

Capturing the Media: Similarities between Viktor Orbán’s and Donald Trump’s Media Aspirations

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This work explores the parallels forming between today’s Hungarian and American right by investigating the media bases of Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and former President Donald Trump. The study begins with a political economy analysis of Hungary’s Central European Press and Media Foundation (KESMA) and the more loosely formed media of the Make America Great Again (MAGA) movement. Through a process examined here, known as media capture, these media markets have been steadily transformed by loyalists of Orbán and Trump and have become saturated in the narratives of their “illiberal state” and “America First” movements. The study then cross-analyzes 1,360 headlines emanating from eight representative KESMA and MAGA outlets. The findings reveal the Orbán and Trump media to be producing parallel narratives, linking antiliberal, antimulticultural, and antiglobalist themes. In this converging brand of far-right-illiberal populism, liberals are presented, not as ideological foes, but as universal enemies of the state.

Keywords: media capture, far-right populism, illiberalism, Orbánism, Trumpism

When Steve Bannon, onetime chief strategist to President Donald Trump, traveled to Hungary in 2018 to speak with Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, his visit was cast as anything but diplomacy. News outlets began to note the linkages between Orbán’s platform of “illiberal democracy” and Trump’s antileft, “America First” movement. One *Vox* article surmised, “Steve Bannon certainly sees the parallels. Trump’s former senior strategist has repeatedly praised Orbán as a model for his vision of populist politics. . . . The similarities between the American and Hungarian leaders are hard to miss” (Beauchamp, 2018, para. 16). It was the same in 2021, when Fox News host Tucker Carlson flew to Hungary to interview Prime Minister Orbán. This time, Carlson’s weeklong broadcast from Budapest was framed as anything but journalism. A news story in *The Guardian* referred to the “U.S. right-wing media star” as really “promoting Hungary as a model for America’s future” (Smith, 2021, para. 4).

Inside the expressed concerns over Bannon and Carlson’s interest in Viktor Orbán resides perhaps a deeper anxiety about the significance of these international exchanges. That two of the most influential voices in American right-wing media and politics are now looking to Hungary and its ultra-right government, as a blueprint for their society. That growing hypothesis has been echoed in American headlines such as, “Does Hungary Offer a Glimpse of our Authoritarian Future?” (Marantz, 2022). And yet, little research to

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date has examined the potential parity of ideologies and purpose forming between the Hungarian and American right, or what some have called Orbánism and Trumpism (Wodak & Krzyżanowski, 2017).

This study aims to explore the parallels between these far-right populist movements and their representation of a greater global shift toward illiberalism. Although many studies have focused on the reemergence of right-wing populist parties around the globe (Breeze, 2019; Pajnik, 2019; Tóth, 2020), this work will comparatively investigate the media echo chambers that have been and are being built to specifically prop up the pro-Orbán and pro-Trump movements. What makes these two political-media systems so significant is not just their similarities or apparent interest in one another, but also the way they activate a brand of media populism that is advancing the cause of far-right governance. As defined, media populism involves the media's deliberate and sometimes induced role to promote the "construction and favoritism of in-groups" and simultaneous "hostility toward, and circumvention of the elites and institutions of representative democracy" (Krämer, 2014, p. 48). A playbook, in other words, that can be found in different nations at different stages and therefore studied along a prospective timeline.

For Hungary, this research will examine the work of the Central European Press and Media Foundation, better known as KESMA, and the partisan headlines it produces. In the United States, the study investigates the more loosely formed media of the Make America Great Again (MAGA) movement. The MAGA media are not an affiliated network of organizations like KESMA, and yet they share certain similar political and economic origins, as they operate to manufacture many of the same narratives. Using political economy and content analysis, the following research will contrast and compare the KESMA and MAGA models, focusing on their structures and headlines, and potential coalescence around a brand of right-wing populism that is striving to make liberalism the universal enemy of the state.

Media Populism Through Media Capture

At the center of this study is a focus on media populism and the effort of far-right political groups to create media echo chambers that will continuously carry their antiliberal and antiestablishment campaigns into the public square. A long-studied phenomenon, populism itself has been defined as "an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, the 'pure people' vs. 'the corrupt elite'" (Mudde, 2004, p. 562). But what has often made populism so difficult to identify is the chameleon-like nature of its expression. Over time, the roles of "the pure" and "the corrupt" have been assumed by and assigned to a wide array of groups that often contradict. As Waisbord (2018) explains, "It takes multiple ideological forms—socialism and conservatism, nationalism and workerism, nativism and indigenism. It applies to quite strange ideological bedfellows—latter-day nationalists, anti-imperialist socialists, antiglobalists, xenophobes, and racists. Without concern for ideological purity, populism swings from positions" on the right and the left (p. 22).

Because populist movements are so "thin-centered" (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017), often based more on public grievances than on deeply held ideologies, they can be steered in different directions through political campaigns and media. Numerous studies have shown how political parties employ antielitist rhetoric *through* the media to exploit public outrage and manipulate populist uprisings in their favor (Bos & Brants, 2014; Homolar & Scholz, 2019; Pajnik, 2019). Krämer (2014) established how these antielitist and antiestablishment trends also exist in the press, separate from any political influence, helping to fuel public

grievances while activating in them a “populist worldview.” Media populism, he explains, “may then parallel that of the respective political movements and may seek strategic alliances with them” (Krämer, 2014, p. 46). It is that alliance and media-inspired effect that many of today’s far-right movements seek to cultivate, but only a few have the means to truly acquire on a national scale.

This work will explore a form of media populism that is “intended for the media” by politicians (Bos & Brants, 2014, p. 707), but also engineered by their business allies, through an exceptional process known as media capture. Media capture campaigns are rare because, beyond political motivation, they require a massive financial support system and shrewd understanding of media industries necessary to overtake the media market of a given country. Mungiu-Pippidi (2008) defined media capture as a “concentrated, non-transparent ownership of media outlets, with important political actors controlling the media” (p. 73). Unlike an authoritarian press system, in which government seizes control over the media through state-sponsored means, media capture campaigns can occur within democratic systems through the often-observed alliances formed between politicians and private media owners who use their media holdings in shared pursuit of a political movement (Ryabinska, 2014). In their analysis of a media capture campaign in Sub-Saharan Africa, Mabweazara, Muneri, and Ndlovu (2020) identified some of the pillars of this process to include the systematic concentration of media ownership, financial enticements, and pressures brought upon news outlets, which “compromise the independence of the press and its core principle of speaking truth to power” (p. 2162).

There is an often observed undemocratic strain that runs through the types of political movements that seek to financially “capture the media” to perpetually champion their cause (Mabweazara et al., 2020, p. 2168). Beyond compromising the independence of the press, movements that seek to reform the media of their countries often do so by making the press the primary target of their opposition. Political figures like Viktor Orbán and Donald Trump have led these anti-media campaigns, directing hostile diatribes at the press while simultaneously endorsing their own populist mediaspheres as the alternative. As keynote speaker at the 2022 American Conservative Political Action Committee (CPAC) conference, Prime Minister Orbán excoriated the Western media, calling them the “root of the problem,” before advising his captive audience, “You have to have your own media” (Garamvolgyi, 2022, para. 6).

Far-Right-Illiberal Populism

The renewed focus on far-right populism is reflective of the rather unexpected revival of this style of politics in the 21st century where, across the West, a current of antiestablishment, antiliberal, and sometimes antidemocratic sentiment has swelled into insurgent campaigns with surprising levels of popular support. Its place in the body politic of nations like Hungary and the United States has helped to usher in a wave of antielitist fervor, nationalism, and nativist aggression (Kalmar, 2020). Today’s far-right populism might also be distinguished by the growing list of groups that it now deems corrupt, many of which will be featured in this study. Whereas populist campaigns have often rested public ire at the doorstep of powerful bodies of government, corporations, and mainstream media, today’s far-right movements have begun to target other, often apolitical sectors in society, such as scientists and schoolteachers (Hameleers, 2018).

But if there is one crusade that galvanizes right-wing populism in its present form, it is its central fixation on the perceived threat of liberalism and pluralism. Beyond nationalism and nativism, and even superseding charges of corrupt elitism, the far-right’s disdain for the left has become its unifying cause. This

style of politics, which has resurfaced in the United States, Europe, and South America, is one in which liberal groups are no longer communicated about just as ideological opposition, but as enemies of the state. The theoretical origins of antiliberal populism might best be traced to Stuart Hall's (1979) conceptualization of "authoritarian populism" that captured the British ideological "swing to the right" under Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher (p. 14). Among its features, Hall (1979) described authoritarian populism as a deliberate "weakening of democratic forms and initiatives" that is often articulated in "key themes of the radical right—law and order, the need for social discipline and authority in the face of a conspiracy by the enemies of the state" (p. 16). Ádám (2019) described "authoritarian populist regimes" as illiberal democracies, in which minority parties are deliberately marginalized and all opposition is treated as "enemies of the people" (p. 386). By whatever name it has been given, authoritarian or illiberal populism, Thatcherism or Trumpism, the use of "liberal-pluralist threat" as the centerpiece to these campaigns, has steadily activated and organized right-wing dissent into positions of legitimate political power. And perhaps nowhere in recent years has this model been more pronounced and successfully employed than within Viktor Orbán's platform of illiberal democracy.

All Eyes on Hungary

Many mark 2010 as the beginning of the illiberal turn in Hungary, the year Viktor Orbán reassumed power with the far-right Fidesz Party and populist sentiment behind him (Bozóki, 2016). After creating a new constitution that centered on "returning" Hungary to a Christian identity, Orbán's platform of illiberalism began to take shape. Wodak and Krzyżanowski (2017) documented how the new prime minister "soon started dismantling Hungary's still volatile democracy with the help of nativist and exclusionary slogans that legitimized his essentially antidemocratic agenda" (p. 471). He skewed the electoral system so that his party could win future elections without winning a majority of voters. And while in speeches, Orbán's vision for the illiberal state was defined as the rejection of "external interference" and protection of "Christian liberty" (Roylance, 2018), in practice, illiberalism carried a much more antiliberal tone.

Orbán's government and political surrogates coalesced around a communication strategy that would demonize the institutions that opposed his vision, always using liberalism as his foil. That opposition included political parties, but also academics (Tóth, 2019), civil rights groups, and, perhaps most of all, journalists. Ádám (2019) writes, "A large-scale restructuring of the media sector has taken place, with government-friendly businesses playing an increasingly dominant role. Public media outlets have turned into government propaganda vehicles" (p. 394). This heist of the Hungarian press did not happen overnight, but its steady realization has arguably become the crown jewel of Orbán's illiberal crusade: a privately funded nationalization of the media that was, only a decade ago, pluralistic.

Here is where the study of far-right populism overlaps with a system of media capture that this work will investigate. The illusion of Orbán's illiberal model is that it was born purely of the people's will to defend their national sovereignty and rise up against elites. In fact, it has been achieved in stages, first through the government's systematic vilification of political and cultural challengers on the left, and then, by a strategic remaking of the media that now works in concert to convince the public of the central narrative, that liberal democracy is dangerous. Galston (2018) describes this as a campaign of "populists who seek to drive a wedge between democracy and liberalism. Liberal norms and policies, they claim, weaken democracy and harm the people" (para. 3). Orbán and his party's perceived success in cementing these ideas into the national psyche has made them the envy of many right-wing movements around the globe.

And that brings us back to Steve Bannon and Tucker Carlson, whose high-profile visits to Hungary and praise of its leader signaled to many their calculation that Orbán's populist model was a blueprint for success. Grunstein (2021) states, "the visit by Tucker Carlson . . . highlighted the ways in which Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's brand of 'illiberal democracy' has not only gone mainstream in Europe but has also become increasingly attractive to the Trump-era Republican Party in the United States" (para. 1). That transnational exchange has also been reciprocated, when in 2019 Orbán was invited by President Trump to visit the White House. More than a political alliance, the intermingling of the Hungarian illiberal and American MAGA movements—each example of far-right-illiberal populism on the rise at different stages—presents evidence of the ongoing global advancement of this movement sweeping through liberal democracies today. This study seeks to contribute to an understanding of how that is happening through comparative analysis of the media bases and subsequent headlines that have been forged in each nation to support the populist right, and vilify the political left. Specifically, the research sought to learn the following:

RQ1: What are the political-economic origins of the pro-Orbán media foundation KESMA, and how do the rising pro-Trump media potentially liken or differ to that model?

RQ2: What are the predominant headline themes of the KESMA media, and how do they liken or differ to those emerging from the MAGA media?

The study begins with a political economy analysis of the Orbán-led and Trump-centered media bases. The KESMA and MAGA media are distinguished not by their far-right slant alone but by their direct relationships with Orbán and Trump, and ongoing promotion of their populist crusades. Through examining the origins of Hungary's well-established KESMA and still-developing MAGA media space, the research will illustrate a model of media capture: one complete, and the other, potentially underway.

Political Economy Analysis of a Media Capture Campaign: The KESMA Model

On November 28, 2018, 476 media outlets were offered over to the recently formed KESMA, resulting in the overnight concentration of progovernment media in Hungary, and instantly one of the largest media holdings in Europe. On paper, KESMA was a private organization launched by media magnate Gábor Liskay. Its stated mission was to "promote those activities of the print, radio, TV and online sections of the Hungarian mass media which serve to build values and strengthen Hungarian national consciousness" (Brogi, Nenadic, Cunha, & Parcu, 2019, p. 4). In reality, more than 40% of Hungary's media market, including all regional dailies and national radio stations, had just become unified "mouthpieces for government propaganda" (Medvegy, 2020, para. 2). The media owners, business associates of Orbán, and members of the ruling Fidesz Party, had effectively gifted their holdings to KESMA without payment. Kárpáti (2019) writes:

Nearly five hundred private Hungarian news outlets were simultaneously donated by their owners to a central holding company run by the people close to Prime Minister Viktor Orbán. In coordinated announcements, media owners declared the transfer of news websites, newspapers, television channels, and radio stations to the Central European Press and Media Foundation (abbreviated in Hungarian as KESMA), a group founded a few months earlier. (p. 80)

In fact, analysis of KESMA's true origins reveals a media consolidation campaign that began, not months, but years prior when Prime Minister Orbán reassumed power.

Setting the Stage: 2010–2011

Viktor Orbán has long voiced the view that “a new balance in the fields of the media . . . should be created” (Hegedűs, 2001, para. 14), a perspective that would become elemental to his illiberal objectives. But more than a search for balance, Orbán increasingly regarded the free press in hostile terms. Hungarian journalist Rényi Dániel (2022) writes, “Orbán saw the media as a battlefield; occupied by enemy troops and crowded with territories for potential expansion . . . Orbán did not only aim for censorship, he rather wanted to capture the mediasphere” (para. 8). Thus, in 2010, the new prime minister began to set the conditions by which his party could reset the national media. It began with his passage of the Media Act that created a media council that would extend the Fidesz-led government's powers of oversight to include broadcast, print, and online media. In response to the new law, Hungary's then most popular newspaper, *Népszabadság*, published the headline, “Freedom of the Press in Hungary has Come to an End” (Freedom House, 2012). In the coming year, the media council would rule against the planned merger of *Népszabadság* with another company, a decision “viewed as an attempt to keep the financially vulnerable paper on the market for a more government-friendly buyer” (Freedom House, 2012, para. 5). In fact, the *media buyout* would become the central mechanism through which Orbán's allies would overtake and later silence outlets like *Népszabadság*, before achieving near total media compliance.

Follow the Money: 2012–2018

Although KESMA was publicly launched in 2018, it was the six years of prior media acquisitions, achieved by a handful of Hungarian oligarchs, that centralized the national press. Beginning with Lajos Simicska, a childhood friend of Orbán's, the media capture campaign commenced. Simicska, who had built an empire of enterprises, was also the financial director of the Fidesz Party (Kárpáti, 2019). He attained ownership over the preeminent newspaper *Magyar Nemzet*, Hír TV network, as well as national radio stations and magazines. Each of these media was repurposed in the service of Orbán and the illiberal movement. Moving forward, Simicska would fall out of favor with Orbán, but a new series of oligarchs would replace him to buy up Hungarian media. Among them, Andy Vajna, a Hollywood film producer, was also a longtime friend of Orbán. Vajna bought two television stations, capitalizing on new government pressures brought on foreign-owned media firms to sell their holdings to Hungarian businesses (Tyszka, 2020). This pattern continued through 2016 when Gábor Liskay, a Fidesz-friendly media CEO and later founder of KESMA, engineered the purchases of several anti-Orbán newspapers, including the outspoken *Népszabadság*, which was subsequently closed.

Ultimately, it was another childhood friend of Orbán's, billionaire Lőrinc Mészáros, who moved in to complete the media capture campaign. Like pieces on a chessboard, Mészáros's companies bought up Liskay's media network in 2016. He then purchased *Magyar Nemzet* and many other independent dailies in 2017, before finally attaining the TV and radio holdings of Andy Vajna on November 28, 2018. That was the same day that Mészáros transferred over ownership of his entire media portfolio to KESMA, joined immediately thereafter by the other media-owning Orbán loyalists.

Reigning in the Noncompliant

Through a series of media buyouts, closures, and relaunches, the KESMA model shows that, in the 21st century, autocrats no longer need a traditional authoritarian press system to occupy the media landscape. One only needs a few billionaire allies with the knowledge of how to buy up and saturate a national media market. However, certain mechanisms of *soft censorship* are still employed as a means of exercising control over noncompliant media. For example, Hungary's governmental powers over advertising allowed it to award Fidesz-friendly media with huge ad buys, while freezing out the ad revenue of dissenting media until they could cease to operate (Tyszka, 2020). Another form of soft censorship, achieved through ostensibly legitimate means, was the buying out of media that were critical of government for the mere purposes of closing them down, which often became inevitable once their editors and journalists quit in protest. Finally, through launching a series of new tabloids online, Orbán's allies were able to finance a media echo chamber that did not previously exist to solely promote his cause. Today, KESMA is run by the prime minister's most ardent devotees and propaganda ministers. Many of its productions are hosted by faithful ideologues of the Fidesz Party. Cementing the illusion of its independence, Orbán's government now formally denies having any connection to KESMA (Morrison, Birks, & Berry, 2022).

The MAGA Media Space

On a timeline, the media network that surrounds and supports Donald Trump begins to take shape in 2015, the year he launched his presidential campaign. Thus, the MAGA media, as this research will define them, evolves several years after Orbán's campaign to capture the Hungarian press had commenced. As such, the analysis of Trump-centered media is an exploration of a work in progress. Today's MAGA media are developing along a later timeline than the KESMA collective, presenting some notable differences in form, but also some striking similarities in foundation, strategy, and message (see Figure 1).

Billionaire Backing: 2015–2016

The Trump media base initiates in a manner not so unlike Orbán's media network, with the discreet financial backing of a billionaire. Robert Mercer, who was by far the largest donor to President Trump's 2016 presidential campaign (Kelly, 2016), was the elusive CEO of one of the most profitable hedge funds in the country, Renaissance Technologies. Mercer was also the quiet benefactor of a select few conservative media voices that would become the initial advocates of candidate Trump. Among these, Mercer had become chief stakeholder in the popular right-wing website *Breitbart News*. Sam Nunberg, an aide to the Trump campaign, recalled how *Breitbart* gave Trump his initial standing. "Breitbart gave Trump a big role . . . They gave us an outlet. No one else would. It allowed us to define our narrative and communicate our message" (Mayer, 2017, para. 62). Mercer was also the longtime backer of another rising right-wing firebrand, Steve Bannon, who became the executive chairman of *Breitbart*, initially aligning the outlet with the alt-right movement, and then, with Donald Trump.

But it was through Mercer that Bannon would be introduced to Trump's presidential campaign, which he would join as chief executive officer and play a major role in steering its ultra-nationalist and populist messaging. Bannon and Mercer together would also become the financiers behind another media

operation, Cambridge Analytica, a tech firm that mined social media profiles to locate and influence potential voters, which it would do in the service of the Trump campaign (Valluvan, 2019, p. 193).

Realigning With Trump

Although Mercer played a familiar architectural role in advancing certain key media supports for Trump in 2016, similar to Simicska's early backing of Orbán, the American media landscape would not present the same fertile ground for other billionaires to buy up and repurpose. The Orbán playbook of acquiring preeminent newspapers and networks would not be feasible in the largely multinational, conglomerate-owned media structure of the United States. Instead, a realignment of existing right-wing media would begin to unfold, recentring their conservative brands in lockstep with the newly elected president and his MAGA movement. Among these, the established right-wing networks of Newsmax and One America News (OAN) would become fierce advocates for President Trump, hosting him, carrying his message, and later, hiring his chief surrogates and staff as on-air show hosts. Newsmax, often labeled the "pro-Trump outlet" in the press, was owned by another wealthy ally of Trump, Chris Ruddy, who concurrently served as an informal advisor to the president, while his network promoted his policies. OAN, whose owner Robert Herring Sr. had long sponsored conservative candidates, received a private audience with Trump in 2018. He soon found the president praising his network in speeches and tweets such as, "Thank you to One America News for your fair coverage and brilliant reporting" (McCormick, 2020, para. 5).

A Growing MAGA Media Network: 2017–2023

While right-wing news outlets tied their brands to the Trump presidency, other MAGA-based media began to take-off in the digital sphere. Real America's Voice, *The Daily Wire*, and Right Side Broadcasting Network were a few of the well-financed streaming operations that formed during the Trump presidency, and today, produce a consistent feed of pro-Trump content. Real America's Voice (RAV), in particular, has become a beacon for Trump advocates and MAGA politics, including hosting *Bannon's War Room* (Bannon, 2021–present) after that podcast was banned by streaming services for its divisive content. The show has been described as a "gathering point for the pro-Trump movement," and Bannon its "wartime general" (Stanley-Becker, 2022, para. 10). Numerous other pro-Trump/MAGA-themed podcasts began to emerge in that growing space, including *America First with Sebastian Gorka* (Gorka, 2019–present) and *The Dan Bongino Show* (Bongino, 2017–present).

As these upstarts produced a powerful chorus of support for President Trump during his presidency, signs of a strategy to saturate the airwaves with pro-Trump voices materialized even more significantly after his term in office. A growing ensemble of Trump's former White House staff migrated into on-air host positions on Newsmax TV, including Press Secretary Sean Spicer, Deputy Assistant Sebastian Gorka, and Senior Advisor Steve Cortes. On RAV, Trump's National Security Advisor, Michael Flynn, and Trade Advisor, Peter Navarro, became vocal advocates for the former president as regular contributors on *Bannon's War Room* (Bannon, 2021–present). Further demonstrating a media strategy at work, Trump launched his own social network in 2021, Truth Social, with the expressed goal of challenging Twitter and Facebook, networks from which he was deplatformed one year prior.

Media Capture Campaign	Pro-Orbán Media	Pro-Trump Media
	Completed, 2010–2018	In progress, 2015–2023
Early media backing by wealthy ally ↓	Billionaire friend Lajos Simicska acquires newspapers, television, and radio stations. Repurposes them into pro-Orbán media.	Billionaire ally/donor Robert Mercer is the chief stakeholder of Breitbart News and Cambridge Analytica. Each aid in Trump’s 2016 presidential campaign.
Buyouts, closures, and realignments ↓	Oligarchs take over media capture campaign. Anti-Orbán media are bought out and shut down or resurrected as pro-Orbán media.	No buyouts and closures of competing media. But established right-wing media like OAN fully realign their brand with the Trump movement.
Building out the populist media base ↓	New far-right websites are launched to rival remaining anti-Orbán media. News sites like <i>888</i> disseminate pro-Orbán, antiliberal themes.	MAGA media has grown online, featuring widely followed podcasts and news websites like <i>The Daily Wire</i> that produce pro-Trump, antiliberal themes.
Governmental and political pressures ↓	Orbán Gov’t supports ally media with major ad buys while freezing out anti-Orbán press. New law forces the sale of foreign-owned media into the hands of Orbán-allied buyers.	President Trump often calls for limits on the press. As president, he directs frequent attacks on the mainstream media, which he calls the “enemy of the people.”
Capture and saturation of media market	The creation of KESMA brings pro-Orbán media under one all-encompassing foundation. KESMA media outlets regularly feature Orbán government officials and surrogates.	MAGA media are not unified. But they are now heavily represented by former Trump officials who serve as show hosts. Trump has launched his own social network to challenge big tech firms.

Figure 1. Modeling two media capture campaigns.

Today’s MAGA media space is still forming, but a distinct structure is taking shape; one in which a chain of alternative far-right broadcasts, social networks, and podcasts, have begun to encircle mainstream media with a unified pro-Trump agenda. Outlets like Newsmax, OAN, and RAV have grown to rival conservative outlets like Fox News and the *Wall Street Journal*, while online operations like *The Daily Wire* have used open platforms like Facebook to widely disseminate their content. And although these media are not united under an official banner like KESMA, they are now playing the same strategic role in concentrating far-right populist discourses into the American political sphere. Notably, scarce research presently exists on the headlines emanating from the MAGA media, despite their growing presence in American politics. Likewise, most of the current literature on the KESMA media has only explored its formation, but not its powerful messaging operation. The next part of this study offers some of the first analysis that looks specifically at message within these media bases.

Method

Part two of this study examines the media populism now at work within these influential mediaspheres. A two-month content analysis was performed, tracking the daily news output of four typical media outlets from KESMA and four from the MAGA space. In total, 1,360 news headlines were examined between January and March 2022 to explore the dominant storylines emanating from these media. This study's timeframe is significant in that an election year was now underway in both countries, thus the narratives from these outlets would reflect the political campaigns of the greater illiberal and MAGA movements.

From the Hungarian press, the research followed the daily news feeds of *Hír TV Online*, *Magyar Nemzet*, *Origo*, and *888*, a selective sample of outlets chosen for their wide following and influence. Using Similarweb analytics, the research determined the average following of these sites to be 37.8 million visits a month (Similarweb, n.d.). These outlets also share in common the story of once-independent media enterprises that were bought out by associates of Orbán. For long-standing news organizations like *Magyar Nemzet*, the transition to KESMA led to the immediate firings and mass resignations of journalists who would not go along with the political takeover. In the United States, the research selected *Bannon's War Room* (Bannon, 2021–present), along with the websites of *The Daily Wire*, *Newsmax*, and *OAN* to analyze. Collectively, the three websites garner 61.7 million visits each month (Similarweb, n.d.), while Bannon's podcast has been estimated to receive millions of downloads. Though two among this sample—*Newsmax* and *OAN*—predate the political rise of Donald Trump, all four media outlets have since occupied their organizations with the former president's surrogates and, as this research will show, structured their content in line with his MAGA brand.

The analysis began with the daily collection of the five lead headlines from each outlet. Headlines were chosen as the units of analysis for their capacity to summarize and frame a story (Doufesh & Briel, 2021), as well as to activate in readers' minds the "most salient cues" intended by the journalist (Pan & Kosicki, 1993, p. 59). In assessing each headline, the research categorized a story by its central focus. The determination of how the headline presented the subject was then evaluated and coded as either supportive, oppositional, or neutral. For example, the *Newsmax* headline, "Biden Turning a Blind Eye to Americans in Pain" was coded as an *anti-Biden* story for its selective depiction of President Biden's apathy (Fitzgerald, 2022). In *Origo*, the article "Comics for Children have been Invaded by LGBTQ Propaganda" was categorized as one of its many *anti-LGBTQ* pieces ("Comics," 2022). For this more latent analysis, a Scott's Pi intercoder reliability test was conducted between two coders to measure the level of agreement in assessing the intended emphasis of 136 headlines (10% of the sample). Coders yielded a Scott's Pi of .802, with values greater than .8 considered to be "substantial" (Wombacher, 2017, p. 754).

Stories were frequently cataloged by their focus on opposition, which ranged from political figures to cultural communities to entire institutions. Other articles were built around the glorification of the illiberal and MAGA crusades and their leaders. An *Origo* headline that read, "Orbán Protects our Families!" was subsequently coded as *Pro-Orbán* ("Orbán Protects," 2022). Fewer headlines centered on the neutral news coverage of current events, but those that did were classified accordingly. *The Daily Wire* article, "Biden to Head to Europe for NATO Talks" was categorized as *News: Russian Invasion of Ukraine* (Curl, 2022). In total, the study identified 876 headline subjects from KESMA media and 806 subjects from the MAGA outlets. From these, the study was able to identify the overlapping and distinct headline themes (i.e., antileft, pro-Orbán, antimulticulturalism) present in these media sectors. The prospect of parallel messages existing

between the Orbán-led and Trump-centered media would be examined by the degree to which these two media concentrations likened or diverged.

Content Analysis: Media Populism at Work

Although the KESMA and MAGA media are shown to be distinct in their present roles, with the former now a fully established progovernment cornerstone of Orbán's regime, and the latter steadily forming on the margins as a collective of pro-Trump outlets, both media bases delivered strikingly parallel narratives. Tables 1 and 2 provide a window to broadly observe the headlines emerging from these Hungarian and American media that demonstrate a common set of issues, enemies, and even conspiracy theories, embodying this brand of media populism. In total, the content analysis identified 1,682 story subjects from 1,360 headlines that ran during the months leading up to the presidential election in Hungary and midterm campaigns in the United States. Thus, the select headlines carried by these media would be reflective of the predominant political discourses circulating through their respective right-wing bases.

As the tables illustrate, an overwhelming majority of KESMA's headline subjects overlapped with those that emerged from the MAGA space. These mostly included oppositional headlines about liberalism and the political left, migrants at the border, the LGBTQ community, globalism, and so-called "elitist" or "corrupt" institutions, primarily the media, educational, and scientific sectors. A large portion of each sample's headlines were also mutually dedicated to supporting or defending Prime Minister Orbán and President Trump and their illiberal and MAGA causes, respectively.

Table 1. KESMA News Concentrations.

Breakdown of 876 Headline Subjects (bold = category total)			
Illiberalism	210	Anti-Involvement in Ukraine	56
Antileft/Liberals	191	Anti-LGBTQ	46
Anti-Socialism/Communism	10	Dangerous Migrants/Border	27
Anti-"Wokeism"	9	Global Right-Wing	21
Pro-Orbán/Hungary First	163	Nationalism	
Pro-Orbán	105	Pro-Trump/MAGA	15
Pro-Orbán/Fidesz Gov't	37	Pro-Putin	6
Hungary First	21	Anti-Institutions	20
Anti-Márki-Zay	113	Antiliberal Media	14
News	102	Anti-Teacher	6
Russian Invasion of Ukraine	71	Christian-Hungarian Identity	9
Other	31	Crime on the Left	3
Antiglobalist Europe/West	100	Pro-Ukraine	2
Anti-EU/Anti-West	47	Anti-Vaccine-Vaccine	2
George Soros Conspiracy	42	Anti-Environmentalism	2
Anti-Biden	11		

Table 2. MAGA News Concentrations.

Breakdown of 806 Headline Subjects (bold = category total)			
Anti-Biden	139	Racial Culture War	38
Pro-Trump/MAGA	135	Anti-Cancel Culture/Woke	20
Pro-Trump/Defending Trump	78	Anti-Critical Race Theory	8
Celebrating MAGA Politics	30	Anti-Black Lives Matter	5
Anti-Never Trump Republicans	27	Other	5
News	101	Anti-Immigrant/Border Crisis	22
Russian Invasion of Ukraine	84	Global Right-wing Nationalism	20
Other	17	Pro-Global Right Movement	19
People's Uprising	89	Pro-Orbán	1
Truckers Rally: Anti-Mandates	75	Antiglobalism	20
Confronting Schools/Teachers	14	George Soros Conspiracy	13
Anti-Institutions	84	Anti-EU/NATO/UN	7
Anti-CDC	46	Anti-LGBTQ	18
Antiliberal Media	26	Anti-Involvement in Ukraine	18
Anti-Hollywood	7	Christian-American Identity	17
Anti-University	3	Crime in Liberal States	13
Anti-Big Tech	2	Anti-China	13
Antiliberal America	69	Anti-Environmentalism	7
Anti-Left-Wing Politics	44	Pro-Gun	3
Liberal Election Fraud	18		
Left is Pro-Terror/Enemy	7		

Figure 2 further illustrates the uniformity existing between these two mediaspheres by focusing on the predominant headline themes they produced. Although there was tremendous parity in the populist themes of these media, there was also an uneven concentration around certain story subjects, particularly the *antiglobalist* and *anti-institution* headlines. This disparity likely reflects the distinct political realities of each movement. Thus, it is first important to recognize how the KESMA and MAGA media find themselves at different stages of the far-right political ascent, which explains their heavier emphasis on certain storylines.

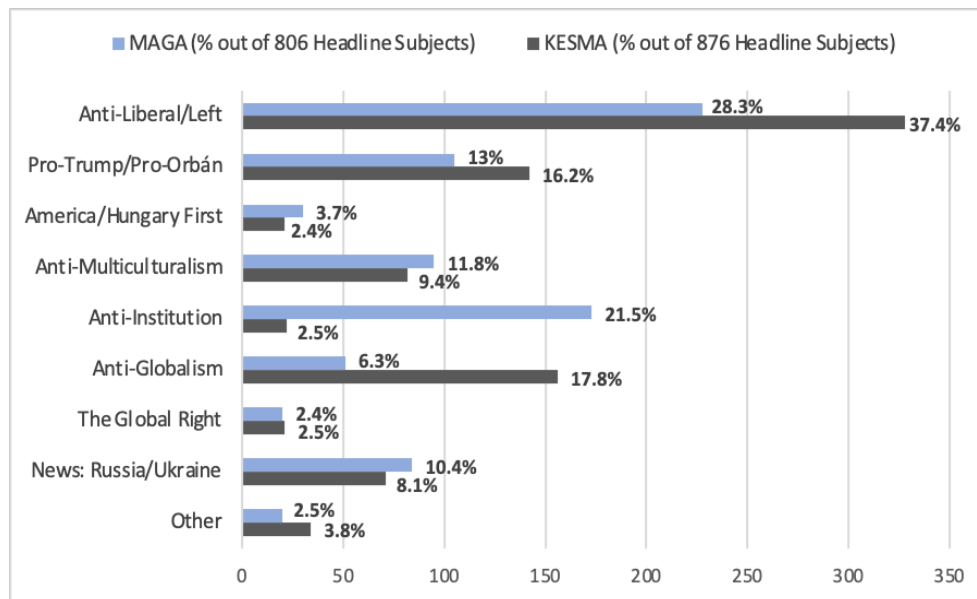


Figure 2. Comparing predominant headline themes.

Note. $N = 1,682$ headline subjects.

In Hungary, where Orbán's illiberal movement has now secured dominance over the government and media, there was a greater overall focus on so-called globalist threats to that power, found in recurrent storylines about foreign interferences from the European Union (EU) and alleged "conspirators" like billionaire George Soros. As noted earlier, such narratives are hallmarks of authoritarian populism in that they promote "the need for . . . authority in the face of a conspiracy by the enemies of the state" (Hall, 1979, p. 16). In the United States, where Donald Trump did not win reelection, the far-right movement focuses its attention inward on regaining that power. As such, the MAGA media concentrated much greater emphasis on stories that vilified domestic institutions like the media and scientific community. This trend reflects another principal strategy of populist movements, which is to "activate hostility toward elites (populism) to destabilize the political landscape" (Breeze, 2019, p. 89). Overall, these differences between the KESMA and MAGA media reflect the incongruent reality of their movements' political power, in that the former has now seized control of Hungary's government, while the latter is still attempting to unseat America's political establishment by unmooring its institutions.

Parallel Messaging

A closer analysis of these media headlines might, at first glance, resemble that of many right-wing populist narratives. For example, both bases heavily concentrated their news cycles on the vilification of the "elitist" and "corrupt" left, set in direct contrast to the ascribed virtues of their own movements. The MAGA outlets' primary focus was on the production of scathing headlines about President Biden's "corruption" and "ineptitude," contrasted with glowing features about President Trump. In KESMA, a constant flow of laudatory coverage of Prime Minister Orbán was met by a persistent stream of negative stories about his "elitist" political opponent, Peter Márki-Zay. But moving beyond right versus left, a distinct set of far-right-illiberal messages

begin to emerge, in which the liberal opposition is defined not merely as corrupt or elitist, but as enemies of the state. Specifically, a common strategy is established in these KESMA and MAGA headlines that sets out to characterize the left as unhinged and dangerous, depraved and anti-Christian, and conspiring and controlling.

The Unhinged and Dangerous Left

The first evidence of a common playbook emerges in how each base depicted their liberal rivals as deliberately endangering the people. Headlines underscored the political left's alleged pro-terrorist, pro-illegal immigration, and anti-police policies as imperiling everyday citizens. Such stories were presented in captions that emphasized crime in "liberal cities" or "blue states," or in crisis at the borders, using words like "invasion" in place of "migration." These headlines usually went beyond highlighting stories of crime and crisis to insinuate the political left was carelessly or deliberately causing the chaos. One *Daily Wire* headline read, "Biden: There Will Be 'Costs' For Americans 'Here at Home' as a Result of My Foreign Policy Decisions" ("Biden: There," 2022). Such allegations echo an earlier-referenced strategy of these movements, which is to consistently claim that "liberal norms and policies . . . harm the people" (Galston, 2018, para. 3). In contrast with these sinister portrayals, Prime Minister Orbán and former President Trump were cast as sturdy and heroic leaders, fighting to save their countries from liberal enemies at home and abroad, through headlines such as "Trump Drops Hammer on Domestic Terrorism" (Bannon, 2022) and "Orbán: David v Goliath in Brussels" ("Orbán: David," 2022).

The Depraved and Anti-Christian Left

Another shared narrative centered on the cultural groups that each media base selectively vilified in their news feeds, which revealed the homophobic and transphobic expression present in these far-right movements, but also the way in which minorities are deliberately positioned as dangerous to the majority. Here, the LGBTQ community was presented as that cultural threat to Hungarian and American society. In the tabloid *888*, articles pertaining to sexual orientation and race were encompassed under one section, "White Man." In *The Daily Wire*, an ongoing series was titled "Trans vs. Conservative Men Debate Masculinity" (PragerU, 2022). The transgender community, in particular, was a focal target of these media that fixated on claims about gender identity being forced upon children, sometimes likening it to "grooming" and "child abuse." These transphobic headlines converge around a common strategy, which is to present the left as perverse, while stoking anxieties about imminent cultural change. In their study of "Orbanism" and "Trumpism," Wodak and Krzyżanowski (2017) described how such "nativist exclusionary ideologies" are achieved through messaging about the "fear of 'strangers,' such as migrants; fear of losing national autonomy; and fear of losing old traditions and values" (p. 476).

For the Hungarian and American right, these heightened fears often centered around the notion that Christianity is under liberal assault. In Hungary, headlines forewarned of a left-wing oppression against European Christians. Similarly, within several MAGA stories, Christian freedom was presented as being imperiled by liberal-inspired cancel culture. One such *Daily Wire* video feature was titled, "The Woke Attack on Christianity," (Klavan, 2022). Such themes should be understood in the context of the aforementioned anti-LGBTQ narratives, which reinforce, not a defense of religious identity, but a rejection of multiculturalism.

The Conspiring and Controlling Left

A final thread running through the KESMA and MAGA headlines was the mutual distrust of so-called “globalist,” “leftist” institutions, which were presented as antithetical to the Hungarian illiberal and America First movements. For KESMA, the EU was most commonly depicted as that elite globalist institution working to undermine Hungary’s proud sovereignty and Christian identity. For MAGA media, domestic institutions like the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and mainstream media assumed the charge of “being controlled” by conspiring left-wing forces. The propagation of these conspiracy theories serves a specific purpose for the leadership, and the media that litigate their cause, in that these narratives rally a defensive response. Douglas et al. (2019) explain, “conspiracy theories are linked to defensive ways of identifying with one’s social group” (p. 9). Here, when KESMA and MAGA media allude to these globalist conspiracies, they also evoke public sentiments of feeling undermined by these forces, which rallies the people behind their leader. Douglas et al. (2019) continue, “A conviction that others conspire against one’s group is more likely to emerge when the group thinks of itself as . . . under threat” (p. 9).

One central figure ever-present in these conspiracy storylines was Hungarian-born billionaire George Soros, who was often cast as the elite mastermind pulling various strings to control Hungary and America’s futures. According to Kalmar (2020), the Soros conspiracy theory, which Orbán often evokes, is “widely understood . . . as drawing on antisemitic tropes” about the Jewish businessman (p. 193). For Orbán, especially, the use of the Soros plotline puts a face behind the insinuation that Jewish, globalist actors are conspiring to usurp Hungarian Christian freedoms. KESMA headlines accused the “Soros network” of influencing the European Union, manipulating European journalists, and interfering in Hungarian elections. Across the MAGA mediasphere as well, the Soros conspiracy was present. Progressive groups were increasingly labeled “part of the Soros network” as a means of suggesting an underhanded left-wing presence. One Newsmax headline proclaimed, “Soros-Backed Radical DA Indicts 19 Police for Riot Control” (Mack, 2022). The collective effect of these headlines, insinuating conspiracies among liberal agencies and global institutions, is to foster the idea of a left-wing takeover now underway, and thus promote the populist backlash against such forces.

Conclusion

Today, the illiberal and MAGA movements are drastically reshaping the political and cultural landscapes of their countries. For this reason, future research should continue to follow the alignment of political discourses in the Orbán and Trump media orbits, as this study has shown how the former may indeed inform the political messaging of the latter. These media systems, more importantly, capture the expressed forms of far-right-illiberal populism as this surging movement advances through liberal democracies. It will be critical to monitor that advancement as it develops in nations like Brazil, France, India, Poland, the Philippines, Hungary, and the United States. This research aimed to contribute to that body of literature that centers on the political communication of these movements (Breeze; 2019; Tóth, 2020) by comparing the well-advanced and steadily advancing media echo chambers of the Hungarian and American far-right.

The research investigated the strategic headlines of far-right media populism at work in each nation, revealing a coalescence around certain antiliberal, anti-institutional, and antimulticultural

storylines. Beyond mere expressions of right versus left, distinct themes were shared, such as the savior-like depictions of Orbán and Trump juxtaposed to claims of conspiring globalist forces, or the emphasis on Christian national identity contrasted to the purported threat of imposed multiculturalism. Both the KESMA and MAGA media also sought to recognize the reverberations of their movements happening around the globe, from headlines about anti-government truckers mobilizing in Canada and Australia, to protests against progressive leaders in Europe. The significance of these stories returns us to where this study began, with the global spread of illiberal populism. Although parallel political headlines do not establish any coordination between the KESMA and MAGA media, they do point to the probability that successful right-wing narratives can spread beyond borders.

Toward its theoretical impact, this work also sought to advance a greater understanding of the process known as media capture (Mungiu-Pippidi, 2008; Rybinska, 2014), which has become an emerging communication strategy of well-funded right-wing movements, enabling the concentration of their political messaging. Whereas prior studies explored some of the defining attributes of this extraordinary process of politically overhauling a national media market, this work offered a potential model along which to study how media capture campaigns unfold. The study established how KESMA's media capture was not simply the result of willing mergers among right-wing media, but rather a decade-long reorganization of Hungary's entire media infrastructure that was achieved through a series of financial, and then political takeovers, orchestrated by business allies of Orbán. The unaffiliated MAGA media are similarly striving to upend American media, led by owners and operators who are both political loyalists and financial backers of President Trump. Today, media productions like RAV and *Bannon's War Room* serve as outposts for Trump's MAGA movement, hiring and hosting his surrogates, and providing direct airtime to his own views, much as Orbán's media did for him. Along the further-evolved KESMA timeline, a more aggressive strategy of media capture has transpired that saw independent news outlets acquired by Orbán's allies, only to then be shut down or resurrected as compliant arms of his illiberal movement.

As this work explored the strategic structures and subsequent headlines of the KESMA and MAGA media, there were also limitations that future research could address through different questions and methodologies. The content analysis of headlines revealed the predominant storylines of these media, and, in particular, the targeted opposition of their movements. Future studies should delve deeper into these stories, exploring the framing of issues that communicate the illiberal and America First ideologies that KESMA and MAGA represent. Another limitation of this study was the concurrent timeframe of the analysis, which revealed strikingly similar narratives coming out of these two media bases, but could not definitively show if one truly inspired the other. If, as suggested, similarities do exist between the Orbán and Trump-centered movements, then that relationship could be studied further by identifying and tracking original discourses emerging from the Orbán regime and KESMA. Would the same political discourses then surface in the Trump/MAGA mediasphere in the months that followed?

Publicly, more overt connections between the Hungarian and American right have continued to emerge. For example, a considerable extent of sympathy toward Donald Trump was observed in Hungary in a recent attitude study (Zsolt, Tóth, & Demeter, 2022). At the same time, the new chairman of KESMA, László Szabó, was invited to speak at CPAC in Orlando, where he openly promoted preserving "Jewish-Christian heritage" and rejecting "gender ideology" to his American audience. Three months later, CPAC held its international conference

for the first time in Budapest, selecting as its keynote speaker Prime Minister Orbán. There, the Hungarian Prime Minister implored the American right, "You have to have your own media" (Garamvolgyi, 2022, para. 4). He continued, "We need to take back the institutions in Washington and Brussels. We must find allies in one another and coordinate the movement of our troops" (Garamvolgyi, 2022, para. 4). Such statements continue to give pause to those in the United States who wonder whether Orbán's illiberal model of governance signifies the ghost of America's political future. Research can best address this concern by continuing to investigate the MAGA media space, its financiers, and architects like Steve Bannon who have expressed a noted affinity for the Orbán-style of leadership. For now, the MAGA media appear to exemplify the same principal function as KESMA and the politics it propagates, which is to lionize and defend the leader, attack his perceived enemies, and ultimately, demonize the left.

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