

“Untouched by your Do-gooder Propaganda”: How Online User Comments Challenge the Journalistic Framing of the Immigration Crisis

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Abstract: The role of the media in polarizing the debate on immigration has been subject to a growing amount of research; yet little is known about whether and how online comment sections related to news articles on immigration reshape the journalistic narrative. This study examines readers' reactions to the media coverage by employing a quantitative content analysis of over 6,000 users' comments responding to 128 online news articles on immigration. It concludes that generally the discussants' perspective does not differ significantly from the medium's framing of the issue with one important exception: the human rights frame accentuated by the medium is strictly refused by the discussants. The discussants also bring the economic and cultural aspects of immigration into the debate. The article thus contributes to a more general understanding of the role the users' discussions play in shaping the debates on controversial political issues.

Keywords: online news comments sections; online public sphere; immigration crisis; media framing; political polarization.

INTRODUCTION

Even years after its peak, the refugee wave from predominantly Muslim countries to Europe is a strong issue attracting the attention of many institutional as well as individual actors in European societies and serves as a polarizing topic used not just by populist political actors to gain votes (Deacon & Smith, 2017). Although unprecedented in scope, research shows that the media coverage

of the refugee crisis does not differ dramatically from established representations of immigrants and framings of immigration (Greussing & Boomgaarden, 2017; Urbániková & Tkaczyk, 2020).

Nevertheless, regardless of the rather stable journalistic routines related to the coverage of immigration issues, the rise of online media in recent decades poses questions about whether and how the public debate on the issue has been altered, given that virtually anyone can publicly comment on it. Did the discourse become more varied, less dependent on media routines and perspectives as the online news' public comments sections became a standard of current media communication?

Inspired by studies that stress the importance of the Web 2.0 spaces in the political communication of citizens (Kreis, 2017) and the prominence of the immigration topic in these discussions (Wright, Graham, & Jackson, 2017), we aim to describe how online discussions reflect or reshape the media coverage of the European immigration crisis. We believe that such an approach can contribute to a more general understanding of the role that readers' online participation plays in political communication.

In our study, we focus on whether and how the representations of the immigration crisis constructed by one of the most popular Czech online news outlets, iDnes.cz (www.idnes.cz), relate to readers' representations of the respective issue published in the medium's public comments section. We are specifically interested in how the medium and its audience agree or disagree on accentuating the aspects of the events, and the selection of actors and valence towards the issue.

The case of the Czech Republic serves us as an example of a national context in which xenophobia is a prominent feature of public opinion and discussion. The country displays one of the most anti-immigrant attitudes in the EU (Eurobarometer, 2018), immigration represents a significant topic on the media agenda (Urbániková & Tkaczyk, 2020) and hateful stances towards immigrants are common among the Czech public (Zavoral, 2015). The country was among the most critical members of the EU concerning the migrant quota and other issues related to immigration and the topic strongly polarized the Czech public, although the country was not significantly affected by immigration (Prokop, 2019). Above all, the importance of immigration as a public topic continuously increased between 2015 and 2017 and remained on the top of the public agenda until recently, while the prominence of the issue decreased in many other European countries (Prokop, 2019, pp. 104–108).

THE EUROPEAN IMMIGRATION CRISIS AND ITS MEDIA FRAMING

Public discussion related to the refugee crisis in Europe has been affected by either or both strongly anti-immigration and anti-Islamic sentiments in many European countries (Fekete, 2017; Kreis, 2017), with the Czech Republic being a typical example of such trends (Zavoral, 2015). Images of refugees as a threat started to dominate the discourse following the traditional "securitization" of the immigration issue (Greussing & Boomgaarden, 2017; Huysmans, 2000; Korkut, 2014; Urbániková & Tkaczyk, 2020). Korkut (2014) connects negative attitudes toward immigrants with prevailing conservative socio-political leanings in European societies in which "the issue of immigration remains very central to understanding notions such as national identity" (p. 620). The public rejection of any "foreignness" influences, according to Korkut, the attitudes to immigration even in national contexts where immigrants do not settle in large numbers (p. 621). Recent studies on the media framing of the European immigration crisis reveal "stereotyped interpretations of refugee and asylum issues" – as in the past, the immigrants are represented mainly as a threat and destabilizing force and/or economic burden in the media (Greussing & Boomgaarden, 2017, p. 1749), following the trends documented since the 1980s (Huysmans, 2000). Significantly less attention is paid to the refugees' situation from a humanitarian perspective (Greussing & Boomgaarden, 2017). In the context of the Czech Republic, Urbániková and Tkaczyk (2020) documented how mainstream dailies represented immigrants mainly "as a burden on host society, as victims of a humanitarian crisis and, to a lesser degree, as a security threat" (p. 1).

Some authors suggest that immigration not only arouses strong anti-immigrant and anti-Islamic sentiments but is also related to "current trends in Europe where nationalist-conservative and xenophobic right-wing groups gain power and establish a socially accepted discourse of racism", defining themselves in strict opposition to domestic actors perceived as liberal (Kreis, 2017, p. 1). According to Bhatia and Jenks (2018), who analyzed the US media representations of Syrian refugees, it is possible to identify a humanitarian perspective ("victimized refugees escaping from their tragic pasts") related to the immigration discourse promoted by the liberal media on the one hand and a perspective pushed by the conservative media which "portrays refugees as a threat to national security" on the other (p. 223). Kreis (2017) reveals the "growing sentiments against immigration and refugee policies and practices in some parts of European societies," which she connects to the rise of "nationalism and right-wing populism in Europe" (p. 14).

Scholars show how explosive topics such as the immigration crisis influence national political debates by turning the issue of an "external" enemy into a national political issue, mainly by the populist political actors (Reinemann et al., 2019). According to Fekete (2017), post-communist nationalist leaders

in Central and Eastern European countries use the refugee crisis (among other topics) to take the attention away from their failures, corruption and “perversion of power”. Fekete specifically names Germany and Merkel, the visible representatives of the EU, as targets of criticism by nationalist populists. In the context of the Czech Republic, Prokop (2019) connects the growing societal intolerance towards the immigrants with “the political crusade against anything foreign and ‘abnormal’” (p. 94).

THE ROLE OF COMMENT SECTIONS IN ONLINE NEWS CONSUMPTION

The role and potential contribution of users’ comments related to news coverage are often dismissed by critics for not representing public opinion. Research also points out the uncivil and polemic character of user discussions (Coe, Kenski, & Rains, 2014) and Ziegele, Quiring, Esau and Friess (2018) presume that “the pessimistic perspective of user comments seems to have gained the upper hand” (p. 2). Nevertheless, a growing number of scholars consider the discussions a crucial part of the online public sphere and as new modes of participation and stress positive impacts of the online users’ discussions on readers (Thorson, Vraga, & Ekdale, 2010). According to Rowe (2015), comments sections included in news websites may challenge the “traditional unidirectional flow of messages” and lead to citizens’ greater control over news content (pp. 539–540). Similarly, Nagar (2011) considers user comments on mainstream news sites a forum for the exchange of ideas and expression of public opinion, and according to Gonçalves (2018), online news comment sections represent some of the “most promising forums for discussion” (p. 604).

Scholars often also conclude that comments help the readers understand the issue better and look at it from new perspectives (Gonçalves, 2018, p. 605; Jahng, 2018). Some believe that online comments can change the readers’ perception of the original content (Thorson et al., 2010) or even result in readers questioning their previous views on the topic (Jahng, 2018, p. 145). Ziegele et al. (2018) conclude that comments serve readers to form their opinions, attitudes, and judgements about news issues (p. 2). On the other hand, Kreis (2017) thinks that social media and discussion spaces “may be used to disseminate racial and xenophobic opinions, resulting in ‘anti-social media’” (p. 14). Buonfino (2004) similarly explains that public opinion and mass media mutually collaborate at the national level in developing of anti-immigration discourses.

As concerns our research topic directly, there are not many studies on the relationship between the media framing of the events and their representation by the online discussants. Coleman, Thorson and Wilkins (2011) found that readers did not follow the framing of health stories offered by the media and insisted

on their own perspectives on the issue in the comments. On the other hand, Ziegele et al. (2018) point out the importance of the media agenda as commenters usually develop their discussions around journalistic frames. Nevertheless, the dissonance between the journalistic and users' frames may be higher in cases where the users consider the media coverage of the issue biased or unbalanced. In this case, they are urged to publish disapproving or corrective comments (Ziegele et al., 2018, p. 11). Koltsova and Nagornyy (2019) perceive news readers discussing the issues online as rather independent of the medium's perspectives and framing. According to them, readers contribute significantly to a shift in the debate as they "make their own conclusions and generalizations bringing their background knowledge into the discussion" (p. 153).

METHODOLOGY

In our present research, we aimed at exploring whether and how public debate on the issue of immigration represented by the user comments to online news articles differs from the media coverage of the immigration issue. Although various aspects of online media comments sections have been widely studied (Rowe, 2015; Nagar, 2011; Gonçalves, 2018), the relationship between the article agenda and the content of subsequent comments has so far been rather neglected in academic research (Coleman et al., 2011). Given the lack of previous knowledge on the issue, we refrained from attempting to formulate clear hypotheses. Instead, we focused on the readers' construction of themes related to immigration in the online news comment section and looked for patterns connecting the user generated content with the medium's framing of the issue. The following main research question guided our research:

- RQ1: What is the relationship between the media representations of immigration and those introduced by the discussants?

We were further guided by the following questions considering more specific aspects of the above outlined relationship:

- RQ2: What patterns can be observed concerning the accentuation of specific aspects of the topic by the medium and the subsequent discussants' reactions?
- RQ3: How are the media's mentions of actors related to actors mentioned in comments and the valence of the comments towards both the actors and immigration as such?

We have chosen the highly polarizing topic of the European immigration crisis, as immigration is one of the issues with the potential to provoke the most extensive

discussions (Ernst, Esser, Blassnig, & Engesser, 2018). We focused on the second-most-read online news server in the Czech Republic, iDnes.cz, with 1.4 million unique users per day (www.netmonitor.cz); accessed February 5, 2021. Based on the profile of its readers, the online daily can be described as center-right and belongs to the Mafra publishing house associated with the former Czech prime minister Babiš (Urbániková & Tkaczyk, 2020). Both facts may have influenced the content of both the articles and the readers' comments, as right-wing political leaning may be related to anti-immigration stances (Bhatia & Jenks, 2018; Kreis, 2017). It would thus be useful to compare the content of iDnes.cz with a center-left online daily, but, unfortunately, comment sections related to such a daily and the most read online news server (Novinky.cz with 2.25 million unique users per day) are not available in the archive. Our analysis thus represents a specific case study focusing on one of the most popular non-tabloid online dailies in the Czech Republic.

As we were interested in the relation between specific article features and the content of the comments, we have conducted a quantitative content analysis of articles related to the issue of immigration and their follow-up comments.

SAMPLE

In the first step, we searched for all articles that could relate to the issue using predefined tags (“the influx of refugees to Europe”, “immigration”) and keywords (“immigration”, “refugee”, “Islam”, “Muslim”) in the titles of the articles.¹ We processed them manually and finally identified 960 articles related directly to the European migration crisis and published on www.idnes.cz in 2016–2017. Our selection of the years was motivated by our effort to focus on a relatively recent period and on the two years during which the media focus on immigration decreased, while also considering the importance of the topic in the public agenda. Prokop (2019) stresses that in the Czech Republic, the importance of the topic continuously increased between 2015 and its peak in 2017 and remains at the top of the public agenda, unlike in other European countries (pp. 104–108). We also archived all comments related to the articles. Given that we were interested in how the agenda of articles reflects in the content of the comments, we only selected first-level comments for our analysis in which the user interacts with the original article. According to Ksiazek, Peer and Lessard (2016, p. 502), this user-content interactivity is more information-oriented, unlike user-user interactivity, which is rather driven by the need for social interaction. Additionally, because randomly selected comments from different phases of the discussion threads often lack necessary context, these user-user

¹ Automated download from iDnes.cz was performed by the Scrapy library in the Python programming language.

comments were not always enough comprehensible in terms of coding. Using a two-stage random selection, we finally obtained a sample of 6033 comments related to 128 articles. We aimed to code 50 randomly selected comments for each of the 100 randomly selected articles to code approximately 10% of the articles in the dataset and achieve a sufficient sample of comments. Since not all articles generated the required number of first-level comments, we have slightly increased the number of articles included in the analysis. On average, the articles generated 181 first-level comments (SD=160), our final sample represented 3.5% of all first-level comments.

VARIABLES

We first looked at how the medium frames immigration, both in the text and through the visual material accompanying the article. We manually coded the sample of articles for traditional framing related to immigration issues, i.e., *security frame*, *economization of the problem*, *cultural differences including gender relations*, *political-administrative frame* or *human rights dimension* (Greussing & Boomgaarden, 2017; Urbániková & Tkaczyk, 2020). The main motive (differing representations of immigrants, the EU and its symbols, politicians, police and army, barriers etc.) of the opening photo related to the article was also coded and assigned to one of the frames mentioned above. The securitization frame included photos of refugees – men, barriers and the police or army. If there were women, children or other vulnerable people in the photos, they were coded as including the human rights frame. The political-administrative frame was included if a politician or, for example, the EU symbol appeared in the photo. We searched for the same set of frames in the user comments but allowed the coders to identify more than one of the listed frames in the user comments, whereas only one frame had to be selected for the analyzed articles. This decision was made because discussants typically combined several frames when formulating their arguments, whereas trained journalists usually select the frames much more specifically.

Based on a preliminary analysis of 50 articles and 300 comments, we identified the most frequently mentioned actors in the migration debate on iDnes.cz and coded articles and comments for the *presence of predefined actors in their content* (selected Czech, foreign, and EU politicians, NGOs, or countries most affected by the migration crisis). We were also interested in the *presence of pro-immigration and anti-immigration actors* and whether the article gives voice to the *immigrants* by quoting or paraphrasing them. To better understand the construction of specific actors of the immigration discourse in the comments, we focused on the presence of *criticism towards immigration proponents* (including their specific labelling), *non-profit organizations*, *the European Union*, *Angela Merkel*, and *Germany*. We also coded the data for the *presence of populist rhetoric* (addressing

politicians, the media or elites in general). Finally, we coded the *valence* of the articles and comments *towards the topic of immigration*. Two team members attended numerous rounds of coder training until they acquired an acceptable level of intercoder reliability. The acceptable level was when the Krippendorff alpha reached a minimum value of 0.850 for all variables apart from six: (i) valence of the comment towards the immigration (0.788); (ii) populist rhetoric (0.835); (iii) the human rights frame (0.797); (iv) an article photo (0.836); (v) valence of the article towards the EU (0.801) and (vi) the article frame (0.815). The two trained coders tested the intercoder reliability on 50 articles and 300 comments, after which they conducted the coding.

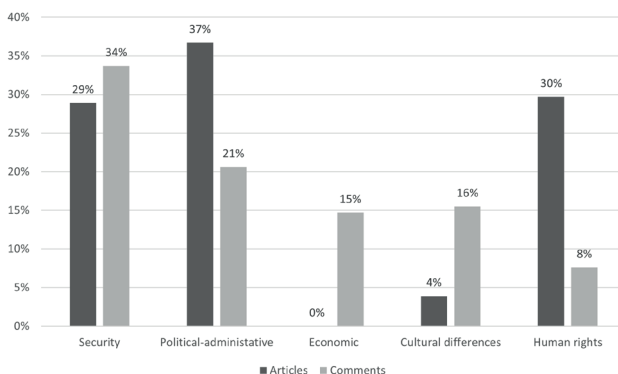
FINDINGS

ALTERNATIVE FRAMING AND REJECTION OF POSITIVE MEDIA IMAGES: MEDIA'S VS USERS' REPRESENTATIONS OF THE ISSUE

The comparison of the framing of the immigration topic by the online daily on the one hand and the accentuation of immigration aspects and actors in the discussion section on the other revealed that the discussants contribute significantly to a shift in the narratives presented by the medium. Nevertheless, the pattern was in no way simple and was tightly connected with the valence the medium attributed to the immigrants and their stories, as the data presented below show.

The analysis of the articles' framing (Figure 1) revealed a dominance (37%) of the political-administrative frame (quota, political negotiations, etc.). The human rights frame and securitization of the issue followed in 30% and 29% of the articles, respectively. These results indicate that besides following the typical immigration framing (Greussing & Boomgaarden, 2017), the medium also provides space, less typically, but following a more general trend in the Czech Republic (Urbániková & Tkaczyk, 2020), for employing human rights framing. The coverage frequently mentioned tragic events, but also covered extremist attacks on migrants or unsatisfactory conditions in the refugee camps. The need to close borders to the immigrants and crime linked to immigration (mostly smuggling) were the issues that dominated within the security-oriented articles. The absence of the economic frame in the sample may be interpreted as a lack of reflection of both causes and effects of immigration, which may reveal the medium's reluctance to contextualize the issue. References to cultural differences were also almost absent from immigration articles.

Figure 1. Thematic frames in articles and comments
(N=128 for articles, N=6033 for comments)



Source: Authors

The analysis of the discussion section (Figure 1) reveals that, compared to the news, the discussants often accentuated various aspects of the issue.² The most common of the discussants' comments (34%) was concerned with security risks (the need for border surveillance and fears of the invasion of immigrants dominated in their comments). Comments on the role of the EU in the crisis and its immigration policies (the political-administrative frame) comprised 21% of all comments. Cultural differences and the economic aspects of immigration, which were almost absent from the articles, scored relatively high in comments (16% and 15%, respectively). Unlike the online daily, discussants are thus much more concerned with the impact of immigration on the state budget and with cultural differences, including attitudes and behavior towards women, thus to some extent shifting the focus of the public debate on the issue. Human rights were mentioned rather rarely in the comments (8%), although they were frequently present in the medium's agenda.

Despite the differences, when comparing the thematic frames of the articles and the aspects of immigration accentuated in the subsequent comments (Table 1), we found that for the three most frequently used frames, in the comments that followed, the readers were most often discussing the topics raised by the articles. This relationship was statistically significant for the securitization and political-administrative frame (Adj. res = 16.7 and 16.5, respectively) but also applies to the human rights frame (Adj. res = 6.8).

2 In total, 6033 comments in our sample were published by 2343 users, i.e., each wrote 2.6 comments on average. The 27 most active users (1.1%) were responsible for 10% of the comments, but most often, the discussants left only one comment. The discussion environment was clearly oriented against immigration, with 80% of comments coded as negative in relation to the issue (and only 2% of comments identified as clearly positive).

Table 1. Bivariate analysis of articles' frames and frames and actors in the comments (N=6033, column percentages)

Comment frame	Security	Economic	Cultural	Human rights	Political-administrative	Merkel	NGOs	Germany	EU	Populism - politicians	Populism - media
Security	42.3%	23.6%	26.3%	21.7%	29.4%	37.9%	20.5%	43.7%	29.9%	35.9%	22.0%
Economic	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Cultural	2.1%	1.9%	2.6%	5.2%	1.4%	1.0%	1.7%	2.2%	1.2%	2.9%	8.4%
Human rights	26.3%	29.9%	42.6%	45.4%	13.4%	14.1%	61.2%	18.5%	13.5%	18.3%	45.6%
Political-administrative	28.6%	44.0%	27.5%	27.2%	55.4%	47.0%	16.3%	35.2%	55.0%	42.6%	20.4%
Other	0.6%	0.6%	1.0%	0.4%	0.4%	0.0%	0.3%	0.4%	0.4%	0.2%	3.7%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
Phi	0.219	0.083	0.109	0.094	0.246	0.116	0.163	0.135	0.242	0.122	0.162
χ^2	288.407***	41.834***	71.173***	53.112***	364.337***	80.632***	161.140***	110.025***	352.445***	89.124***	159.245***

Note: *p< .05, **p< .01, ***p< .001.

Source: Authors

When we look at the discussants' reactions to the human rights frame more closely, a pattern became visible that could be one of the most interesting findings in our data. The human rights frame set by the medium triggered almost the same percentage of comments that agreed with the human rights framing and comments that stressed the cultural differences between the Europeans and the immigrants (45% and 43%, respectively). Nevertheless, the compassionate, positive human rights framing was typical for the pro-immigration discussants. Immigration opponents frequently employed the frame of cultural differences in reaction to the human rights framing by the medium or agreed with the human rights framing but rejected its positive valence (i.e., they were sarcastic about the situation of the immigrants or wished them bad luck). The data thus showed that the medium supported the positive (or compassionate) reactions among the immigration advocates by publishing human interest stories but provoked an intensely disapproving reaction among the anti-immigration discussants. Their negative response to a more positive framing of the topic by the medium was also evident in the relationship between the article framing and the media criticism (Table 1). When the journalists concentrated on human rights, readers reacted by labelling such articles as “propaganda worse

than the Bolsheviks” or as “multiculturalist propaganda” and condemned the medium as belonging to the “ruling elites”. Our data reveal that the rhetoric identifying the media as propagandists in the service of the elites was mainly present (46%) in the comments reacting to articles framing immigration in the human rights context.

A similar tendency was evident when we looked at the connection between the human rights media framing and the occurrence of some specific actors of the immigration discourse in the comments. The human rights framing was followed by the highest percentage of criticism of immigrants’ proponents (36%), showing that the frame increases discussants’ need to publicly reject those who supported or at least defended the immigrants. Any NGOs, whose critique appears mostly below the articles dealing with human rights issues (Table 1), are frequently the target of such criticism for helping immigrants and refugees.

The results comparing the themes of the articles’ lead photos and the thematic frames in the comments (see Tab 2) showed that certain visual media representations of immigration are accompanied by particular reactions in the comments. We found a statistically significant association between photographs supporting the securitization framing of the immigration crisis (photos of male refugees, barriers or the army and police) and the securitization perspective in the comments. Nevertheless, photographs of refugees were followed by comments that highlighted the economic implications of the European migration crisis more often, a result that supported our previous findings about the importance of the economic framing of the issue by the discussants. Photos of the EU symbols or representatives and pictures of other politicians triggered the political-administrative accent in the comments most often. Discussants reacted to the presence of mixed groups of migrants or their vulnerable representatives (such as women, children and the elderly) in the photos by referring mostly to the assumed differences in cultural values in a rather negative way.

We can thus see a clear pattern in our data: the anti-immigration majority of the discussants reacted negatively to any positive representation of the immigrants by the medium. This tendency supports previous research findings summarized above, which suggested that readers’ comments were rather independent of the medium’s framing of the issues (Coleman et al., 2011; Koltsova & Nagornyy, 2019), specifically in case readers considered the media coverage biased (Ziegele et al., 2018). Given the controversial nature of the immigration topic and the prevalence of anti-immigration stances among Czechs, we may understand this finding as supporting the conclusions of Koltsova and Nagornyy (2019): the discussants did seem to bring their previous perspectives on the issue to the debate and made their own conclusions. When these perspectives concurred with the medium’s framing of immigration (for example, as a security problem), the difference between the framing in the articles and in the comments was

small. But when the medium framed immigration in contrast to the dominant perception of the issue, as a humanitarian catastrophe, the readers brought “their background knowledge into the discussion” (Koltsova & Nagornyy, 2019, p. 153) and strictly refused such a framing.

Table 2. Bivariate analysis of articles’ lead photos and frames in adjacent comments (N=6033, column percentages)

Frame comment	Security	Economic	Cultural	Human rights	Political-administrative
Photo article					
Refugees - men only	16.6%	22.4%	16.1%	15.0%	9.7%
Refugees - women/children/old	4.9%	5.3%	12.6 %	8.7%	3.4%
Refugees - mixed	17.5%	25.9%	23.2%	26.5%	19.1%
Detention facilities/barriers	14.2%	14.7%	11.4%	14.8%	14.8%
EU and its symbols	2.5%	4.2%	1.4%	2.4%	11.8 %
Politicians	10.2%	6.5%	7.9%	6.5%	24.7%
Police/army	21.0%	13.7%	15.9%	10.2%	12.4%
Opponents	3.0%	1.0%	2.0%	3.0%	0.7%
Supporters	4.8%	4.7%	4.1%	9.1%	1.9%
Others	4.5%	1.0%	4.3%	3.0%	1.0%
No photo	0.7%	0.6%	1.2%	0.7%	0.4%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
Phi	0.165	0.190	0.153	0.135	0.327
χ^2	164.479***	218.630***	140.526***	109.503***	644.448***

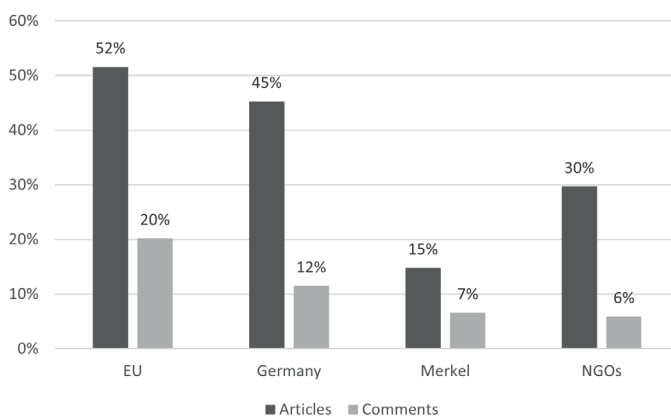
Note: *p< .05, **p< .01, ***p< .001.

Source: Authors

Comparison of the presence of specific actors in the analyzed immigration coverage and related discussions (Figure 2) is another way of considering the relationship between the medium’s agenda and its readers’ reactions. When we focused on the associations between the presence of the most prevalent individual and institutional actors in the articles and users’ comments – Angela Merkel, Germany, EU, and the NGOs (Figure 2), we can see that there is a statistically significant link between the mentioning of all these four actors in the article and their subsequent presence in the comments (Table 3). The articles’ agenda was thus clearly mirrored in the agenda of the readers. The strongest association was observed in the case of the EU (Phi = 0.322, p < 0.001), whose presence in the article seemed to enhance its appearance in the comments notably, but the correlation was strong in all four cases. However, despite relatively robust

associations, 51% of comments discussing Merkel were still not related to articles mentioning her name. This suggests that the readers tend to bring Merkel into their comments following other cues, e.g., the reference to the EU (64% of comments mentioning Merkel were linked to such articles) or to Germany (77%). It could also indicate that the discussants entered the discussion with their pre-definitions of important actors of the immigration discourse and were not entirely dependent on the actors mentioned by the medium (Koltsova & Nagornyy, 2019).

Figure 2. Actors in articles and comments on iDnes.cz
(N=128 for articles, N=6033 for comments)



Source: Authors

Table 3. Associations between actors in articles and comments (% of mentions in the comment that is associated with the presence in the article; Phi values; N=6033)

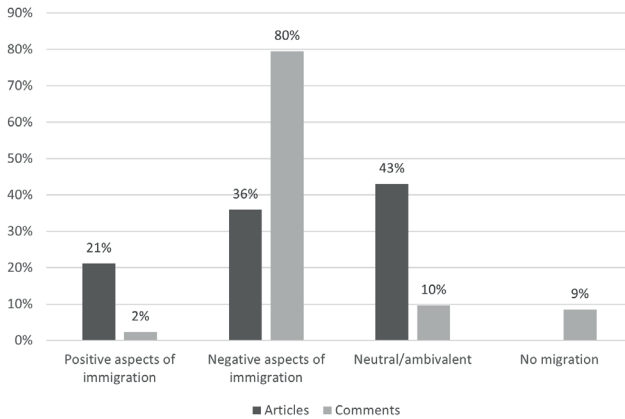
Articles	Comments			
	EU	Merkel	Germany	NGOs
EU	83%	64%	41%	65%
	0.322***	0.070***	-0.073***	0.072***
Merkel	18%	49%	35%	6%
	0.034**	0.244***	0.191***	-0.069***
Germany	44%	77%	81%	30%
	-0.014	0.167***	0.252***	-0.078***
NGOs	26%	12%	21%	78%
	-0.051***	-0.104***	-0.072***	0.259***

Note: *p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001.

Source: Authors

It is also worth noting that the mere presence of similar actors in the articles and the comments does not have to be a sign of a general agreement of the discussants with the media narratives on immigration. Whereas the medium may be successful in setting the actors to be discussed, the evaluation of these actors by the discussants may be very different, as in the case of the EU (mentioned in 52% of articles and 20% of comments). When the article attributes a positive role to the EU, 41% of related articles mentioning the EU are negative, whereas the percentage of negative comments decreases to 26% when the article evaluates the EU negatively. This suggests that the discussants tended to mobilize against the positive media images of the institution, as in the case of immigrants themselves or their advocates. Another example of such disagreement are NGOs (mentioned in 6% of the comments) which were covered rather neutrally or positively by the medium but mainly represented objects of the discussants' criticism for an allegedly positive approach towards immigration.

Figure 3. Valence towards the immigration in articles and comments (N=128 for articles, N=6033 for comments)



Source: Authors

Similarly, the presence of immigrants as active actors who are given a voice by the medium (in 15% of the articles) triggered more positive (3.2%) as well as negative (83.1%) comments ($\Phi = 0.100, p < 0.001$). This personalization of immigration thus seems to mobilize both groups, opponents and supporters, one negatively against immigrants, the other positively for their defense or support. The presence of immigrants in the article increases not only the probability of human rights focus in the comments, but also the presence of comments stressing cultural differences. It thus mobilizes advocates of immigration to emphasize the difficult fate of immigrants and, at the same time, inspires their opponents to accentuate the cultural differences in a generally negative way.

Results related to the relationship between the valence of the medium and that of the discussants towards the issue generally supported our argument that the framing of the topic by the medium did not change the perspective of the discussants.

Table 4. Associations between valence in articles and comments
(N=6033, Cramer’s V = 0.093, p < 0.001)

Valence article	Valence comment			
	Pro-immigration (2.3% in total)	Anti-immigration (79.5% in total)	Ambivalent/neutral (9.6% in total)	No migration (8.5% in total)
Positive	3.9%	81.3%	11.2%	3.5%
Negative	1.4%	82.3%	8.4%	7.8%
Neutral	2.2%	76.3%	9.8%	11.6%

Source: Authors

The discussants usually brought their unambiguous attitudes towards immigration into the discussion, so even though neutral articles dominated, almost 80% of the subsequent comments were negative (Figure 3). We found an association between the articles highlighting the positive aspects of immigration and pro-immigration comments (Adj. res = 4.4) and those highlighting the negative issues related to immigration and anti-immigration comments (Adj. res = 4.0). Nevertheless, it is worth noting that positively framing an article does not decrease the percentage of negative comments significantly, again revealing a minimal influence of the medium on the convinced anti-immigration discussants (Table 4).

CONCLUSIONS

This study aimed to explore the character of online debates related to news articles on immigration and their relationship with the medium’s agenda on the issue. In focusing on the online debates, our paper sought to fill the research gap in the contemporary scholarship on media and migration in Europe, which has so far favored the analysis of media content. News users’ perspectives and participation in the debates stemming from the articles have been given relatively marginal attention, despite their potential role in framing the issue summarized in the theoretical introduction to our research. We also believe our paper to be a possible contribution to media practice by providing media professionals with detailed information about the relationship between their production and the readers’ reactions.

In response to our research question, we can generally state that the medium set the agenda to some extent, but its positive framing of the issue was visibly rejected by a majority of the discussants. The most interesting pattern in readers' commenting, which our research identified relates to the human rights frame. When the medium framed immigration positively or with empathy, for example, by covering human stories related to the suffering of the immigrants or their integration in Europe, it predominantly provoked an opposing, negative reaction among the anti-immigration discussants. The same happened when the medium provided immigrants with a voice in the coverage or promoted the positive role of the NGOs or the EU in the immigration crisis. In such cases, the anti-immigration discussants reacted by reinforcing the frame of cultural differences presenting the immigrants' culture as incompatible with European culture, with more negativity in general and with a stronger criticism of both pro-immigration actors and the medium itself. This suggests that the readers who were active in the discussion and held anti-immigration positions were rather independent of the medium in their perceptions of the issue. A more compassionate framing of the issue or attention paid to the dominantly rejected sides (the immigrants, the NGOs, some pro-immigration politicians) by the medium seems to have contributed to an even more intense rejection of these sides by opponents.

We further found that the discussants diversified the immigration discourse by offering framing of the issue that the medium did not focus on. Specifically, the discussants perceived the issue, unlike the medium, through the economic lens as they were often concerned about the impact of immigration on the state or EU budget. They also saw the issue through the prism of cultural differences in that they focused on the alleged cultural incompatibility of the immigrants and the Europeans among which they pointed out the attitudes and behavior towards women. In the case of the German Chancellor, the discussants often included her in their comments even though she was not mentioned in the article.

The findings summarized above raise questions about the possible sources of the resistance of the anti-immigration discussants to some perspectives offered by the medium. Our data may indicate, in accord with previous research (Koltsova & Nagornyy, 2019; Ziegele et al., 2018), that the discussants entered the debate in the environment of the mainstream online medium with a previously formed set of meanings and interpretations of the crisis. That made them probably less dependent on the framing of the issue by the medium, especially when the medium offered frames that are inconsistent with the readers' opinion. The conclusion by Tóth et al. (2022, p. 4) that "polarization could sometimes be driven by exposure to opposing views, rather than by exposure to content one agrees with" also supports this interpretation.

Our data and our knowledge of the broader national context of the issue, enables us to further interpret the readers' refusal of the human rights frame and refugees' perspective in the articles. Their refusal is a result of the influence of populist political actors who became a significant part of Czech political culture. They spread hatred not only against immigrants but also against various liberal actors (the EU, the NGOs) and, specifically, the media (see Csehi & Zgut, 2020, Kreis, 2017 or Fekete, 2017) and thus legitimize and normalize this hostile approach. We can confirm previous findings that immigration is usually connected with strong anti-immigrant sentiments and anti-liberalism (Bhatia & Jenks, 2018; Deacon & Smith, 2017; Kreis, 2017). One of the most robust discussion environments related to online news in the Czech Republic turned out to be substantially anti-immigration and anti-liberal oriented. Most of the commenters were approaching the issue negatively, with a significant presence of populist attacks against allegedly liberal politicians, political institutions and the media. They strongly criticized some specific actors of the discourse, such as the EU and the immigration supporters (including the NGOs). This is in line with previous research considering Euroscepticism and illiberalism among the main characteristics of recent European populism (Csehi & Zgut, 2020).

Our research focuses on a particular national context in a specific period and on a selected medium and its comment section. These choices limit the possibility of generalizing our findings. The Czech Republic also represents a specific approach to the immigration crisis, which the country shared partially with other CEE or Visegrad countries. It would be useful to further test our findings on more diverse data, in different national contexts and in relation to various media and news topics.

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