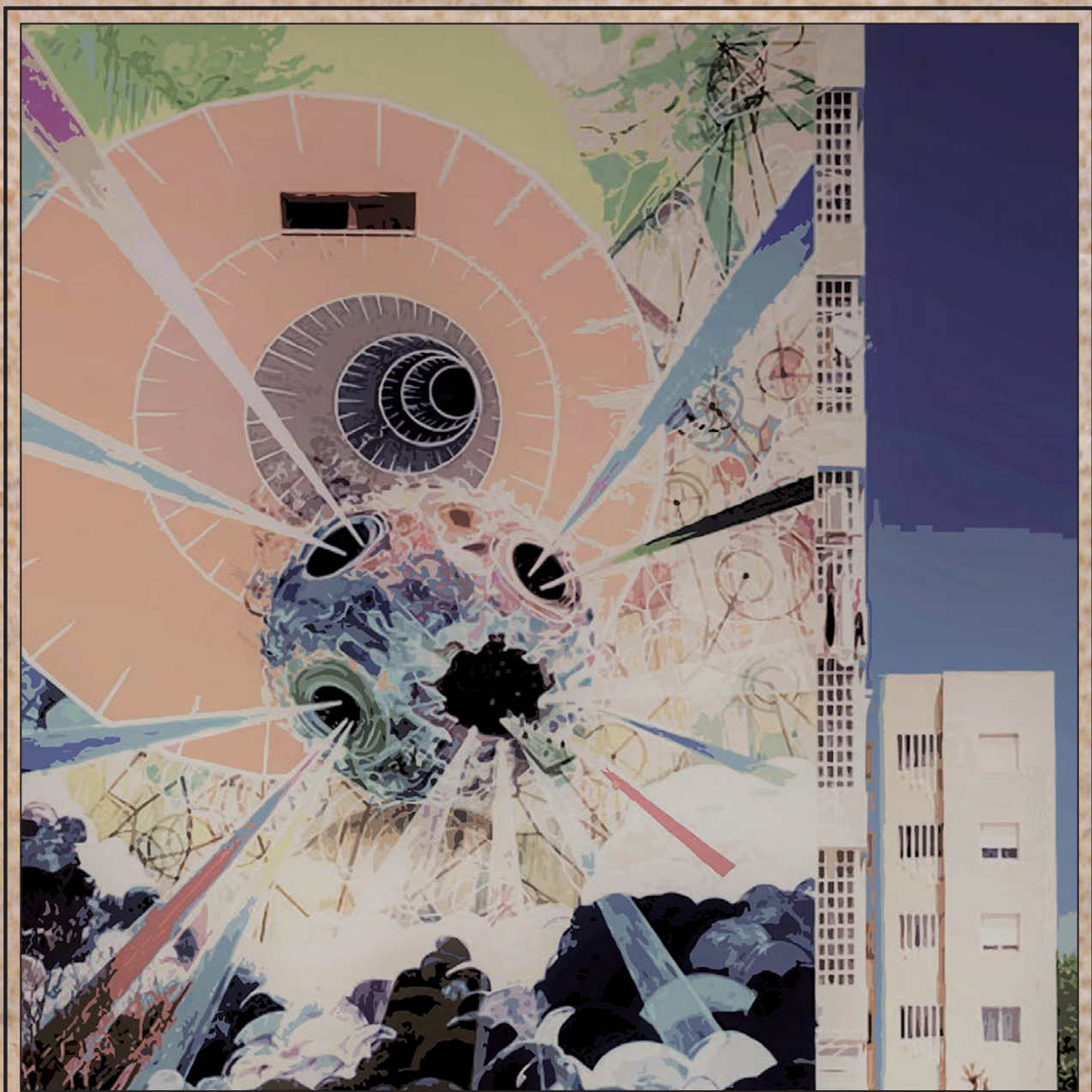


# ANNALES

*Anali za istrske in mediteranske študije*  
*Annali di Studi istriani e mediterranee*  
*Annals for Istrian and Mediterranean Studies*  
*Series Historia et Sociologia, 34, 2024, 4*





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**Series Historia et Sociologia, 34, 2024, 4**

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Zgodovinsko društvo za južno Primorsko - Koper / *Società storica del Litorale - Capodistria*® / Inštitut IRRIS za raziskave, razvoj in strategije družbe, kulture in okolja / *Institute IRRIS for Research, Development and Strategies of Society, Culture and Environment* / *Istituto IRRIS di ricerca, sviluppo e strategie della società, cultura e ambiente*®

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**e-mail:** annaleszdjp@gmail.com, **internet:** https://zdjp.si

Redakcija te številke je bila zaključena 16. 12. 2024.

**Sofinancirajo/Supporto finanziario/  
Financially supported by:**

Javna agencija za znanstvenoraziskovalno in inovacijsko dejavnost Republike Slovenije (ARIS)

*Annales - Series Historia et Sociologia* izhaja štirikrat letno.

Maloprodajna cena tega zvezka je 11 EUR.

**Naklada/Tiratura/Circulation:** 300 izvodov/copie/copies

Revija *Annales, Series Historia et Sociologia* je vključena v naslednje podatkovne baze / *La rivista Annales, Series Historia et Sociologia è inserita nei seguenti data base* / *Articles appearing in this journal are abstracted and indexed in:* Clarivate Analytics (USA): Arts and Humanities Citation Index (A&HCI) in/and Current Contents / Arts & Humanities; IBZ, Internationale Bibliographie der Zeitschriftenliteratur (GER); Sociological Abstracts (USA); Referativnyi Zhurnal Viniti (RUS); European Reference Index for the Humanities and Social Sciences (ERIH PLUS); Elsevier B. V.: SCOPUS (NL); Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ).

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## WHO SETS THE AGENDA IN THE HYBRID MEDIA SPHERE? THE ROLE OF MASS MEDIA IN THE SLOVENIAN TWITTER (X) MIGRATION DEBATE

Rok SMRDELJ

University of Ljubljana, Faculty of Arts, Department of Sociology, Aškerčeva cesta 2, 1000 Ljubljana, Slovenia  
e-mail: rok.smrdelj@ff.uni-lj.si

### ABSTRACT

*Building on the hybrid media system model, our study examines mass media's role in shaping the Slovenian Twitter (X) migration debate. The analysis revealed that mass media actors, both "older" and "newer", predominantly with a right-wing orientation, were among the most influential users. The discourse analysis of the most retweeted tweets revealed the coexistence of security and humanitarian perceptions on migration, indicating that Twitter's migration discourses did not significantly deviate from those prevalent in mass media. Our findings illustrate how mass media have effectively adapted to Twitter's media logic, utilising it as a channel for content distribution.*

**Keywords:** migrant "crisis", Twitter (X), mass media, hybrid media system, security discourse, political actors, right-wing

## CHI STABILISCE L'AGENDA NELL'AMBITO DEI MEDIA IBRIDI? IL RUOLO DEI MASS MEDIA NEL DIBATTITO SU TWITTER (X) RIGUARDANTE L' IMMIGRAZIONE IN SLOVENIA

### SINTESI

*Basandoci sul modello del sistema mediale ibrido, il nostro studio esamina il ruolo dei mass media nel modellare il dibattito su Twitter riguardante l'immigrazione in Slovenia. L'analisi ha rivelato che gli utenti dei mass media, sia "vecchi" che "nuovi", con un orientamento prevalentemente di destra, sono tra gli attori più influenti. L'analisi del discorso sulla migrazione, tramite i tweet più ritwittati, rivela la coesistenza di prospettive di sicurezza e umanitarie, dimostrando che i dibattiti sulla migrazione su Twitter non si discostano significativamente da quelli prevalenti negli altri mass media. I risultati evidenziano come i mass media si siano adattati alla logica di Twitter, usandolo per diffondere i propri contenuti.*

**Parole chiave:** "crisi" migratoria, Twitter (X), mass media, sistema mediale ibrido, discorso sulla sicurezza, attori politici, destra

## INTRODUCTION

Since 1991, Slovenia has experienced three mass arrivals of migrants: Bosnian migrants in 1992–1993; migrants from the former Soviet Union, Asia, the Middle East, and Africa between 1999–2001; and migrants from Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq during 2015–2016 (Žagar Žnidaršič, 2018). Compared to earlier periods, the most recent has coincided with the rise of the online digital media sphere, transforming “traditional” mass media and contributing to the emergence and rapid spread of “newer” social media platforms (Chadwick, 2017). The latter, specifically Facebook and Twitter, (now X)<sup>1</sup> provided the most current information pertaining to the events along the so-called Balkan migration route (Lecheler et al., 2019). Thus, the latest period was communicated through both mass and social media (Srnđelj, 2021).

The aforementioned transformations in the media sphere present both theoretical and methodological challenges for media and migration studies, particularly in analysing the interconnectedness of mass and social media (Smets et al., 2019). These changes have rendered mass and social media inseparable, emphasising the importance of considering their interplay in research. The hybrid media system model (Chadwick, 2017) addresses this interconnectedness, offering a framework for analysing the contemporary media sphere amidst recent technological and social shifts.

Despite the mass and social media’s coexistence in the contemporary media sphere, the hybrid media system model is rarely applied in studies examining migration in the media. While some relevant studies can be found internationally (e.g., Bennett, 2016; Ojala et al., 2019; Pöyhtäri et al., 2021; Siaperä et al., 2018), such research is notably scarce in Slovenia. To address this gap, we employ the hybrid media system model in our analysis,<sup>2</sup> focusing on the role of mass media in shaping the Twitter agenda during the third period of mass migration to Slovenia, i.e. the 2015–2016 migrant “crisis.”<sup>3</sup> This period, spanning from the second half of 2015 to early 2016, was marked

by significant migration to Europe, mainly from Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, and other nearby countries (Eurostat, 2019; Government of the Republic of Slovenia, 2016). After Hungary closed its border on 17 October 2015, Slovenia became a transit country for migrants<sup>4</sup> attempting to reach Germany or other destinations in Northern or Western Europe. Subsequently, the Balkan migration route shifted from the previous trajectory of Serbia-Hungary-Austria-Germany to a new path of Serbia-Croatia-Slovenia-Austria (Malešič, 2017, 953).

With most citizens lacking direct contact with migrants, the media—both mass and social—became the primary information sources on the evolving migrant situation, significantly shaping the perception of the migrant “crisis” (Kogovšek Šalamon & Bajt, 2016). Twitter, the empirical basis for our analysis, hosted a heated debate about the arriving migrants. We focus on Twitter because, compared to the more popular Facebook, it is more accessible to the public; virtually everyone, including non-users, can view posts (Jesenšek et al., 2021). In addition, compared to Facebook, which is more oriented towards maintaining social dynamics, Twitter concentrates more on current socio-political debates (Verweij, 2012, 682). This focus also explains why mass media institutions frequently use Twitter as a news source (Moon & Hadley, 2014).

The primary objective of our study is to investigate the role of mass media in shaping the Twitter debate on the migrant “crisis” in Slovenia. Our analysis is grounded in the theoretical framework of the hybrid media system model, and it operationalises this framework by examining both the central users and the most retweeted tweets within the entire Slovenian Twitter debate on the migrant “crisis.” Specifically, we explore the linkages between central users and mass media, and the alignment between the discourses of the most retweeted tweets and those prevalent in mass media. Through this exploration, we aim to determine whether “traditional” mass media sets the agenda for the Twitter migration debate, or whether there are distinctive migration discourses on Twitter that diverge from the those typically found in mass media. The main

1 In July 2023, the platform formerly known as Twitter was rebranded as X. Nonetheless, this paper retains the original name, Twitter, as the discussions analysed herein occurred prior to the rebranding.

2 This research was conducted as part of the research programme Problems of Autonomy and Identities at the Time of Globalisation (P6-0194, 2019–2024), funded by the Slovenian Research Agency, and as part of the activities funded by the Eng. Milan Lenarčič University Foundation. This article’s analysis draws from the author’s doctoral dissertation titled *The Construction of the Refugee Crisis in Slovenia from the Perspective of the Hybrid Media System* (2022). Some PhD sections included in this article also appear in modified form in Srndelj (2021; 2024).

3 We place the term “crisis” in quotation marks to distance ourselves from the media and political depiction of migration to Europe as a “crisis”. Social crises are not always genuine crises but are often constructed as such by the media and politics (Vezovnik, 2018; Srndelj & Vogrinc, 2020).

4 Following IOM (2019), we utilise the term “migrant” to refer to any individuals who have crossed international borders, irrespective of their reasons for leaving their home country and whether they merely travelled through Slovenia or sought asylum there. We have chosen not to include these distinctions because we consider all migration legitimate, regardless of the departure reasons. However, we are attentive to how migrants are portrayed in media discourse, particularly the labels used to describe them. Such labels imply specific attitudes towards them (for example, the label “refugee” in media discourse suggests more rights and benefits than the label “illegal migrant,” regardless of the actual type of the migration involved).

reason for focusing primarily on mass media, rather than any other social group in the Twitter debate, is to gain direct insight into whether Twitter facilitates the production of discourse independent of mass media, given that users can create their own content, or whether “traditional” sources of information continue to dominate the debate. In other words, it is crucial to assess whether mass media, which were the principal sources of information on migration developments even before the emergence of social media, continue to dominate the digital media sphere, particularly in the Twitter migration debate.

To achieve our objective, we first outline our theoretical framework for a hybrid study of digital media. Next, by drawing on existing literature, we present the main discourses found in both mass and social media, aiming to establish a foundation for identifying categories for our empirical analysis. This is followed by a literature review clarifying the contribution of our research in studying migration on Twitter from a hybrid perspective. We then detail our research questions, sampling approach, data collection methods, and analysis techniques. Finally, we present our results and then discuss the key findings of our study.

#### THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: OPERATIONALISING MEDIA HYBRIDITY AND INFLUENCE

The hybrid media system model provides a theoretical foundation for examining media hybridity, exemplified in our study by the interplay between Twitter and mass media. However, this model has limited explanatory power in thematising media influence, which is key to understanding power dynamics within the contemporary digital media sphere. To enhance its explanatory capacity, we supplement it with agenda-setting theory (McCombs, 2014) and network theory (Lindgren, 2017; Schroeder, 2018).

The hybrid media system model challenges the linear conception of media history, where one medium supersedes another. Instead, the hybrid approach implies that “older” and “newer” media coexist and interact with the media sphere. This interaction is evident as “newer” social media platforms evolve and “older” media, such as newspapers, radio, and TV, adapt to the dynamics and logic of social media. Therefore, in the contemporary media sphere, no medium can be analysed as “pure” and “separate” from the others, hence we examine Twitter’s interactions with mass media (Chadwick, 2017, 28–48).

The hybrid media system model, while insightful, lacks a thorough theoretical consideration of media influence. Consequently, it alone does not suffice to explain the relevance of focusing on the most influential users and the most retweeted tweets. For this reason, we integrate agenda-setting theory, a

more traditional media theory that originally focused on the impact of mass media on audiences (McCombs, 2014). Agenda-setting theory posits that the media determine the topics considered most important and relevant by the public. Specifically, topics that dominate media reporting tend to generate the greatest public interest (Oblak, 2000; Pajnik, 2003). Accordingly, the media not only determine the “list” of most significant topics, but also suggest how to understand these topics (Ceron et al., 2017, 8). It is important to note, however, that the prominence of certain topics in media discourse does not necessarily reflect their actual importance and relevance to the public, but rather the importance attributed to them by the media. This dynamic often results in marginalisation of topics and perspectives from those lacking power and influence (Weinberg, 2007, 63). Therefore, to comprehend the prevalent public construction of a particular topic in the online digital media sphere, it is necessary to scrutinise the most prominent users and posts. Focusing on the top of the agenda is even more important in the online digital media sphere, where there are numerous posts, but only a small percentage attain visibility and influence (Al-Rawi, 2019).

But how can we determine what will rise to the top of the agenda in the digital media sphere? How can we define these criteria to enable direct translation into empirical analysis? To make this possible, network analysis must also be employed in our research (Lindgren, 2017). According to this approach, not all network users occupy the same position in online debates, as they vary in terms of their influence and activity. The most influential and/or most active users are considered central users (Jesenšek et al., 2021; Xie & Luo, 2019). In our study, we follow the definition of influence as the power of a user to shape others’ opinions on a given topic (e.g., Al-Rawi, 2019; Dang-Xuan et al., 2013). We measure influence using retweets which indicate interest and support for an author and their posts (Metaxas et al., 2021). Thus, the most influential users are those whose tweets receive the most retweets, and the most influential posts are those that garner the most retweets. Furthermore, retweets serve as a measure activity. Accordingly, the most active users are those who generate the most retweets (Jesenšek et al., 2021). From the perspective of agenda-setting theory, central users and the most retweeted tweets occupy the top positions on the Twitter agenda.

Having introduced the assumptions of the three theoretical approaches presented above, it is evident that collectively, they offer significant theoretical potential for studying contemporary digital media. The hybrid media system model provides starting points for examining the interconnectedness of mass and social



media. Complementarily, agenda-setting theory and network theory enhance our understanding of media influence. Agenda-setting theory suggests that users and issues dominating the media agenda exert greater influence, while network theory provides a framework for operationalising influence within a networked digital media sphere.

Finally, our research adopts a critical approach and refrains from making assumptions about whether Twitter has enhanced or diminished current power relations. We do not subscribe to the “optimistic” approach that prevailed at the beginning of the internet era, which presupposed the democratisation of society through “newer” media platforms where users generate content, in contrast to mass media controlled by journalists and editors. Similarly, we reject the “pessimistic” perspective on “newer” media, which categorically dismisses their potential to facilitate democratisation and social change in advance (Avraamidou et al., 2021; Bennett, 2021). Instead, we interpret the results of our analysis in the Discussion section by prioritising a critical approach that does not presuppose “optimistic” or “pessimistic” outcomes in advance but rather focuses on the structural conditions that could explain the findings of our analysis.

#### PRODUCING “OTHERNESS”: MEDIA DISCOURSES CONSTRUCTING THE MIGRANT “CRISIS”

According to previous research on the media construction of the migrant “crisis” (Eberl et al., 2018; Smrdelj, 2021; 2022), migrants who arrived in Europe during this period were portrayed in both mass and social media as “others” in relation to the “dominant” society represented by European citizens. This “Otherness” emerged from negative discourses<sup>5</sup> aimed at justifying the rejection of migrants, notably those related to security, criminalisation, and nationalist discourses. The aforementioned negative discourses on migration are the most prevalent ones encountered in the media (cf. Smrdelj, 2021; 2022).

The security discourse portrays migrants as threats to both public and cultural safety, a view that was intensified by global incidents such as the 9/11 attack, positioning migration predominantly as a security issue (Bigo, 2005). This perspective is complemented by the criminalisation discourse, which labels migrants as criminals for illegal border crossings and alleged offenses such as theft, public disruption, and drug trafficking (Smrdelj & Vogrinc, 2020). Additionally, existing literature discusses “crimmigration,” a term coined to describe the growing interweaving of criminal and migration proceedings (Bajt & Frelj, 2019).

The interplay of security discourse, criminalisation discourse, moral panics, and emergencies results in a “securitization of migration,” (Malešič, 2017; Vezovnik, 2018; Smrdelj & Vogrinc, 2020), which portrays the dominant understanding of contemporary migration as a security issue, overshadowing social, economic, or humanitarian concerns.

In addition to security and criminalisation discourses, migrants are often depicted negatively through nationalist discourse, which emphasises host nation identity, culture, and socioeconomic interests over migrant rights (Ješe Perković & Učakar, 2017). Using Anderson’s (2006) terminology, nationalist discourse describes how a community imagines its nationality and identity in relation to incoming migrants. Mihelj (2004) identifies two distinct types of national imagination in Slovenia’s context: ethno-nationalist, which perceives Slovenia as a country of all blood-related Slovenians to the exclusion of other ethnic groups, and civic-nationalist, which considers all residents with citizenship as Slovenians, regardless of their ethnicity. Moreover, Mihelj (2004) demonstrates that the ethno-nationalist national imagination dominated media reporting during the first and second mass arrivals of migrants to Slovenia.

In addition to unfavourable portrayals of migrants, research indicates that media can also promote sympathy, protection, and support for migrants, providing them with a platform to convey their experiences. A notable example of positive media representation is the humanitarian discourse, which depicts migrants as victims of conflict and poverty. However, this approach can unintentionally perpetuate stereotypes and discriminatory power dynamics by portraying migrants as helpless, thereby undermining their agency, rights, and positive contributions to society (Smrdelj & Vogrinc, 2020). Thus, it is essential to critically examine the implicit assumptions that may unintentionally perpetuate discriminatory and stereotypical exclusionary practises.

#### LITERATURE REVIEW: MIGRATION ON TWITTER FROM THE HYBRID PERSPECTIVE

When examining migration on social media, Twitter is the most commonly studied platform (Smrdelj, 2022), presumably because all Twitter data was freely accessible via the Twitter API until February 2023 (Peters, 2023). However, studies on migration using Twitter rarely employ the hybrid media system model. When applied, it is used in three distinct ways: as a framework for analysing URL links to other online content posted on Twitter (Bennett, 2016; Pöyhtäri et al., 2021); as a model for studying interactions between government, public,

<sup>5</sup> Following Fairclough (1992, 63–64), we define discourse as a set of forms of representation of a particular topic, focusing on how social power relations are represented within a particular text.

and mass media (Ojala et al., 2019); and as a means of studying the relationship between mass and social media, optimistically assuming that the former amplifies the voices of social power and influence, while the latter enables the articulation of all voices, including those of minority groups (Siapera et al., 2018).

The studies mentioned, which focus on different national contexts in Europe, find that politicians, mass media, and established NGOs are central Twitter users. In contrast, “alternative” users tend to occupy less visible positions (Siapera et al., 2018). Furthermore, right-wing political users instrumentalize Twitter’s migration debate (Bennett, 2016). Ojala et al. (2019), however, argue that Finland’s hybrid media system encourages citizens to hold the government accountable. These analyses also reveal that Twitter’s migration debate is dominated by negative discourses such as security and criminalisation discourse (Pöyhkäri et al., 2021; Siapera et al., 2018), as well as by humanitarian discourse, which became particularly prominent when the image of the drowned child Alan Kurdi proliferated online (Bennett, 2016).

In discussions of migration on Twitter derived from “big data”, quantitative digital methods are usually utilised (e.g., Lee & Nerghes, 2017; Nerghes & Lee, 2019), whereas qualitative methodological approaches are typically employed to analyse smaller samples of tweets (e.g., Bozdağ & Smets, 2017; Kreis, 2017). In contrast to this prevailing research trends, our study draws on “big data” and applies qualitative methods. Specifically, we examine the entire Twitter debate during the Slovenian migrant “crisis” using agenda-setting theory to focus on the top users and posts.

Compared to the existing research outlined above, the main contribution of our study is to demonstrate how the hybrid media system model, agenda-setting theory, and network theory form a coherent theoretical framework for analysing digital media, focusing particularly on operationalising media hybridity and media influence in the online digital media sphere. Additionally, our contribution also highlights how “big data” can be analysed using qualitative approaches, specifically through critical discourse studies, as we explain in the following section.

## METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

### Research Questions

Drawing upon the aforementioned theoretical framework, we operationalised hybridity as the interconnectedness between Twitter and mass media in two distinct ways: at the user level and at the discourse level. At the user level, we identified which users associated with mass media participate in the Twitter debate. At the discourse level, we examined whether the discourses in tweets differ from the migration discourses

prevalent in mass media. Additionally, acknowledging the media reality as a hybrid sphere—where content from one medium interacts with another and vice versa—we also assessed whether the most retweeted tweets include a URL link to mass media content.

On the basis of the operationalisation of media hybridity presented above, we formulate the following three research questions that will be addressed in our subsequent analysis:

- RQ 1: Which users generated the most retweets (the most active users)?
- RQ 2: Which users’ tweets were retweeted the most (the most influential users)?
- RQ 3: What are the most retweeted tweets, and what is their discourse?

In addressing the research questions, our focus centred on the mass media perspective, aligned with our theoretical framework for studying media hybridity. However, we presented not only data directly related to mass media but also all available data relevant to each specific question. This comprehensive approach allows us to define the role of mass media in the debate more precisely. For instance, in identifying the most active users, we included all such users, not just those engaged with mass media, to comprehensively analyse their role in the Twitter debate in relation to other user groups.

### Sample & Data Collection

The sample consists of 3,103 users who generated 35,543 tweets (13,189 of which were retweets) between 1 September and 31 December 2015, during the peak of the migrant “crisis” in Slovenia. Data were collected through the Twitter API using Academic Research Access on 25 April 2021, in collaboration with Uroš Godnov, PhD, of the Institute for Data Quality (Slovenian: Inštitut za kakovost podatkov, d.o.o.). The sample included all Slovenian posts containing at least one of the following hashtags, words, and/or root words: “#begunci”, “#migranti”, “#begunskakriza”, “#migrantskakriza”, “#ilegalnimigranti”, “#ilegalci”, “#prebežniki”, “#ŽičnaOgraja”, “begun-”, “migra-”, “prebežni-”, “ilegal-” in “azil-”.

### Data Analysis Methods

We exported the data from R software to Microsoft Excel for processing using pivot tables, generating three key lists: 1) the users who generated the most retweets (most active); 2) the users whose tweets were most retweeted (most influential); and 3) the most retweeted tweets (most influential posts), each limited to the top twenty. This list-making approach follows the methodologies described by Jesenšek et al. (2021) and Al-Rawi (2019).

In analysing the 20 most active and influential users, our goal was to categorise users based on their connection to mass media (journalists, editors, or media institutions) under the “mass media” category. Additionally, we classified other users into specific categories: those identifiable by their username or profile photo but not publicly recognised as “publicly unknown users”; those using pseudonyms or non-representative images as “anonymous users”; inactive accounts as “unidentifiable”; users involved in parliamentary politics as “political elite”; and users by their professions, such as chemists. We also aimed to identify “weak publics,” including NGOs or social minority representatives.

In our analysis of the top active and influential users, we noticed that some were distinguishable by their known political leanings. Thus, we categorised users based on political orientation when they were publicly recognised for aligning with specific political stances or ideologies within political networks (e.g., left-wing or right-wing). We refrained from assigning political orientations to users without public recognition due to the impossibility of accurately determining their stances. Similarly, we avoided categorising the political orientations of publicly known users when their political leanings were undisclosed or unclear. Our aim in identifying political orientations was to gain insights into the variety of political networks engaging in the debate, acknowledging the complexity of accurately identifying users’ political affiliations and limiting this categorisation to cases where it is publicly evident.

After examining the twenty most active and influential users, our analysis shifted to the twenty most retweeted tweets, conducting a discourse analysis on each. As part of our study on media hybridity, we examined the discourse of the most retweeted tweets to examine whether they resembled the discourses prevalent in the mass media. Furthermore, we specifically sought tweets that contained URL links to mass media content, incorporating this content into our discourse analysis whenever present.

Critical discourse studies (CDS) (Krzyzanowski & Machin, 2017) have been applied to the discourse analysis of each tweet and the potential mass media content accessible via URL links. CDS examines how language legitimises unequal social relations. In this instance, we analyse the social relations between the “dominant” society (the citizens of the host country) and the “minority” society (the migrants). Our discourse analysis primarily focuses on how language establishes and legitimises these social relations, as well as its efforts to disclose and deconstruct them. Fairclough’s (1992) dialectical-relational approach aligns most closely with our perspective within CDS. He contends

that media texts not only reflect and represent social relations, but also concurrently construct and constitute them (Fairclough, 1992, 3). Consequently, power relations are always implicitly embedded within a particular discourse that legitimises hierarchies through ideological mechanisms, and CDS seeks to reveal these mechanisms (Smrdelj & Pajnik, 2022; Smrdelj, 2024).

In our discourse analysis of the most retweeted tweets, we examined how the acceptance or rejection of migrants is justified within the Twitter debate. We were interested in determining whether migrants are portrayed negatively within security or criminalisation discourses, or if efforts exist to counteract such stereotypes through humanitarian discourse. Additionally, we considered the presence of migration discourses outside established categories (e.g., security, criminalisation, nationalist, humanitarian). Our goal was to determine whether the discourse in the most retweeted tweets mirrored that in the mass media, or if an independent migration discourse was emerging, distinct from traditional media and other social power structures.

The presentation of the results is structured into three sections, each addressing one of our research questions. In presenting the results, we clearly identify the aspects relevant to understanding media hybridity. These aspects are explored in depth in the subsequent discussion.

## RESULTS OF THE ANALYSIS

### Most Active Users

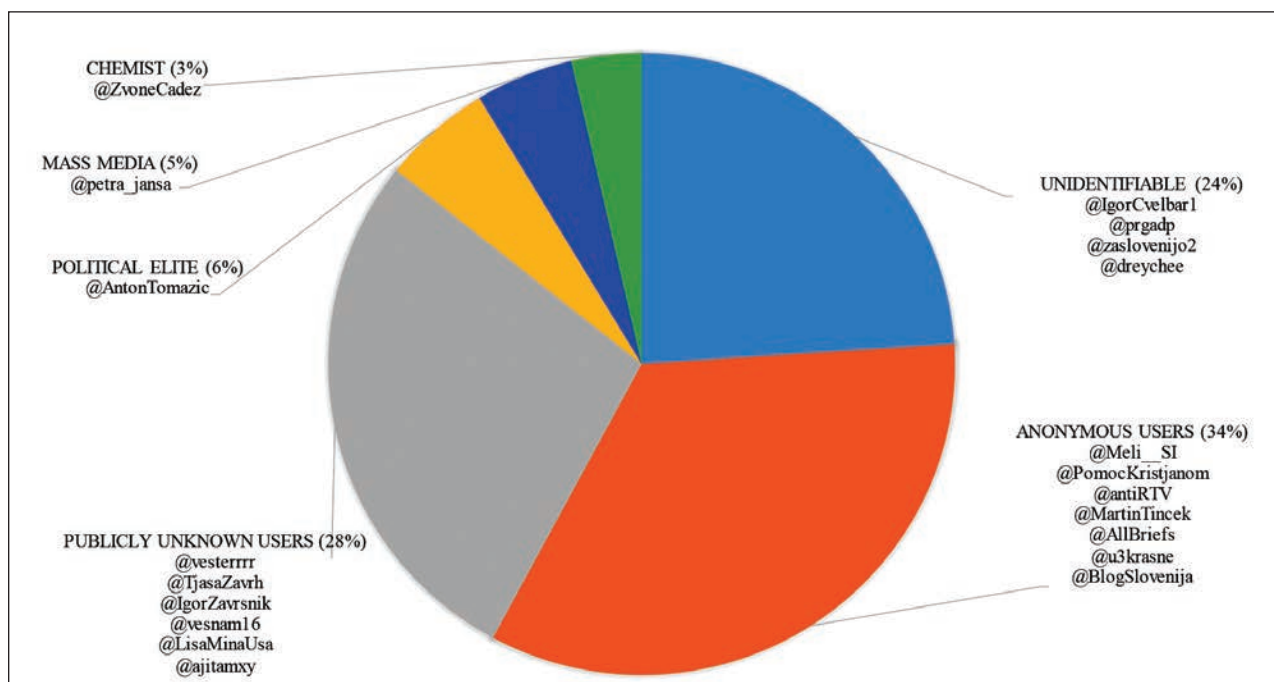
Table 1 lists the sample’s most active users based on the number of retweets they generated. It shows each user’s rank (first column), username (second column), number of retweets (third column), and a category (fourth column), determined by the criteria described in the methodology section above.

According to the classification of users depicted in Graph 1, it is revealed that 62% of the retweets generated by the most active users were produced by publicly unknown and anonymous users. When including unidentifiable users—who are presumed to also be anonymous, as they used pseudonyms—the proportion of retweets produced by publicly unknown users rises to 86%. Only three users, representing the political elite, mass media, and the field of chemistry, are publicly recognised. Together, they accounted for 14% of all retweets generated by the most active users. Based on their public recognition, it can be speculated that all three are connected to the right-wing Slovenian political network.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> The first profile likely represents Anton Tomažič, a former politician and MP. The second profile probably pertains to Petra Janša, a journalist for the right-wing weekly *Demokracija*. The third profile likely belongs to Zvone Čadež, a chemist, member of the right-wing Slovenian Democratic Party (SDP), and current CEO at the University Rehabilitation Institute of the Republic of Slovenia Soča.

Table 1: Most active users.

Rank	Users	Retweets	Category	Political Orientation
1	@IgorCvelbar1	238	unidentifiable	/
2	@prgadp	206	unidentifiable	/
3	@Meli_SI	191	anonymous user	/
4	@vesterrrr	190	publicly unknown user	/
5	@TjasaZavrh	189	publicly unknown user	/
6	@AntonTomazic	184	political elite	right-wing
7	@zaslovenijo2	179	unidentifiable	/
8	@IgorZavrsnik	174	publicly unknown user	/
9	@PomocKristjanom	168	anonymous user	/
10	@petra_jansa	165	mass media	right-wing
11	@antiRTV	164	anonymous user	/
12	@MartinTincek	161	anonymous user	/
13	@dreychee	160	unidentifiable	/
14	@AllBriefs	158	anonymous user	/
15	@u3krasne	138	anonymous user	/
16	@BlogSlovenija	127	anonymous user	/
17	@vesnam16	119	publicly unknown user	/
18	@LisaMinaUsa	119	publicly unknown user	/
19	@ZvoneCadez	118	chemist	right-wing
20	@ajitamxy	118	publicly unknown user	/
	<b>Total</b>	<b>3,266</b>		



Graph 1: Proportions of most active users by category and their retweet production (Source: own analysis).

In the context of our examination on media hybridity, it is noteworthy that only one user, accounting for 5% of all retweets made by the most active users, has ties to the mass media. This profile likely belongs to already mentioned Petra Janša, a journalist from the weekly magazine *Demokracija*.

### Most Influential Users

Table 2 lists the most influential users based on the number of retweets their posts received. It shows each user's rank (first column), username (second column), number of retweets (third column), and a category (fourth column), determined by the criteria described in the methodology section above.

In contrast to the most active users, the most influential users are—with the penultimate user in Table 2 as the only exception—publicly recognised actors. Data in Graph 2 reveals that 65% of the retweeted posts from the most influential users in the sample originated from users associated with the mass media, 28% from the political elite, 4% from a user publicly known as an architect, and only 3% from an anonymous user.

In the context of our examination of media hybridity, it is important to note that among the most influential mass media-related users, we find eight mass media (Reporter, Nova24TV, 24ur.com, Domovina, Delo, STA, Demokracija, Večer), four Slovenian journalists (Peter Žerjavič, Srdjan Cvjetović, Bojan Požar, Vinko Vasle) and one editor (Jože Biščak). Print media dominate, while television media represent a smaller proportion. Furthermore, non-commercial mass media (e.g., public broadcaster RTV Slovenia, Radio Student) and radio media do not feature among the top twenty most influential users.

Excluding the Slovenian government profile, all political elite users are right-wing and closely associated with the right-wing SDP, which was the largest opposition parliamentary party during the migrant “crisis” in Slovenia. Similarly, right-wing mass media-related users are prominent, with the top two influential mass media users being right-wing oriented (Reporter, Nova24TV). Specifically, 64% of the retweeted posts from the most influential users in the sample originated from users that can be related to the right-wing political network.

### Most Retweeted Tweets

Table 3 displays a list of the top twenty retweeted tweets. Since the data obtained does not contain full tweet content (e.g., attached images), we additionally

examined the original Twitter posts using their ID number.<sup>7</sup> Our discourse analysis revealed that the top twenty retweeted tweets can be divided into two categories. The first category includes posts that reinforce negative stereotypes about migrants (posts 1, 2, 7, 8, and 12–19) (59%).<sup>8</sup> Among these, posts 2, 7, 8, 13, 14, and 19 are based on security-related discourse, representing 31%. The second category consists of posts that utilise an inclusive and empowering discourse to challenge negative perceptions of migrants (posts 3–6, 9–11, and 20), making up 41% of the list. In the following, we present both categories in detail.

In the first category, the discourse of the Slovenian police reinforces the perception of migrants as “others” by accentuating their “foreignness” (post 1). Furthermore, the “majority” is portrayed as a “minority” and vice versa. Specifically, members of the “dominant” society (Slovenes) are portrayed as “second-class” victims of violence, while migrants are denied minority status (post 15). Moreover, government statistics classify migrants as “deserving” (mothers and children) and “undeserving” (young males over 18 who should remain and defend their own nations) (post 18). Migrants are also blamed for economic harm in areas adjacent to the Slovenian border (post 16). Slovenia is portrayed as a transit country, not a destination country like Germany, which discourages the reception of migrants (post 17). Another aspect contributing the construction of migration as a “crisis” is the outrage over Greeks providing a map to “illegal migrants” that directs them to Slovenia (post 12).

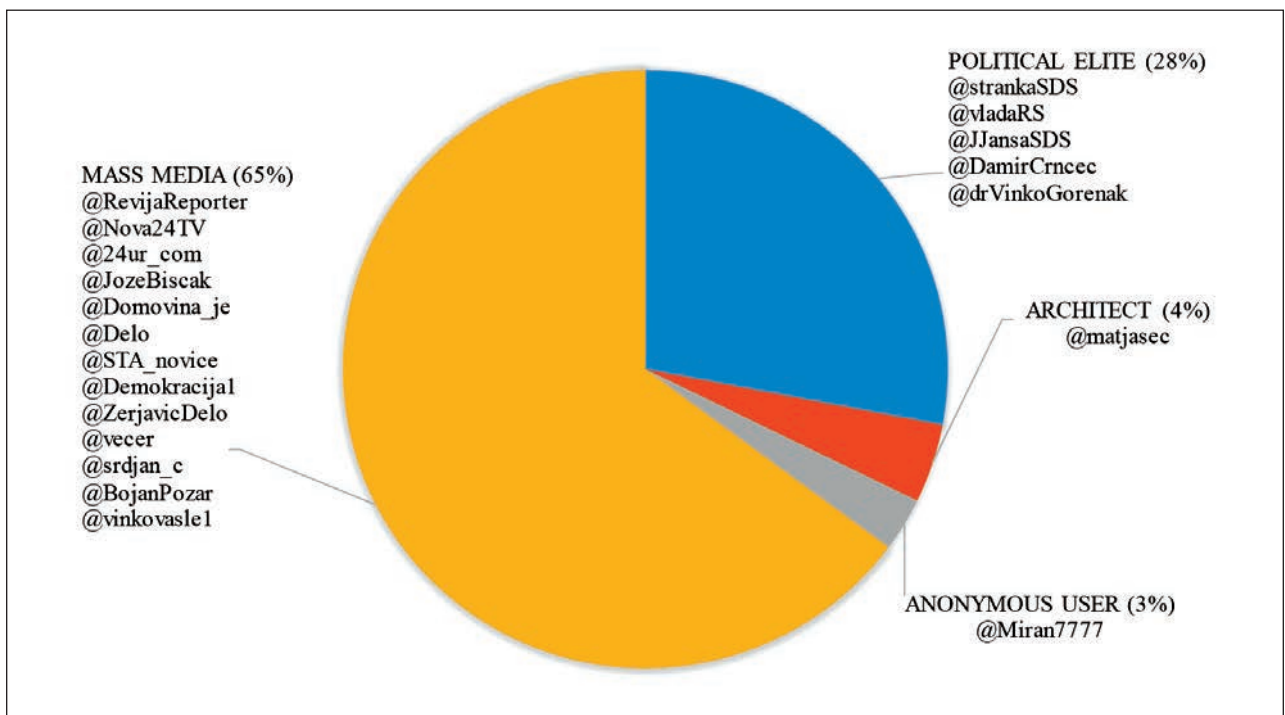
The perception of migrants as a security risk to the “dominant” society particularly notable within first category of posts. Numerous security measures are demanded in the context of portraying migrants as security threats. For example, to prevent migrants from entering Slovenia, the Slovenian government is pressured to close the country's borders, following the example of Hungary (post 2). Additionally, stricter asylum laws and a discriminatory Islamic law akin to those in Austria are also advocated (post 8). The state's repressive apparatuses, such as the police and army, are accorded a prominent role in managing migration, suggesting that migration is primarily viewed as a security concern (post 14). Mocking the concept of hate speech, “refugees” are cynically associated with “terrorists” (post 13), and the uncontrolled entrance of migrants is condemned as a threat to Slovenia's security (post 19). There are concerns about the government's transparency regarding security screenings of migrants, suggesting that potentially harmful migrants may be allowed entry into the country (post 7).

<sup>7</sup> For the purpose of this study, we translated the original Slovenian tweets into English, ensuring the preservation of the original punctuation and stylistic nuances.

<sup>8</sup> This share, along with others in this subsection on the most retweeted tweets, refers to the total number of retweets the top 20 posts received.

**Table 2: Most influential users (Source: own analysis).**

Rank	Users	Retweets	Category	Political Orientation
1	@RevijaReporter	448	mass media	right-wing
2	@strankaSDS	326	political elite	right-wing
3	@Nova24TV	311	mass media	right-wing
4	@24ur_com	309	mass media	/
5	@vladaRS	301	political elite	/
6	@JozeBiscak	291	mass media	right-wing
7	@Domovina_je	236	mass media	right-wing
8	@JJansaSDS	235	political elite	right-wing
9	@Delo	184	mass media	/
10	@matjasec	179	architect	/
11	@DamirCrncec	171	political elite	right-wing
12	@STA_novice	154	mass media	/
13	@drVinkoGorenak	146	political elite	right-wing
14	@Demokracija1	146	mass media	right-wing
15	@ZerjavicDelo	139	mass media	/
16	@vecer	138	mass media	/
17	@srdjan_c	137	mass media	right-wing
18	@BojanPozar	124	mass media	right-wing
19	@Miran7777	122	anonymous user	/
20	@vinkovasle1	115	mass media	right-wing
	Total	4,212		



**Graph 2: Proportion of most influential users by category (social group) (Source: own analysis).**

The second category of posts challenges the negative stereotypes associated with migrants. Specifically, the security discourse is deconstructed by explaining that migrants are fleeing danger rather than posing a threat (posts 3 and 9). The binary stereotyping of “us” and “them” is also dismantled by elaborating that the problem lies not with “them,” the “refugees,” but with the “domestic phobias” of “us” representing the “dominant” society (post 6). In addition, the notion that migrants will Islamise Europe is countered by highlighting their pursuit of a better life, as opposed to “priests” who travelled under the guise of humanitarian work to spread Christianity (post 5). The perception of arriving “migrants” as “others” and “non-Europeans” is deconstructed by pointing out that “our,” “European,” identity is founded on historical figures such as Jesus Christ and Primož Trubar, who had similar experiences to the migrants arriving in Slovenia (post 10). A humanitarian discourse is established by providing prepaid phone cards to migrants (post 11) and by exposing the contradictions of the anti-humanitarian discourse, which argues that Slovenia cannot afford to help “refugees” because we must first care for “our own” people in need. It is revealed that when migrants are present, Slovenians in need are given priority; in their absence, such concerns may not receive equivalent attention (post 4). Additionally, post 20 includes a photograph of a sleeping migrant infant on the floor and urges the then-Prime Minister Miro Cerar to take action against such human suffering.

The labels used to describe migrants varies across the analysed posts. In the first category, migrants are often labelled as “foreigners” (e.g., in police discourse) or as “illegal migrants” in posts focused on security issues. The term “illegal migrants” emphasises their non-legal status resulting from illegal border crossings, overshadowing all other facets of their complex migration experience by portraying them primarily as criminals (Žagar Žnidaršič, 2018). In contrast, the term “refugee” is the most commonly used in discourse that aims to be non-discriminatory towards migrants. This usage likely stems from the notably advantageous status the term conveys, granting migrants numerous benefits and rights.

In our analysis of media hybridity, it is notable that only two of the top twenty most retweeted tweets (posts 12 and 15) include links to mass media content, accounting for 9%. Post 12 references a reaction from Slovenia to a map distributed to “illegal migrants” in Greece, citing the Croatian online news source *Jutranji List*. In this context, then-Interior Minister of Croatia Ranko Ostojić was reported saying that Croatia has a contingency plan should Hungary close its borders. However, post 12 utilises this news piece to question whether Slovenia is similarly prepared for such an eventuality. In post 15, the author challenges

perceptions by asking if anyone has witnessed “refugee” violence, referencing a statement by Danilo Türk in an Al Jazeera Balkans news article. This rhetorical question aims to refute the portrayal of migrants as a minority group and instead suggest that Slovenians are the true victims of “violence” due to the migrant situation. In contrast, the discourse in the news tends to be more positive towards migrants, framing migration as a humanitarian issue, yet still distinguishing between “deserving” and “undeserving” migrants.

## DISCUSSION

Our analysis revealed that most of the top active users are not publicly known (RQ 1). The majority of the most influential users are members of the right-leaning media and political elite (RQ 2). Additionally, the discourse analysis of the top twenty retweeted tweets reveals that these posts predominantly engage in discourse that aims to reinforce negative stereotypes about migrants, focusing on security concerns associated with migrant arrivals (RQ 3).

In accordance with the hybrid media system model, the interplay between mass media and Twitter was operationalised at the levels of users and discourses. This interaction proved significant, particularly in the case of the most influential users and the most retweeted tweets. Notably, posts from influential users affiliated with mass media accounted for the highest proportion of retweets (65%), underscoring their pivotal role in shaping the Twitter debate. These users adeptly adapting to Twitter’s media logic, using the platform as a conduit for disseminating their content. Moreover, the discourse practices observed in the top twenty most retweeted tweets on migration, encompassing both security and humanitarian discourse, reflect those commonly seen in mass media reporting (Smrdelj, 2021). This indicates a similarity in the dominant discourses between Twitter and mass media.

Conversely, the interaction between mass media and Twitter proved to be minimal concerning the most active users and the inclusion of URL links. Mass media accounts for only 5% of all retweets generated by the most active users. Given that Twitter debates are typically driven by publicly unknown users who retweet the posts of influential users (cf. Jesenšek et al., 2021), it is not surprising that media and other publicly visible social groups, such as politicians, do not dominate among the most active users. Similarly, only two of the top twenty most retweeted tweets include URL links to mass media content. This observation leads to the speculation that “algorithms” (Onitui, 2021) may be designed to keep users engaged on the platform for extended periods. Consequently, they tend to display content that does not contain URL links to

**Table 3: Most frequently retweeted tweets (Source: own analysis).**

Rank	Text	Retweets
1	RT @policija_si: According to initial data, the police used gas spray against violent protesters, not against foreigners. #begunci	50
2	RT @JjansaSDS: Hungary will close its border with Croatia for migrants tomorrow. We urge the@vladaRS to take the same measure simultaneously.	46
3	RT @FranciKek: How can someone be so stupid and evil not to see that refugees are fleeing from what happened in Paris and are not part of ISIS.	41
4	RT @Pizama: A: Children are hungry. Let's help them. B: There are no hungry children here. This is propaganda. A: Let's help refugees. B: Why doesn't anyone help children?	39
5	RT @SafetAlibeg: When refugees knock on Europe's door, it is Islamization, when priests go to Africa to spread faith in Jesus, it is humanitarian work.	36
6	RT @SafetAlibeg: Our problem is not refugees. They will come and mostly leave. Our problem is domestic phobias. They will stay.	36
7	RT @JjansaSDS: They are lying to you how they security-check every migrant. And take finger prints. @vladaRS is lying to you big time. <a href="https://t.co/O5ty3...">https://t.co/O5ty3 ...</a>	35
8	RT @ZanMahnic: Measures FOR security: 1.) Immediate border closure for all illegal migrants 2.) Changes in asylum legislation 3.) Law on Islam modelled on Austria	34
9	RT @ntokomc: We need open borders and safe passage for refugees. Everything else is barbarism that we will pay dearly for. #blog <a href="http://t.co/C...">http://t.co/C ...</a>	31
10	RT @ervinmh: Christ was a refugee. So was Trubar. If they had drowned, we wouldn't have Christian foundations.	31
11	RT @TelekomSlo: We will help refugees stay connected with their relatives using prepaid cards. We want to at least slightly brighten their day. <a href="http://...">http:// ...</a>	30
12	RT @DamirCrncec: How will we in Slovenia take a stance on the map that the Greeks are sharing to illegal migrants? <a href="http://t.co/k7VSIKA9rG">http://t.co/k7VSIKA9rG</a> <a href="http://t...">http://t ...</a>	30
13	RT @BojanPozar: One French terrorist came to Paris as a refugee. Now I don't exactly know, is reporting about this hate speech or not. I'm waiting for advice from @nmusar.	29
14	RT @JjansaSDS: Slovenia is grateful to @policija_si @Slovenskavojska volunteers and everyone else working to manage the migrant "surprise"	29
15	RT @freewiseguy: Did anyone notice violence against refugees? I only noticed it against Slovenians. Against second-class people. <a href="https://t.co/bPkemmnHUn">https://t.co/bPkemmnHUn</a>	28
16	RT @JjansaSDS: @MiroCerar is responsible for the economic damage in border municipalities, who stupidly rejected the proposal of the RH for trains with refugees to run through Dobova.	28
17	RT @DamirCrncec: Now that GER has closed borders for illegal migrants, there is no target country anymore. This means that they will stay between TUR and Austria. What does this mean for SLO?	26
18	RT @vladaRS: In the last week, 47,510 migrants or #begunci arrived in Slovenia, 45% are women and minors, 55% Syrians, 25% Afghan. <a href="https://t...">https://t...</a>	25
19	RT @juretepinja: Croatia is playing a very dirty game. It stops trains far before the border and lets immigrants cross the border uncontrollably. This is how smugglers do it.	25
20	RT @borutmekina: @MiroCerar The night is coming. The children are getting sleepy. #begunci <a href="http://t.co/U03jaV0ZcF">http://t.co/U03jaV0ZcF</a>	24
	<b>Total</b>	<b>653</b>



external sites, aiming at maximising user retention on the platform. This strategy could explain why the most retweeted tweets predominantly lack URL links to external content.

Despite the less evident connection between mass media and Twitter concerning the most active users and URL links, the relationship observed with the most influential users and the discourse of the most retweeted tweets still underscores the significant role mass media plays in shaping the Twitter agenda on the migration debate. The following sections provide a more detailed interpretation of these results, first examining the impact at the user level and then delving into the discourse dynamics of the most retweeted tweets.

Building on the critical Internet perspective outlined in the theoretical section of our article, we argue that the dominance of “older” mass media actors predating Twitter’s emergence—such as 24ur.com, Delo, and Večer newspapers—can be explained through Herman & Chomsky’s framework (2002, xvi). They posit that the most successful media actors online were already successful before the advent of the Internet, attributing this success to substantial economic capital and large pre-existing audiences that facilitated their effective transition into the digital media sphere. Consequently, these “older” media actors rank among the most influential users on Twitter. However, the significant presence of right-leaning media such as *Nova24TV* and *Domovina*, established concurrently with the migrant “crisis”, cannot be explained by the same factors as they were not previously present in the Slovenian media sphere. We believe that their influence stems from strategic Twitter utilisation. According to Amon Prodnik (2016, 152), Slovenian political parties such as SDP trained members to use social media to promote the party’s agenda. As both mass media (particularly *Nova24TV*) support the SDP’s agenda, it is reasonable to speculate that their tweets were extensively retweeted by party members and other supporters. This explains both their influential position and the dominance of right-leaning SDP-affiliated politicians in our study.

With regard to the discourses of the most retweeted tweets, it is important to note that the occurrence of security discourse in the Slovenian migration debate on Twitter in 2015 mirrors broader trends in public’s perception of migration in Slovenia. Notably, Malešič (2017) discovered through an analysis of Slovenian public opinion data that concerns over migration as a security issue surged among the Slovenian public when the SDP, known for its strong security-focused stance on migration, gained considerable support compared to other Slovenian political parties. Our research corroborates these findings, demonstrating that SDP politicians

were pivotal in shaping the Slovenian Twitter migration debate. Additionally, the most influential Twitter users were predominantly right-wing mass media, promoting a security-focused perspective on migration. Moreover, as the perception of migration as a security issue prevailed among the Slovenian public, this viewpoint also laid the groundwork for legitimising various security policies and legislative measures implemented by the Slovenian government at the time, such as the erection of a razor-wire fence along the border (cf. Malešič, 2017).

To understand why the perception of migration as a security issue prevails both in the general Slovenian public and in our sample of retweets, it is necessary to compare the 2015–2016 migrant “crisis” with the first (1992–1993) and second (1999–2001) mass arrivals in Slovenia. The earlier periods were characterised by an ethno-nationalist framework that viewed Slovenia as a nation of citizens bound by blood and kinship (Mihelj, 2004). However, when analysing the top twenty retweeted tweets from the third period, it is challenging to identify a distinct ethno-nationalist tone; instead, a security-focused perspective on migration stands out. These differences in discourse can be attributed to the different socio-historical conditions prevailing at the time. The first and the second mass arrivals occurred before migration was widely regarded as a security issue. The global impact of events such as the 9/11 attacks has contributed to the shift towards viewing migration as a security concern (Bigo, 2005). It appears that right-wing actors in Slovenia have adopted discriminatory discursive practices prevalent worldwide, which have strengthened and spread after 2001, leading to the replacement of ethno-nationalist discourse with security discourse in the third period. However, this hypothesis is based on the prominence of security discourse and the absence of explicit ethno-nationalist discourse in our sample of the top twenty retweeted tweets. To determine whether security discourse has indeed replaced ethno-nationalist discourse in the third period, a comprehensive historical comparative analysis would be required, examining the role of security discourse during all three mass arrivals.

In conclusion, a hybrid approach to analysing Twitter has provided valuable insights by uncovering the mass media’s role in the migration debate through influential users and dominant discourses. Moreover, our study reveals how the Slovenian right promotes a security-focused migration discourse that is not authentically rooted in the Slovenian “national” understanding of migration, but was likely imported from abroad. Furthermore, the findings illuminate how the Slovenian right had skilfully appropriated the migration debate on Twitter as early as 2015. This likely indicates that

Slovenian right-wing actors recognised the importance of Twitter communication prior to Donald Trump's presidency, whose expert use of Twitter (cf. Chadwick, 2017) probably served as an inspiration for many like-minded allies around the world.

### CONCLUSION

Our research into the role of mass media in shaping the Twitter agenda during the migrant "crisis" in Slovenia reveals that mass media play a significant role in setting the agenda within the Twitter migration debate. The analysis of the most influential users in this debate shows that mass media actors are prominently represented among these users. This group includes users associated with both "older" mass media, which existed before Twitter, and "newer" mass media, which emerged in the current hybrid media sphere. The majority of these mass media users can be categorised as having a right-wing political orientation. Moreover, right-wing politicians are also significant, ranking alongside mass media as the second most influential group. Thus, our data not only highlight the dominance of mass media in the Twitter migration debate but also the prevalence of a right-wing political network.

The influence of mass media on the structure of the migration debate on Twitter is also evident at the level of discourse analysis of the most retweeted tweets. In particular, the coexistence of security discourse with the humanitarian perception of mi-

gration indicates that the migration discourse on Twitter does not significantly diverge from the discourse prevalent in mass media. Furthermore, the emergence of security discourse in the Slovenian migration debate on Twitter in 2015 reflects broader trends in the public's perception of migration in Slovenia. This suggests that the migration agenda on Twitter aligns with the prevailing views on migration in the Slovenian public sphere.

Future research may investigate how mass media content is incorporated into the Twitter migration debate through hyperlinks. Considering the influence of mass media users revealed in our study, it is essential to conduct a URL link analysis (Pöyhtäri et al., 2021) on our current sample to better comprehend the role of mass media content. Additionally, a historical examination of security discourse during Slovenia's three mass arrivals could shed light on the specificities of migratory practises in different socio-historical contexts, particularly from the perspective of the ethno-nationalist discourse that was prominent during the country's first and second mass arrivals. Finally, researching Twitter's migration discourse from an intersectional perspective, particularly concerning the religious dimension (Jurekovič, 2018; 2020; 2023; 2024), is vital for future research, as the "Islam" identity (Mandelc & Gajić, 2022; Pušnik, 2017) is central to the formation of "otherness" in relation to an allegedly "European" identity (Ješe Perković, 2014).

## KDO DOLOČA AGENDO V HIBRIDNI MEDIJSKI SFERI? VLOGA MNOŽIČNIH MEDIJEV V SLOVENSKI MIGRACIJSKI RAZPRAVI NA TWITTERJU (X)

Rok SMRDELJ

Univerza v Ljubljani, Filozofska fakulteta, Oddelek za sociologijo, Aškerčeva cesta 2, 1000 Ljubljana, Slovenija  
e-mail: rok.smrdelj@ff.uni-lj.si

## POVZETEK

Medijska sfera je v zadnjih desetletjih doživela številne tehnološke in družbene spremembe. Eden od pristopov, ki celovito zajame te spremembe, je model hibridnega medijskega sistema, ki predpostavlja hkratno proučevanje »starejših« in »novejših« medijskih institucij, praks in vsebin. Ta model je izhodišče naše raziskave, v kateri smo proučevali vlogo množičnih medijev pri konstrukciji agende na Twitterju (danes X) v obdobju migrantske »krize« v Sloveniji. Naša analiza je razkrila, da so med najvplivnejšimi uporabniki prevladovali akterji, povezani s »starejšimi« in »novejšimi« množičnimi mediji, s pretežno desno politično usmeritvijo. Poleg predstavnikov množičnih medijev so bili med najvplivnejšimi uporabniki tudi predstavniki desničarskega političnega omrežja. Na ravni analize diskurza najbolj retvitanih tvitov smo ugotovili soobstoj varnostnega in humanitarnega razumevanja migracij. Navedena ugotovitev nakazuje, da se prevladujoči migracijski diskurzi na Twitterju niso bistveno razlikovali od tistih, ki so bili običajno prisotni v množičnih medijih. Obstoj varnostnega diskurza v razpravi kaže tudi na to, da je slovenska migracijska razprava na Twitterju v letu 2015 odražala širše trende v javnem dojemanju migracij v Sloveniji. Osrednji prispevek naše raziskave je, da pokažemo, kako model hibridnega medijskega sistema, teorija prednostnega tematiziranja in teorija omrežij tvorijo koherenten pristop za proučevanje digitalnih medijev, s poudarkom na operacionalizaciji hibridnosti in vpliva v sodobni digitalni medijski sferi. Metodološki prispevek pa je v tem, da ponazorimo, kako je mogoče veliko količino podatkov (ang. big data) analizirati s kvalitativnimi metodami, konkretno s kritičnimi študijami diskurza.

**Ključne besede:** migrantska »kriza«, Twitter (X), množični mediji, hibridni medijski sistem, varnostni diskurz, politični akterji, desnica

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