

Wood for the trees. Perception of corruption among Hungarian youth

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The paper presents a research conducted in 2016 on the topic of relations between corruption perceptions and media usage patterns amongst Hungarian youth between 18 and 29 years. The main results can be summarised in three points. First, while half of the Y generation respondents in Hungary have already encountered corruption directly, they feel the presence of corruption stronger in the political sphere than in their everyday life. Second, 71% of the interviewees reported that honest people with a high level of integrity have less chance to prosper than their less honest peers. Third, media usage patterns of the Y generation are based mainly on social media, meanwhile print media use heavily declines. Young people reported to be overwhelmed by big corruption cases involving hardly imaginable sums of money and distant public figures. At the same time, they have very little knowledge of everyday corruption cases.

Keywords: corruption, media consumption, representation, new media, news

1. Introduction

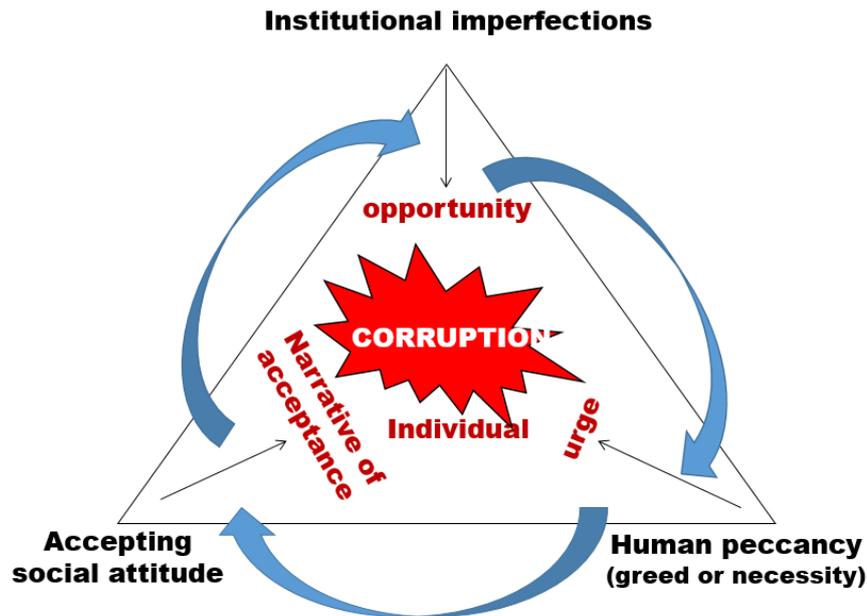
Corruption in a broad sense can be described as various kinds of abuse of entrusted power for private gains. This definition allows us to think of corruption in various forms, contrary to the approach of criminal law, which narrows corruption down mainly to kickbacks, bribery, fraud, maladministration and many other subtypes, but with a strictly legal approach in every case. To explain the difference between the legal and sociological approach of corruption in a nutshell: an act of corruption for criminal law is the infringement of codified legislation, while the above-mentioned, wider definition steps over the written rules and considers acts that are *per se* legal, but meanwhile violate public interest as corruption (e.g. systematic payment of gratitude money in healthcare system, or leakage of information providing competitive advantages in the case of public procurement). Although the practice of criminal law aims to shape certain corruptive

acts and group them into distinct varieties, we also need the former (wider, sociological) definition to be able to explain how corruption results in strange norms in society and everyday life.

According to criminal psychologist Donald Cressey's "fraud triangle" (Cressey 1973), every human being has some original sin, because the urge of favouring our immediate family members is a kind of pledge to survival, and also the survival of our genetic stock. This mechanism works quite similarly in a complex society as well, where the individual basically has to give up some of her individual opportunities to ensure community coexistence. This urge, which may stem from greed or objective financial necessity, can culminate in a populated community, which ultimately generates a permissive social attitude towards corruption.

When a narrative of corruption's acceptance is formed (see above), institutional background promptly responds: the legal system and the government, but also any part of the for-profit sector (alongside with the public sector) will provide opportunities to the individual to behave corruptly, whether intentionally or not (see Figure 1). At this stage, we find ourselves in a spiral, given that these above-mentioned institutional imperfections encourage individuals to let their peccability take the lead, and if so, this makes the accepting social attitudes stronger and stronger.

Figure 1. Factors of corruption



Source: Cressey (1973).

As we see it, a narrative that accepts corruption is the cement and accumulator of individual greed. In countries where corruption is an everyday experience, we often hear the argument “if I refrain from being corrupt, I will be the one who loses out”. These opinions are like venoms for society: the more we agree with them, the more we create a corruptive community. The cited statements, furthermore, work like speech acts in maintaining corruption. As we will see, permissive reasoning (mainly relativization of corrupt acts by their actors) frequently occurs in personal narratives of corruption.

2. Literature Review

In the last few years, various studies have been carried out both in the Euro-Atlantic Region (e.g. Demirhan – Cakir-Demirhan 2016) and in the European Union (including Hungary) to examine the possible links between media consumption and corruption. One of the largest EU-funded projects on the topic is Anticorrp, a research program with 12 different work packages for revisiting corruption and society (Anticorrp 2016). Currently running, as well as recently completed projects are mainly concerned with the media representation of corruption (Szántó et al. 2012) or how media ownership’s expectations influence media content, or create a bias in terms of agenda setting (Stapenhurst 2000). Not surprisingly, these analyses mostly conclude

that the political direction of a certain medium tends to influence the topics that appear on their agenda. The same can be detected in the field of investigative journalism, even if direct political control or manipulation cannot be recognised. As one study notes,

The influence on the Hungarian media of some business groups and advertisers is [...] notable. A large part of the Hungarian media is owned by a few entrepreneurs with strong political affiliations, and that may affect the work of these editorial offices. Also, the news outlets often depend on their public and private advertisers. These relations are not conducive to free and unbiased journalism.”
(Hajdu et al. 2016: 52.)

Or, as we have found, to free and unbiased information gathering on public life. Although there are numerous studies about the links between media consumption and corruption, it is hard to find studies focusing specifically on the relationship between media consumers and their attitudes towards corruption; and harder yet to find any on new media and corruption (Delli 2001; Camaj 2012; Dahlgren 2013). Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore how new media consumption relates to the media consumer’s sensitivity towards corruption-related topics, and we have mapped a number of new media tools that could help raise awareness of problematic social topics in terms of corruption in the long run. Another interesting question is whether the new media toolkit, (e.g. gamification, online trainings, massive open online courses, other e-learning materials and mobile applications) could contribute to a breakthrough in fighting corruption.

3. Research Methodology

This paper presents only a few of the results of a combined research effort that was carried out in Hungary in 2016, a cooperation between Corvinus University of Budapest and Transparency International Hungary, on the Y-generation’s attitudes towards corruption and media usage.

Although the corruption perceptions index (CPI) and other indices provide a measure of experiences and attitudes towards corruption worldwide on an annual basis, these methods have their natural limitations. We cannot uncover exactly how much money changes hands and to what extent decision-makers (politicians, businessmen and other public figures as well as opinion-leaders) abuse their power. Everyday experiences and official statistics are separated from each other; law and ethics often have little in common.

A case in point is that most of the Hungarian citizens do not see gift-giving (or, as it is called in colloquial Hungarian, ‘gratitude money’) in the healthcare system as corruption. However,

according to the broad definition, mentioned in the Introduction, it is a kind of abuse of someone's entrusted power for private advantages, especially when gratitude is paid in advance, before the observation or treatment, not to mention the obvious fact that gift giving is against the law. It seems we all live in a world where actual abuse of entrusted power may well be legal, while officially illegal corruptive acts can be handled as normal and usual social practices.

Although there are a few studies about the links between media and corruption (see the literature review), we could not find any studies on the topic of media consumers and attitudes towards corruption in the preparatory phase of our research. And so, we turned to another direction and aimed to reveal possible connections between the way that media consumers use media, the content they consume, and their views of corruption, and what they see as corruption in the first place.

During the summer of 2016, a representative exploratory survey was carried out by Transparency International Hungary. It aimed to map the relations between corruption perceptions and media usage patterns among young people between 18 and 29 years. Both qualitative and quantitative methods were used: on the one hand, Publicus Institute, a Hungarian research centre carried out a telephone survey of 500 people, providing a representative sample in terms of corruption perceptions. This survey, which took about 7-8 minutes per person, consisted of three sets of questions: first, on actual corrupt cases; second, general attitude questions in relation to corruption in private and in public life, and third, questions on media consumption.

After the evaluation of this survey, we were able to develop a script for the second phase. At this stage, Ph.D. students of the Doctoral School of Social Communication at Corvinus University Budapest helped organize five focus groups to deepen the examination and reveal the hidden contexts between corruption perceptions and the habits of media usage. This qualitative method covered the main regions of Hungary: two focus groups were held in Budapest, two in the Eastern region (Gyöngyös and Kecskemét), and one further in Székesfehérvár, in the Western area of the country. The number of group participants varied between 3 and 10. The main structure was always the same, and the duration of these groups was one and a half hours in each session. Results were officially presented in August 2016 at Sziget Festival, Budapest, with the participation of Coleen Bell, former US Ambassador to Hungary, and Iain Lindsay, the current UK Ambassador. (All the detailed results including attitudes towards actual political issues and ethical problems were published in Martin (2016)).

4. Findings

By the end of the quantitative research, the following key results were found.

First, members of the Y generation in Hungary feel the presence of corruption stronger in the political sphere than in their everyday life. However, more than half of the respondents have already encountered corruption personally. It is a pleasure to say that an extremely increasing number of young people reported that, if they were to experience corruption in person, they would report it to the authorities. In 2012, this ratio was 25%, but by 2016, it reached a staggering 66%.

Second, 84% of interviewees claimed that corruption is an unavoidable part of life, while most young people also thought that it was essential for moving forward in their personal careers: 71% reported that honest people with a high level of integrity have less chance to prosper than their less honest peers.

These two concerns are more or less in contradiction of course: due to the above mentioned personal greed or necessity, individuals are reluctant to comply with their reporting obligations, precisely because they would be in a competitive disadvantage compared to their environment.

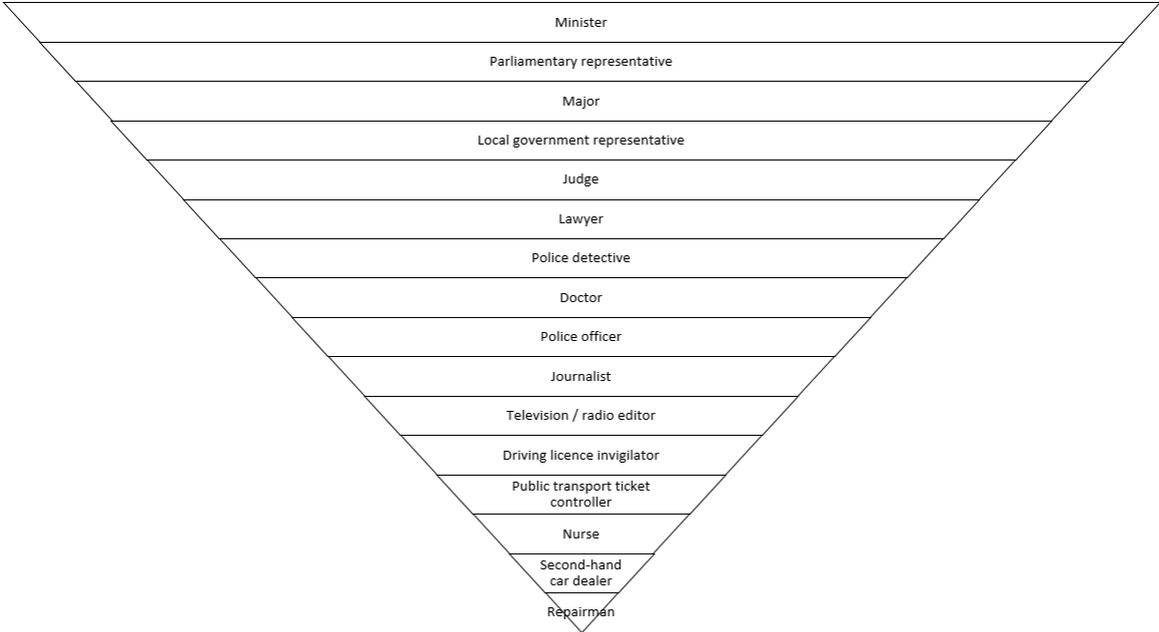
Third, in terms of gathering public news, media consumption patterns of the Y generation are based mostly on new media, especially social network sites. The television, queen of living rooms with its 42% nominal frequency, came only second, while the radio (12%) and print media (round 10%) are at the end of the list of media consumed. Four-tenths of young people do not read a single newspaper and only a quarter of them claim to read more than two newspapers regularly. The dominance of online news portals is extremely high among people with a university degree, but the proportion of newspaper readers in this group is also high.

Fourth, reading frequency of print media heavily declines amongst 18-29 years old people. Concerning corruption-related news, youths are reported to be overwhelmed with large cases involving distant public figures and hardly imaginable sums of money, while they have very little knowledge of everyday corruption cases and only a thin reflection on their own involvement in corruption.

At one point in the focus group interviews, we asked participants to set up an order among representatives of different professions based on how much they were subject to corruption. Not surprisingly, government secretary, member of the parliament, and mayor took the lead.

Repairmen, second-hand car-dealers, and nurses, however, ended up at the bottom of the list. Some participants could not imagine at all that these latter professionals can be corrupt in any ways (see the overall ranking in Figure 2.) A possible reason for this ranking is that participants regarded corruption as some big, intentionally organised, institutionalised network act, which could only be created by mysterious, or better, almighty professions like the ones portrayed in *The Godfather* trilogy. This narrative is consistent with the participants’ opinions – in focus groups: they mostly defined corruption as something “which we, common people personally can’t influence”. It is notable that the most ambiguous judgement (the one with the largest standard deviation) was given to journalists and TV / radio editors. In some focus groups, these professions were judged as the most corrupt ones, while some others ranked as least likely to be corrupt, either because of their lack of knowledge about their everyday working methods and the influence of ownership on it, or because they defined corruption as money changing hands, and presupposed that journalists usually do not pay and get bribes and kickbacks (according to the narrower definition of corruption).

Figure 2. Professions ranked according to their exposure to corruption (opinions).



Source: author

Two main concerns were outlined. First, representatives of professions who are considered the most corrupt, are considered corrupt for stealing public funds for private affairs, while repairmen, nurses, and traders enter into mutually beneficial agreements with private individuals. Tax evasion may only harm a virtual third party (i.e. the state), but the mutual advantage of actors makes small corruption absolutely acceptable. Second, as the media mainly deals with major issues of politicians and other public figures, they are considered to be primarily corrupt by citizens.

In terms of corruption news in media, some participants in focus groups claimed: “There is so much happening that we take it for granted.” In two other groups, similar opinions were put out: “Sometimes I freak out from domestic politics and completely exclude all this kind of news for weeks” and “sometimes I am so fed up that I cannot go near news portals”. Another person said: “Ignoring is how we try to rule out reality because we cannot get it.”

The other main issue of media news is the issue of magnitudes. As one group member said, “I’m afraid there’s a level above which I can’t perceive the difference. I don’t know how to spot the really significant issues”. Another added: “A common man in his everyday life finds it difficult to separate millions and billions of Forints and Euros. It almost does not matter, and therefore I am afraid that none of them will take care of corruption”.

Regardless of the types of media, in all kinds of news, whether online or print, participants detected a bias in the work of journalists. According to one participant, “It is hard to believe that someone as a journalist is completely independent of political pressure. And of the pressure of money, because he wants to keep his job.”

All three issues have a rich foundation in the literature. The overwhelming amount of corruption news results in overexposing, and this more or less disables the news value in the long run. It is difficult to grasp the true significance of large sums of money; hence, the importance of corruption cases inflate: after hearing from several serious bribes, cartels and sudden enrichment, we are unable to distinguish one another. And thirdly, the trust level in journalists seems to be quite low, and this statement seems to be valid for investigative journalism as well.

5. The Potential of New Media in Anti-Corruption

After highlighting the most remarkable results of the survey and the focus groups, this section summarizes the possible breaking points of new media application in anti-corruption. A possible resolution to digitalized integrity education is to support two kinds of changes.

On the one hand, by raising civic awareness, citizens could be helped by informal open education to recognize that petty everyday corruption is at least as important to follow as the major political issues. Good practices are presented by Integrity Action, which developed a story-based online video game (Integrity Action¹), helping recognise good and bad behaviours in different ethical issues areas. Further examples are provided by other websites (Kongregate,² MS Memorial³), moreover, even the Chinese Communist Party launched a ‘serious game’ in order to curb corruption (Sinosphere 2014). In Hungary, a further online game has been released by K-Monitor⁴. These open access online games can only be utilised effectively by curious users, if the designers offer a free, user-friendly, familiar and easy-to-use system, which can be applied in different kinds of everyday situations.

At this point an important remark must be added. In Hungary, the Office of the Commissioner of Fundamental Rights runs a website⁵ where one can lodge a complaint in case of harms of their fundamental rights. The complaint can be handed in with or without identification, depending on the user’s choice. But the more details we add, the easier the Office’s work will be, reportedly. Based on the case description and the attached documents, the Office elaborates the ongoing case, or forwards it to another competent governmental body. Citizens can lodge a wide range of cases, from tax abuses to illegal trash deposit, from retail warranty enforcement issues to bribes. According to official reports, a number of cases move in the order of a few hundred per year, and among them, only a minority deals with corruption cases. There can be many reasons for this low incidence of ‘whistle-blowing’; however, the most significant reasons are low awareness of the existence of this service (e.g. none of the focus group members knew of it), fear of attaching one’s name to delicate matters, and distrust towards state offices. Whichever the main reason is, this system provides a good example for the problems of online, free-of-charge, anonymous anti-corruption tools.

On the other hand, a changing language of media news production, as well as a new toolkit in civic education, may lead us to take corruption issues into account more seriously. As Delli et

¹ See <http://game.integrityaction.org/>

² See <http://www.kongregate.com/games/robproductions/the-corruption>

³ See <http://msmemorial.if-legends.org/games.htm/corrupt.php>

⁴ See <https://k-monitor.github.io/onkormanyzo/hu.html#/>

⁵ See www.ajbh.hu

al. (2001: 168.) underline: “sex, lies and videotapes” rule the new media politics. The core of understanding media lies in the correct interpretation of political communication, which finally results in a highly critical attitude towards public life. Media literacy development, therefore, is a crucial part of proliferating a new, open-access integrity toolkit in informal education systems. According to the V4 countries’ (Czechia, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia) joint media literacy recommendations (Pelle 2016: 236-238.), methodological enrichment and self-education can ultimately lead to a more self-aware society.

In order to maintain a more or less wide circle of self-conscious political audience beside the tabloid-oriented, ‘politically entertained’ (potential) voters, we have a great tool on our hands: different types of new media (including online gamification and open education platforms) can enlighten the hidden corruptive mechanisms in simulations and raise civic awareness towards political and everyday corruption – and at the same time, it helps consumers (especially voters) move beyond extremely personalised political communication. One thing can be surely stated about potential of new media in sensitization: the opinions are divided in the academic debates (Bishop 2015; Deterding et al. 2015; Dichev – Dicheva 2017), while we cannot omit the importance of these platforms in fighting against corruption.

A few notes also need to be added to this point. Development of digital citizenship is one of the most challenging tasks of civic education, if it can be accomplished at all. “Empirical research [...] shows that citizens mostly discuss politics with people who hold the same views and have the same background” – states Shane (2004: 109.). This effect can only strengthen the Cressey-mechanism, but does not help break out of the vicious circle (see Figure 1). The necessary transformation of citizen awareness stems from the educational system in the first place: the problem of sensitivity towards corruption cases is strongly linked to digital competences, critical media consumption, and media wisdom. In Hungary, the public education system is facing major restructuring. In the upcoming complex basic program of public education – a separate “digital-based school developing methodology” – is shaped alongside with other (e.g. logical, artistic and physical exercise) competences. Meanwhile, the Hungarian Government passed a Digital Educational Strategy, which also aims to reshape the entire public education system during the next few years. This gives some hope for the future in terms of raising digital competences, raising prepared and critical user attitude – and thus, proliferating a wiser media user habit.

6. Conclusions

As shown, media users in Y-generation mostly gather their information from social media, especially from their Facebook news feed and online news portals. During the conversations in focus groups, it was found that respondents rarely read entire articles thoroughly; on the contrary, they mostly just skim the headline and lead, and that is enough for them to decide whether the topic accords to their personal worldview, and whether it interests them or not.

Old media will easily decline in the coming years as a source of obtaining information, at least in some parts of the population. As we now see, corruption news requires longer explanation, and often a thorough outline of the topic's background. If media cannot change the way they present corruption cases, the audience will not be able to see the forest for the tree. As an investigative journalist told us in a university class as a guest lecturer, during the last years on their investigative website, the most widely read piece was an article on an overpriced hotel bill of a government minister. The amount in question was about 300-400 euro. This portal usually deals with cases in the millions of euros, involving public figures. Interest rarely correlates with the real importance of cases.

A possibly idealistic solution is to support change from two sides: on the one hand, by raising civic awareness: citizens could be helped in recognizing that petty everyday corruption is at least as important as large-scale political issues. On the other hand, changing language in media news editing may lead us to take the real big deals more seriously.

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