives for a sensationalist style of writing and choosing topics of a sensationalist character, with provocative and clickbait headlines (Jaić, 2022). Articles covering the sex scandal involving the closest associates of the mayoral candidate – Puljak, span from June 12, when the news was initially reported by *Večernji.hr* to June 20. On this latter date, a media article not only presents the latest results of a pre-election poll and the candidates' ratings for the local election in Split but also reflects on the sex scandal and its potential impact on the survey results and Puljak's rating.

In this case, it is noticeable that *Index.hr*, when selecting elements for the article such as headlines and photos, adopted a more restrained approach compared to *Večernji.hr*. More precisely, the equipment used for articles related to the analyzed sex scandal was less sensationalistic on *Index.hr*, whereas *Večernji.hr* tended to use more clickbait-style headlines.

The last news portal that is included in the analysis is *Slobodnadalmacija.hr* that published only seven media articles about the sex scandal involving Baričević and Ivošević, on June 13 and 14, in which they presented exclusively the statements by the actors of the scandal itself and the candidate for mayor – Puljak.

The second part of the research includes an analysis of memes published on the *Megatroll Split* Facebook page on the topic of sex scandals in the political campaign for mayor in the local election in Split. In the period from, June 14 to 18 on the Facebook page *Megatroll Split*, a total of seven memes related to the sex scandal in the political campaign were published.

The first meme, that was published on June 14, banalizes the scandal in a way that on the left it says: "He seduces some girls from Serbia on Tinder", and the right side refers to a member of the Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ), who is accused of being behind the whole affair, and states: "He cheats on his wife, gets a child with a mistress and wins the election".

Another meme again accuses the Croatian Democratic Union of the scandal by portraying a crying boy who is disappointed when he realizes that behind the fake profile

of the Serbian girl is a fifty-year-old mustachioed member of the Croatian Democratic Union.

The third meme contains a text written in Serbian, and Vice Mihanović, the candidate of the Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) in the 2021 local election for mayor of Split, is disguised as a woman. "You seem uninterested, I can't win the election like that" – the text again accuses HDZ of creating a fake profile and rigging sex scandals on members of another political option. The fourth published meme again accuses Vice Mihanović, the HDZ candidate in the 2021 local election, of being behind the fake profile of the girls with whom Ivošević and Beričević had conversations using Tinder.

The fifth published meme shows a profile of a female person on Tinder, and below that it says: "But what if this is Vice?" again hinting that the Croatian Democratic Union is behind the sex scandal. The sixth published meme shows a fake profile of the girl on Tinder, again depicting the character of Vice Mihanović. The last, seventh meme presents tips for dating on the Internet, noting that if a girl knows how to speak English, then she cannot be Vice Mihanović.

Through the analysis of the presented content, it was determined that although the analyzed articles on news portals and memes on social media address the same topic, they have entirely different narratives. The media present this case as inappropriate behavior by members of a political option, calling into question the moral principles of these individuals. Meanwhile, memes portray the same case as a setup by the opposing political option, emphasizing their immorality.

The analysis found that the Facebook page *Megatroll Split*, through the creation and posting of memes, prolonged the lifespan of this topic in the public sphere. The scandal itself transitioned from traditional media to an entirely different environment – social media. The published memes not only intensified the scandal itself, thus extending its duration, but also presented an alternative perspective on the scandal, giving it an entirely new meaning. Although the scandal had a longer presence in the public space through the posting of memes on social media, thus reaching a larger audience, simultaneously, by introducing a completely opposite narrative compared to that on news portals, the memes defended the individuals involved in the scandal, redirecting public attention to the political opponents of the party Centar.

Considering the results of the *Reuters Digital News Report* (Newman et al., 2023), which, over the years, has been consistently showing a growing trend of information consumption through social media rather than through traditional news outlets, we can conclude that the social media presence of *Megatroll Split* in Split enabled a much quicker and more effective dissemination of the message of the party Centar, unlike the media articles from the analyzed news portals. Although the article shows a specific example of the use of memes at the local level, this is certainly a typical example of the role of memes in scandals. Actually, memes are increasingly used as weapons in the context of political communication.

Communication through social media, as demonstrated by Lee (2018), often tends to amplify the impact of scandals, and this case study has confirmed it. Specifically, it was found that memes did indeed amplify the scandal, shifting it from news portals to social networks and giving it an entirely new narrative. This research once again confirmed that memes are an essential tool in political communication (Al-Rawi, 2021; Bebić & Volarević, 2018; Beskow et al., 2020; Dean, 2019; Paz et al., 2021; Ross & Rivers, 2017).

CONCLUSION

The aim of this research was to prove that memes are an amplifier of political scandals created in the media and that thanks to social media they have a greater reach. More precisely, political scandals in the media are shorter-lived, and when they are in the form of memes, they are shared more on social media, thus becoming a kind of common knowledge. The case study focused on three Croatian news portals – *Večernji.hr*, *Index.hr*, and *Slobodnadalmacija.hr* – as well as the memes about the scandal published on the *Megatroll Split* Facebook page during the period from June 12 to 20, 2022. More precisely, content about sex scandal was published on news portals in the period from June 12 to 20, and on the *Megatroll Split* Facebook page from June 14 to 18.

The published memes served to reinforce the scandal itself, transferring it to social media and simultaneously presenting a new narrative. Specifically, they introduced a secondary perspective on the scandal as orchestrated by political opponents, imbuing it with fresh significance. The social networks of *Megatroll Split* facilitated a much faster and more effective dissemination of the messaging aligned with the Centar party option than the media articles featured on the selected news portals.

This research once again confirms the role of social media in amplifying political scandals. Specifically, this study has demonstrated a significant role of memes in political scandals, and it is assumed that future research will further validate this finding. As emphasized by Dean (2019), the role of political memes is highly significant, and it is upon scientists to fully explore the breadth of this phenomenon.

In future research, it would be important to deal with the audience's attitudes about memes, how the audience reacts to memes related to political scandals, the habits of informing through memes and sharing such content. Also, it would be important to develop a metric or a methodology that could give concrete results and answers to the question – how social media, more specifically memes, reinforce or emphasize certain phenomena that spill over from the mainstream media.

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MEMEIFIKACIJA SKANDALA: INTERNETSKI MEMEOVI KAO POJAČIVAČI SKANDALA

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SAŽETAK Ovim istraživanjem želi se dokazati da memeovi pojačavaju političke skandale nastale u medijima. Točnije, ovo istraživanje polazi od hipoteze da politički skandali koji potječu iz medija prelaze na društvene mreže putem memeova. Zahvaljujući društvenim mrežama i memeovima, političkim skandalima produžuje se vijek trajanja. Za potrebe ovog rada provedena je studija slučaja koja ispituje tri hrvatska portala – Večernji.hr, Index.hr i Slobodnadalmacija.hr – te analizira memeove objavljene na Facebook stranici Megatroll Split u lipnju 2022. Rezultati ukazuju da je unatoč manjem broju memeova generiranih u dvodnevnom razdoblju stranica Megatroll Split na Facebooku dobila više angažmana korisnika nego Večernji.hr, koji je objavio šesnaest članaka u osam dana. Ovo istraživanje potvrđuje značajnu ulogu memeova u političkim skandalima i ističe potrebu za daljnjim istraživanjem u tom području.

KLJUČNE RIJEČI

SKANDALIZACIJA, POLITIČKI MEMEOVI, POLITIČKI SKANDALI, DRUŠTVENI MEDIJI, POLITIČKA KOMUNIKACIJA

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