

# AS FAR AS PAKS FROM FUKUSHIMA: THE PRESENTATION OF THE NUCLEAR ACCIDENT IN THE HUNGARIAN ELECTRONIC MEDIA

*Qualitative analysis*

*Prepared by*

*Dr. Balázs Bodó, Kempelen Research*

*by the order of the Energiaklub Climate Policy Institute – Applied Communications*

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## **Executive summary**

In our study we analyze how the mainstream Hungarian online press discussed the events of the Fukushima nuclear accident. We were asked to focus on the Hungarian contexts and analyze the ways atomic energy; the Paks Nuclear Power Plant and the Hungarian energy policy were mentioned and discussed in the context of the Japanese events.

We have conducted our analysis on articles longer than 4000 characters<sup>1</sup>, published in the six most important<sup>2</sup> Hungarian online news outlets, between the 11<sup>th</sup> of March and the 11<sup>th</sup> of May. We used qualitative content analysis methods to study:

- the sources of information in the articles, their variety, background, etc.
- the possible bias of sources, and
- the possible journalistic bias manifest in the use of language.

In our analysis we came to the following conclusions.

### **On the individual journalist's level:**

- We found one reporter, who has a clear (pro-nuclear) bias. He works for the biggest online news portal (index), and was apparently charged with covering the Fukushima events.
- In other news sources the main issue of reporting was not bias, but difficulties with reporting the highly technical details of nuclear technology, radiation, etc. These

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<sup>1</sup> The length requirement allowed us to focus on background, reports and analysis instead of news updates. It also helped to reduce the number of articles to a manageable quantity.

<sup>2</sup> In the six analyzed news organizations there are the two biggest online-only portals (index and origo), the online versions of the two biggest political daily newspapers (Népszabadság and Magyar Nemzet), and the online portals of the two biggest weekly magazines with economic focus (HVG and Figyelő).

difficulties translated into misleading, confusing or simply inaccurate information being published on the events.

**On the sources:**

- The articles in our study rely on a narrow Hungarian expert base to explain, contextualize and analyze the events in and around Fukushima, nuclear energy and energy policy.
- The attention and space given to these experts is very unevenly distributed. While the most popular expert is cited in 42% of the articles, the majority of experts have only one or two chances to express their opinion.
- The most often cited expert is far from being neutral. The head of the Nuclear Technology Institute at the Budapest University of Technology and Economics is an academic expert, who nevertheless has a vested existential interest in the political and popular support of nuclear energy and the public investment in the only Hungarian Nuclear power plant: Paks.
- This expert has routinely overstepped his core expertise in nuclear technology and was actively communicating in health, geology and energy policy topics.

**Journalistic handling of sources:**

- Most news organizations rely on a narrow selection of experts sources. Expert sources offering alternative explanations to the causes and consequences of the accident are rare to appear, and they certainly do not appear in the same article. Different approaches, explanations do not have a chance to meet and clash in the same articles.
- The news organizations fail to address or acknowledge the bias and conflict of interest of their most important expert contributor/source.

**In relation to the Paks Nuclear Power Plant:**

- The message in the Hungarian online press was that Paks is safe, though we have found no statements to fully support this claim.

In summary due to the aforementioned reasons we can establish a clear pro-nuclear bias in the reporting of the events, causes and consequences of the Fukushima incident.