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**Politicization of WHO during COVID-19 pandemic in
Czech media**

Bachelor's Thesis

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Year of the defence: 2024

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In Prague on 3rd January 2024

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Abstract

This bachelor thesis delves into the portrayal of the World Health Organization (WHO) by Czech media during the critical period of the COVID-19 pandemic, aiming to understand the nature of media coverage and its implications on public perception. The study examines whether individuals with lower socio-economic status and educational levels are predisposed to engage with media that casts the WHO in a negative light. Utilizing a dataset from the Newton Media database, the thesis employs quantitative analysis to assess the sentiment of media coverage and consumption patterns across different demographic groups in Czechia. Through rigorous statistical testing, the research reveals significant correlations between socio-economic and educational demographics with preferences for negative media portrayals of the WHO, aligning with the theory that such groups may be more skeptical of international cooperation. This investigation contributes to the academic discourse on the media's role in shaping public opinion during global health crises and offers insights into the socio-political dynamics that influence media consumption.

Abstrakt

Tato bakalářská práce se zabývá zobrazováním Světové zdravotnické organizace (WHO) v českých médiích během kritického období pandemie COVID-19 a snaží se pochopit povahu mediálního pokrytí a jeho dopady na veřejné vnímání. Studie zkoumá, zda jsou jednotlivci s nižším socioekonomickým statusem a vzděláním náchylní k zaujetí mediálních obsahů, které WHO prezentují v negativním světle. Využívající dataset z databáze Newton Media, práce používá kvantitativní analýzu k hodnocení sentimentu mediálního pokrytí a vzorců konzumace různými demografickými skupinami v České republice. Prostřednictvím důkladného statistického testování výzkum odhaluje významné korelace mezi socioekonomickými a vzdělanostními demografickými údaji a preferencemi negativních mediálních zobrazení WHO, což je v souladu s teorií, že takové skupiny mohou být skeptičtější vůči mezinárodní spolupráci. Toto šetření přispívá k akademické diskusi o roli médií ve formování veřejného mínění během globálních zdravotních krizí a nabízí vhledy do sociopolitických dynamik, které ovlivňují konzumaci médií.

Keywords

Politicization, WHO, pandemics, COVID-19, Czech media

Klíčová slova

Politizace, WHO, pandemie, COVID-19, česká media

Title

Politicization of WHO during COVID-19 pandemic in Czech media

Název práce

Politizace WHO v českých médiích během pandemie COVID-19

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List of abbreviations

IO	international organization
WHO	World Health Organization
UN	United Nations
EU	European Union
WHA	World Health Assembly
WTO	World Trade Organization
IMF	International Monetary Fund
IHR	International Health Regulations
USA	United States of America

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has not only catalyzed a global health crisis but also highlighted the complexities of politicization within international health governance. This is particularly evident in the case of the World Health Organization (WHO), which has come under scrutiny and faced challenges to its authority and legitimacy. The politicization of global health institutions, a phenomenon observed, e.g. during the Trump administration in the U.S., is crucial to understanding the broader dynamics of global health governance during a crisis. This thesis aims to delve into these dynamics, with a focus on the WHO, to gain insights into the interplay between politicization, media representation, and public perception in the era of a pandemic.

This exploration is guided by two primary research questions. The first seeks to examine the evolving politicization of the WHO and its media portrayal: *What has been the nature of media coverage about the WHO during this period?* This question aims to explore the trajectory of the WHO's politicization and assess how the media has portrayed the organization throughout the pandemic.

The second question investigates media consumption patterns in Czechia, particularly among specific demographic groups: *Do low-skilled and low-educated individuals in Czechia demonstrate a higher tendency to consume more negative media coverage about the WHO and the COVID-19 pandemic compared to other demographic groups?* This inquiry aims to understand the relationship between demographic factors and media consumption preferences in the context of the pandemic.

The case of Czechia offers a unique perspective on these issues, particularly under the leadership of Andrej Babiš, who, like Donald Trump, represents a similar approach to politics. Both leaders, hailing from business backgrounds and employing populist strategies, make Czechia a compelling parallel for examining the politicization of global health governance. The choice of Czechia is further justified by the significant impact of the pandemic in the region, including a high number of casualties, making it a pertinent case for studying public and media responses to the WHO's actions during a major health crisis.

By comparing the global political reactions, as exemplified by Trump, with the specific national circumstances in Czechia, this thesis aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the politicization of international health governance. It efforts to contribute to the discourse surrounding global governance, media influence, and public

perception, particularly in the context of international health organizations during periods of heightened political scrutiny and media coverage.

Thesis continues with Chapter 2 that presents a literature review, providing a foundational understanding of the theoretical and conceptual framework that underpins the study. It reviews pertinent literature on global governance, the process of politicization, and the role of the WHO in health matters, setting the stage for the subsequent analysis.

Chapter 3 details the methodology, outlining the research design, data collection, and the analytical methods utilized. It describes how the data was prepared for the statistical analysis and the rationale behind the chosen methods to ensure robustness and replicability of the findings.

Following chapter presents the results, where the core findings are interpreted in light of the research questions. It critically evaluates the hypotheses against the empirical evidence and contextualizes the results within the broader academic discourse.

1 Conceptual and theoretical framework

In this chapter, the existing research on the theory of global governance is described first. The concept of politicization is subsequently examined, and the current state of the art in this area is described. Thirdly, the concepts previously outlined are applied to the case of the World Health Organization (WHO), whose media salience is the research subject of this thesis. Additionally, a brief explanation of policy-making regarding this international organization is provided. Continuing the examination of literature regarding media's impact on society.

1.1 Global governance

In this section, the aim is to clarify the ongoing academic discussion surrounding global governance, its theory and genesis.

Although there were attempts to form internationalized governance, such as Wilson's League of Nations or organizations like the ITU or the UPU, the current global system of regulation is the outcome of the Roosevelt administration's (followed by Truman's) after the end of the World War I (Murphy 2013, 27) with the unprecedented rate of IO construction by the end of the World War II (Gordenker 2013, 210). In 1945, the San Francisco Conference approved the establishment of the main organization of the United Nations (UN) system (see Schlesinger 2004; Hilderbrand 2001; Russell 1958), and at that time, plans were also prepared for its expansion with other agencies (Schild 1995), including the World Health Organization (WHO). But this was almost a century ago, and International Relations theorists have moved from description to more in-depth analysis.

For the past few decades, this has gained increasing attention in both academic and public debate (Hooghe and Marks 2009, 6–7), and both world leaders and recent studies suggest that IOs have long been gaining authority (Zürn, Tokhi, and Binder 2021; Wagner 2020).

Zürn (2018, 4–5) defines global governance as: *“the exercise of authority across national borders as well as consented norms and rules beyond the nation state.”* Therefore, he extends beyond the conventional focus on great powers in realism to examine the interplay between states, international organizations, and societal actors (Fioretos and Tallberg 2021, 100). This thesis will, therefore, build upon Zürn's definition and focus on societal actors.

When global governance is discussed, scholars have developed concepts of authority, legitimacy or politicization that help us estimate IOs' role in shaping the effectiveness or perception of global governance institutions. The following paragraphs aim to briefly introduce them as they are mostly interconnected.

Authority as an aspect of global governance is a situation in which members of a community voluntarily accept a set of rules and norms (Fioretos and Tallberg 2021, 102). Similarly, Zürn (2021, 197–98) defines it as a relationship of recognition between superordinate and subordinate entities. He (2021, 199; 2018, chap. 4.) states that authority within global governance comes in two forms: (1) epistemic or (2) political authority. While political authority refers to entities that possess the power to adopt, create or enforce rules within their specific jurisdiction. An example among all is the EU. On the other hand, epistemic authority is recognized for its expertise and knowledge in certain areas. When these institutions gain on authority, some scholars believe that their politicization grows too (Zürn, Binder, and Ecker-Ehrhardt 2012, 82; Börzel and Zürn 2021).

Academic debate agrees that the rise of international institutions' authority leads to their politicization as a consequence of their new authority. Zürn, Bunder and Eckert-Erhardt (2012, 70–71) define the concept of authority-politicization and argue that “*the more political authority international institutions exercise or are expected to exercise, the more they attract public attention and demands – in this way they become publicly contested.*” Rauh and Zürn have observed the exact relation (2020, 587, 603ff).

Legitimacy, another concept linked to global governance institutions, is mainly related to domestic audiences in the literature, how society perceives these institutions, and whether they find and give them legitimacy. Beliefs held by citizens regarding the legitimacy of both national and international institutions are closely interconnected (see Dellmuth and Tallberg 2015; Ares, Ceka, and Kriesi 2017; Schlipphak 2015). Alternative representatives in literature on legitimacy are *trust* (Torgler 2008; Zmerli 2010) or *confidence* (Norris 2000; Dellmuth and Tallberg 2015).

In this sense, legitimacy is being challenged by politicization (Steffek 2003; 2015). So, we can state that when the politicization of global governance institutions occurs, its legitimacy is threatened.

1.2 Politicization

Politicization is the focal concept that this thesis works with. It describes the transformation of global governance topics into subjects of political debate and action. When these topics become more politicized, they often attract greater public attention and examination. This can lead to increased pressure on global governance institutions to address and adapt to public concerns, affecting their legitimacy and authority.

Zürn, Binder and Ecker-Ehrhardt (2012, 71) define it as: “*growing public awareness of international institutions and increased public mobilization of competing political preferences regarding institutions’ policies or procedures.*” Therefore, politicization can be observed in the political communication of individuals (e. g. Dellmuth 2016), domestic partisan competition (e. g. Hooghe and Marks 2009; Rauh 2015), protest events (e. g. Uba and Ugglä 2011) or national media (e.g. King and Lugg 2023; Schmidtke 2019; Rixen and Zangl 2013) which is the case of this thesis.

Although we have introduced the concept of politicization in the context of global governance, we should also state that there are three currently three main groups of academic debate when researching politicization. These are the politicization within (1) national political systems (see De Wilde et al. 2019; Kriesi et al. 2012), (2) the EU (see Hooghe and Marks 2009; De Wilde and Zürn 2012), and (3) international institutions (see Zürn 2019, 984–86; De Vries, Hobolt, and Walter 2021). Each of these “groups” focuses on different political levels. For this thesis, the most relevant is the concept of politicization of international institutions.

The literature can also be distinguished by how the politicization is measured. Recently, we have seen two main streams – (1) the administration or bureaucracy politicization (see Bauer and Ege 2012) and (2) the politicization of IOs (see De Wilde 2011). While the first mentioned can be seen as a politicization from the “inside”, by its clerks. The second is often measured as media salience (see King and Lugg 2023; Schmidtke 2019).

Politicization is not merely another variable we are analyzing. As pointed out, concepts of legitimacy or authority represent a concept that helps us understand the institutional dynamics that have the potential to shake up the current world order (Zürn, Binder, and Ecker-Ehrhardt 2012, 72). The outcome of politicization can be twofold: it can either lead to democratization or prepare the ground for the decline of global governance (Zürn 2018, chap. 3).

1.3 World Health Organization

This chapter builds on the theoretical framework developed in the previous subchapters to apply the concepts of global governance and politicization to the specific case of the WHO. Furthermore, we consider it essential to focus on the explanation of policy-making regarding this IO to clarify the research intentions.

The WHO is a specialized agency of the UN responsible for coordinating international health efforts and responding to global health emergencies, as stated in art. 2 of its Constitution. It comprises 194 members and two associate members (Puerto Rico and Tokelau). This gives it a strong voice in international cooperation to fulfil its scope. The introduction mentions that it is involved in so-called human security governance in health matters (Dellmuth et al. 2022, 284). However, the organization's decision-making process has been a subject of debate and criticism, with concerns about the extent to which political considerations influence its actions.

To apply previously outlined concepts, the WHO is recognized as a leader in “international health matters” (A. Kamradt-Scott 2015) and is also acknowledged as an epistemic authority in this domain (Hanrieder 2015, 195; Zürn 2021, 199). This stems from its expertise and respect for its interpretations and policies (Barnett and Finnemore 2004; Zürn 2018, 128–31).

The WHO's structure is based on its Constitution. It is comprised of (1) the World Health Assembly (WHA), (2) the Executive Board and (3) the Secretariat (art. 9). Outcome of their interplay are health policies that should aim to handle global health emergencies and crises. The WHA is an essential organ since it determines WHO's policies and appoints the Director-General or members of the Executive Board (art. 18). It is composed of representatives of each member state (art. 10). The Executive Board is an executive body of the WHO that is composed of 34 persons appointed by the WHA that are equitably representing geographical distribution (art. 24). The last one, the Secretariat, is headed by the Director-General and is composed of technical and administrative staff needed to run the organization (art. 30). Thus, we can say that *de lege lata* the most power lays on the WHA.

The statement above is also confirmed in the art. 37 and 24-28 as the WHA creates the policies, the rest of the WHO bodies (the Executive Board and the Secretariat) are responsible for its implementation. However, regulations and agreements adopted by the WHA are not self-executing as we know them from different international organizations (such as the EU). Member states are expected to implement these policies themselves (art.

21-22). Also, the WHA has the power to introduce a recommendation for a specific member state with respect to its scope (health matters) (art. 23). But since the WHO lacks a dispute settlement body as we know it from the WTO, for example, there are no means to enforce its policies on member states. Thus, it focused more on cooperation and consensus-building.

Based on the provided description, it should be more challenging for domestic political debate to criticize its policies since the state cooperates in drafting them. Especially when they are not self-executing, and the implementation is at the discretion of each member state.

Throughout its existence, WHO's accomplished successes, combined with its extensive authority and technical responsibilities, have significantly enhanced the organization's legitimacy (Dellmuth et al. 2022). Therefore, member states proceeded to revise the International Health Regulations (IHRs), and in 2005, they expanded their authority over emergency responses and outbreak monitoring (Kreuder-Sonnen 2019, 152ff.; Hanrieder and Kreuder-Sonnen 2014, 336–38; Heymann, Mackenzie, and Peiris 2013).

This extension of powers has come under stress test in previous global health emergencies such as the 2014 Ebola epidemic or the 2015 Zika epidemic. Among others, these crises have brought a wave of criticism to international and domestic debates over the WHO, and its bureaucracy system has been widely contested (Innes 2015, 1306–8; Adam Kamradt-Scott 2016, 412–13; Gostin, Sridhar, and Hougendobler 2015). However, the criticism during these crises was not as severe as that which emerged during the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic under the Trump administration (King and Lugg 2023, 247–48). This escalation peaked in May 2020 when Trump initiated withdrawal from this organization. However, US law requires a year; thus, Biden's administration could retract this decision before the withdrawal came into force.

But even this period gave us extraordinary evidence of heightened politicization of the WHO in the USA when coverage of the pandemic in newspapers more often highlighted politicians rather than experts (Hart, Chinn, and Soroka 2020, 690–92). Similarly, King and Lugg (2023, 9–10) in their study that the politicization of the WHO during the COVID-19 pandemic occurred with increasing negativity as well as dedicating a significant proportion of news to Trump's attempts to shift-blame during the pandemic. That is a common political tactic when politicians face these problems (Hood 2011).

1.4 Media, society and global governance

The previous sections have noted the impact of the media on society and confirmed that the media can support the politicization of global governance institutions. This section will, therefore, attempt to focus more on the interplay of influence between society and the media.

King and Lugg (2023, 6–7) observed selective media coverage in the USA regarding the WHO, with primarily negative aspects during health crises influencing public perception. With similar outcomes came Schmidtke (2019, 654) with case selection in various Western countries that are members of the EU, UN or G8. He furthermore explained that the societal elites influence media criticism and contestation. But we cannot apply this pattern to every IO irrespectively. Communication effect varies from IO to IO, but based on Dellmuth and Tallberg's (2021, 1306, 1309–10) study, we know that more effective contestation is of global multilateral organizations such as the UN, WTO or IMF than regional organizations like the EU or NAFTA.

Similarly to what political science researchers proved has been observed by communication science scholars as media tend to bias its coverage for topics in relation to “bad news”, “conflicts”, “dramas” or “the power elite” (Galtung and Ruge 1965; Harcup and O’Neill 2017). And political matters are very likely conflictual, controversial and sensational. This makes them more likely to get coverage (Phillips 2014). This renders public opinion more susceptible to influence. Without a global public platform, citizens frequently depend on political leaders or mass media to shape their views on international cooperation (Baum and Potter 2008; Ahlquist, Copelovitch, and Walter 2020).

So, the issue of shift-blaming on global governance institution by political elites is something that, according to outlined academic debates, resonates and media want to report on.

But who reads it? Who supports it? Scholars are disunited with their possible explanations of the backlash. Some argue that the causes are material, some that they are nonmaterial (Walter 2021, 429–30).

Those, who argue that it is drive by material causes shown that people with lower skill levels, whose jobs are more vulnerable due to globalization, are more likely to be skeptical in this regard (Bearce and Jolliff Scott 2019; Margalit 2012). Others observed that some people that support protectionism and anti-immigration policies are those who

are exposed to objective globalization risks more often (Dancygier and Donnelly 2013; Owen and Johnston 2017).

2 Hypotheses

This chapter drafts hypotheses drawn from the outlined literature before.

The concept of politicization in global governance is crucial in understanding the dynamics surrounding global governance institutions. In our case, the research focuses on the WHO. Politicization transforms global governance topics into subjects of political debate and action, attracting greater public attention and examination. This increased scrutiny can pressure global governance institutions, affecting their legitimacy and authority. The WHO, as a specialized agency of the UN, is involved in global health governance as an epistemic authority but has faced criticism, with concerns about political influences on its actions.

Hence, with increased political authority of international institutions like the WHO, they attract more public attention and demands, making them publicly contested. During crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the politicization of the WHO escalated as it progressed.

The media coverage of the WHO during health crises, including the COVID-19 pandemic, has been predominantly negative. The tendency of the media to focus on negative aspects and failures related to global governance institutions is expected to result in more critical news coverage of the WHO. Hence, we hypothesize that:

H1: During the COVID-19 pandemic we expect increasing media coverage that will be predominantly critical towards the WHO.

We have also covered that the media's impact on society and its role in supporting the politicization of global governance institutions like the WHO are significant. Presented studies have observed that the media tends to bias its coverage towards negative aspects, especially in relation to global multilateral organizations. This bias towards "bad news," "conflicts," and "sensationalism" is likely to influence public opinion, as people often depend on media to form views on international cooperation and organizations.

The relationship between individuals' skills, education levels, and their attitudes towards international cooperation has been also covered. It suggests that people with

lower skill levels and education, who face higher risks due to globalization, tend to be more skeptical about globalization. This skepticism can influence their media preferences, and thus may prefer media that aligns with these views.

So, we argue that low-skilled and low-educated readers are more inclined towards negative news, particularly in the context of international organizations like the WHO. This inclination is rooted in their material conditions and perceptions shaped by globalization challenges, leading to a preference for media coverage that aligns with their skepticism towards international cooperation and institutions. Therefore, we hypothesize that:

H2a - Low-skilled readers prefer media that reported on the WHO in more negative tone.

H2b - Low-educated readers prefer media that reported on the WHO in more negative tone.

3 Data collection and methodology

In this section, chosen research design employed in this work will be outlined. Specifically, following three subchapters will aim to explain used methodology.

Initially, this thesis will outline the chosen research methodology, explaining the specific approach to be adopted for the conduct of this study. Subsequently, the data collection process will be described, emphasizing the strategies implemented to ensure the data's accuracy and reliability. As well as to meet the academic requirements of easy replicability (see Dafoe 2014). Furthermore, the chosen methods for data analysis will be discussed in detail, encompassing the quantitative methods applied in the analysis, as well as the tools utilized for this purpose. This comprehensive overview aims to introduce the research design.

3.1 Data collection

Politicization evaluation dataset has been coded in three steps that are described in following paragraphs. Firstly, all articles from selected media mentioning the WHO were exported from the Newton Media database in December 2022. Secondly, articles not mentioning the WHO as an IO were rejected from the dataset as they were non relevant.

Thirdly, remaining articles were analyzed according to the codebook as described in next subsection.

For this study, online newspaper articles sourced from the Newton Media database were used. Search criteria were set as “*Světová zdravotnická organizace*” (Czech name for the World Health Organization) and “*WHO*” (as it is widely used in Czech language), commonly used in Czech. This search yielded 2,517 articles dated between December 1, 2019, and August 31, 2020. The subsequent paragraphs will explain media selection and the specific time frame for this research.

The rationale behind choosing this particular media and time frame is multifaceted. The selected period includes both pre-lockdown and lockdown phases in Czechia. Notably, on March 12, 2020, the Czech government declared a state of emergency due to coronavirus, implementing measures like school closures and public event restrictions (Kubal and Gibiš 2020, 243). The first pandemic wave, which ended in May 2020 (Kubal and Gibiš 2020, 582), was succeeded by a second wave from October 2020 to May 2021 (Kubal and Gibiš 2021, 149–81, 774–84). For the purpose of this bachelor thesis, we focus predominantly on the first wave, incorporating periods immediately before and after for a comprehensive perspective.

Our choice of online newspapers is grounded in their accessibility and relevance during the lockdown. With physical news outlets either closed or operating minimally, online newspapers became a primary source for up-to-date news during first lockdown. They offered a dependable means to stay informed, tapping into a range of sources. This preference aligns with NetMonitor’s analysis, which reported a 70% increase in traffic to news websites in 2020 (-mav- 2021).

In selecting news sites for this analysis, the most frequented sites during the study period were initially identified. Additionally, for the second part of the thesis, we considered sites with available readership data. As illustrated in the following Table 1, the selection encompassed public medium - the Czech Television’s *ct24.cz* and private media. Namely *aktualne.cz*, *nova.cz/tn.cz*, *novinky.cz*, *seznamzpravy.cz*, and *iprima.cz/cnn.iprima.cz*. Selected media are of high quality compared to, for example, tabloids, where there is a greater risk of a less than serious tone when reporting on political issues if reported at all.

Ranking	Website of the media
1.	Novinky.cz
2.	SeznamZpravy.cz
4.	Aktualne.cz
8.	TN.cz
9.	iPrima.cz / CNN Prima News
11.	ct24.cz

*Table 1 - Table Showing the Ranking of Selected Media Based on their Traffic in 2020
Source: NetMonitor, SPIR, Gemius, average for I-XII/2020, all platforms*

Initially, the emphasis on quality press is important because it serves as a crucial political arena where elites engage in discourse to introduce new ideas and to promote their assessments of the legitimacy of IOs (Schmidtke 2019, 642). Also, this kind of press inclines to present voice of actors that are seen as influential and reliable sources within domestic politics (Binderkrantz, Bonafont, and Halpin 2017, 315).

Before starting with analysis itself, we had to refine the dataset as it included irrelevant articles such as those pertaining to the English rock band, The Who, or those with picture descriptions using “who” as a pronoun, which did not relate to the intended research target. Therefore, a data cleansing process using scanning reading method to eliminate these irrelevant articles was conducted and decreased to a total of number of 1 655 articles for our dataset.

As I will answer my RQ2, I will have a data set about every selected news server. Thanks to SPIR (*Sdružení pro internetový rozvoj*), which coordinates project NetMonitor,¹ I was able to get socio-economic data about readers of those media. The data are available for the monitored time period in December 2019 and the first half of 2020. Sharing of this data by SPIR had to be authorized by the individual publishers, therefore this dataset is not a public appendix to the thesis.

By providing a clear rationale for my data collection, I have justified its relevance to the research question and demonstrate its potential to contribute to the field.

¹ <https://www.netmonitor.cz/online-data-ola>

3.2 Data set analysis methods and data preparation

This subsection aims to present analysis of presented exported data as it followed the research progress. It discusses details of the content analysis, measurement of the politicization and preparation of the contingency table for the chi-squared test.

3.2.1 Content analysis

After having clean data set of 1 654 articles, it was necessary to code each one of them. Because of the nature of this work, only one reader has been used to prepare codebook based on which the content of the articles has been coded. To ensure at least small reliability of this research, extra step ensuring internal reliability has been conducted.

Firstly, we have skimmed again through the articles to gain awareness of their content and to prepare a codebook for following analysis. To be sure readers understand the meaning of skimming, it refers to a way of reading text in a fast manner to grasp the main points of the text. After getting the knowledge of their contents we have come with the following codebook. The Table 2 shows also coding scheme consisting of the variable we were coding, its explained numeric value equivalent in data set, description of the value and example of some of the articles. Because the articles are too long to be included in the table, only the passages that represent the relevant value together with the citation are presented.

One more important data adjustment should be pointed out. For clearer referencing and because the websites are operated by same media, we have merged articles from sites ceskatelevize.cz and ct24.cz together and articles from tn.cz and nova.cz. Their original links can be found in the Appendix 1 on the sheet with original data. This manipulation added 16 articles to ct24.cz and 128 articles to nova.cz.

	Mention in text	Description	Example
Criticism	0 = no criticism	there is no disagreement, dissatisfaction or criticism towards WHO's actions, policies or decisions	“Podle dat Světové zdravotnické organizace hlásilo v minulém týdnu středně vysokou chřipkovou aktivitu šest evropských států, vysokou aktivitu pouze Turecko a Izrael.“ - (Mašek and jh 2020)
	1 = criticism	any form of criticism, either direct or indirect, indicating dissatisfaction, disagreement or negativity towards WHO's actions, policies or decision	„Prezident Spojených států Donald Trump pohrozil Světové zdravotnické organizaci (WHO) pozastavením plateb z amerických fondů, což zdůvodnil tím, že tato agentura OSN situaci kolem šíření koronaviru „zbabrala“.“ – (ČTK and Novinky.cz 2020)
Authority	0 = epistemic	WHO is mentioned in scientific, research, or data-driven contexts	„Člen vedení Světové zdravotnické organizace (WHO) Michael Ryan podpořil širší používání podomácku vyráběných roušek. Vyslovil tak oficiálně to, co si myslí většina Čechů. Podle Ryan zahalování úst není špatný nápad, uvedla agentura Reuters.“ - (Novinky.cz 2020)
	1 = political	WHO is mentioned in context with its malfunctioning, biased decisions, influence under its member(s)	“Na Twitteru o WHO napsal, že je pročínská a že na začátku pandemie vydala špatné doporučení.“ - (ČTK and Novinky.cz 2020)
Sentiment	-1 = negative	pessimistic or critical tone, focusing on adverse outcomes, problems, or challenges, often casting the subjects, including the WHO, in a negative light	e. g. (mkk, tev, and drk 2020)
	0 = neutral	impartially and objectively presenting information in a balanced and factual manner without leaning towards either positive or negative perspectives	e. g. (Mašek and jh 2020)
	1 = positive	optimistic or approving content, emphasizing positive developments, achievements, or constructive aspects of the subjects discussed, including the WHO	e. g. (ČTK 2020)

Table 2 – Codebook
Source: author

To test our internal reliability, in the first phase of the analyses, random sample of 200 articles has been selected. So, we could perform the coding on. Subsequently, we coded the rest of the articles in our data set one by one. The first 200 articles were after 4 months exported to new separate data set and re-coded again with the same codebook design. After finishing this round of re-coding the first and second sample of the 200 articles were compared, so we can measure the consistency of our findings. Following Table 3 shows the consistency in percentage for each of the variable we are coding to ensure its internal reliability. The simplest approach has been chosen – comparing observations and dividing number of same coding with the number of compared articles.

Criticism	Authority	Sentiment
97,5 %	96,5 %	98,5 %

Table 3 - Overview of the Internal Reliability Test
Source: author

From the Table 3 we can see that each of the variable scores higher than 95 %. This ensures our reliability and consistency of the coding.

3.2.2 Politicization measurement

To check the overall politicization of the WHO in the selected Czech media, we need to aggregate our data arising from content analysis and test our first hypotheses. To do so, alongside descriptive figures, we need to get the percentage of critical articles in the time.

Politicization is commonly described as an increased media coverage and increased polarization towards the institution question. Because of the unprecedented character of the global health crisis and the character of the WHO, there are no public resources with such a survey that would measure polarization towards the WHO. Thus, we need to simplify our equation to just critical newspaper. Therefore we will use the following formula to test our first hypothesis.

$$\text{"politicization" of the WHO} = \frac{\text{sum of the critical articles mentioning the WHO}}{\text{overall sum of all articles mentioning the WHO}}$$

3.2.3 Contingency table

To test second set of two hypothesis, we will need to perform a chi-squared test. This test will help us examine the relationship between the level of education or type of labor and the media tone of the articles. As it is described later, our input education and socio-economic (skill) data are way too complex than necessary for our testing, thus we

will have to re-categorize to 3 groups, so they can fit our 3-category sentiment variable and we can create 3x3 contingency table. This approach allows us to perform a comprehensive hypothesis testing that reflects a wider spectrum of selected readers' backgrounds.

The chi-squared test for independence is suitable for this expanded categorical analysis as it effectively manages our nominal data across multiple categories without presupposing any specific distribution. Outcome of this test will help us determine whether there is a statistically significant association between those variables.

Both the education and socio-economic variables will be re-categorized into three distinct groups - low, medium, and high - to align with the tripartite division of media tone. The division helps us to classify our media those 3 groups that will help us test the hypothesis. The rationale behind the division will be described in following lines.

We have merged data from the previously mentioned SPIR's project NetMonitor. Relevant for our testing were two main variables – “Nejvyšší dokončené vzdělání respondenta” (can be translated as “Highest completed education of the respondent”) and “ABCDE národní socioekonomická klasifikace” (can be translated as “ABCDE national socio-economic classification”). Each of these variables takes multiple values. To describe them clearly, they are listed in the following Table 4. For easier explanation we will refer to the first one as “education” and the second one as “socio-economic” (labor) variables. The first term in the table shows the original Czech name, after the slash there is the English translation for the education variable. For the socio-economic variable we have included the ranking A to E and explained its meaning.

As the ABCDE national socio-economic classification is not commonly known by general public, we reserve this paragraph to briefly introduce this classification mostly used in marketing to precisely target desired groups. It divides the population into groups according to their social status and economic ability of the household where the person lives. It is important to note that. To our knowledge, the SPIR data set uses the basic classification and at the moment of writing this work we are not aware of any specifics. The examples of representatives of each group are commonly described with their achieved education but this classification aims to cover socio-economic background of the readers.

Education	Socio-economic
Neukončené základní / incomplete primary education	A – top managers and professionals with the highest education
Dokončené základní / completed primary education	B – middle management
Vyučen(a) bez maturity / Secondary education without matriculation	C1, C2, C3 – non-manual workers with high education, skilled workers, business owners
Středoškolské s maturitou / secondary education with matriculation	D1, D2 – skilled and unskilled manual workers and low-educated workers in non-manual occupations or managerial positions
Vyšší odborné vzdělání, vysokoškolské Bc. / higher postsecondary education, bachelor's degree	E – low-educated skilled and unskilled manual workers, small entrepreneurs in agriculture and fishing
Vysokoškolské / graduate and above	Non-classified

Table 4 - Values Overview for Education and Socio-economic Variables
Source: author and NetMonitor, SPIR

With such a complex data we needed to simplify our sources. As the sentiment variable ranges from -1 to 1 we need to prepare this tripartite division too. In educational terms, classification into higher, medium and lower education effectively captures our distribution. Thus, as the ceskatelevize.cz/ct24.cz got the highest share of high education readers, we will rank this medium as “higher”. On the other hand the highest share of low or no education readers had nova.cz/tn.cz and iprima.cz/CNN Prima News, those were assigned “lower” media ranking. This leaves us with aktualne.cz, novinky.cz and seznamzpravy.cz to “medium” ranking which corresponds to data we got from SPIR.

Similarly, for the socio-economic variable we have made the same classification and divided our media to “high” “medium” and “low”. Before showing the classification, we have to point out that we have decided to exclude non-classified observations. This strongly limits outcomes of chi-squared test for this hypothesis, but it will be discussed in following sections. For the socio-economic variable the division of media is similar except the input data for this variable led us to move aktualne.cz from medium ranking to high.

This process of classification inevitably reduces the detail and such variety of our input data but helps us enhance the clarity and interpretability of selected statistical analysis. In case of chi-squared test it draws sharper distinction between the key groups as selected, although it might oversimplify the nuances and overlook the heterogeneity within each broad category.

The Figure 1 and Figure 2 show us the final contingency table prepared for the chi-squared test.

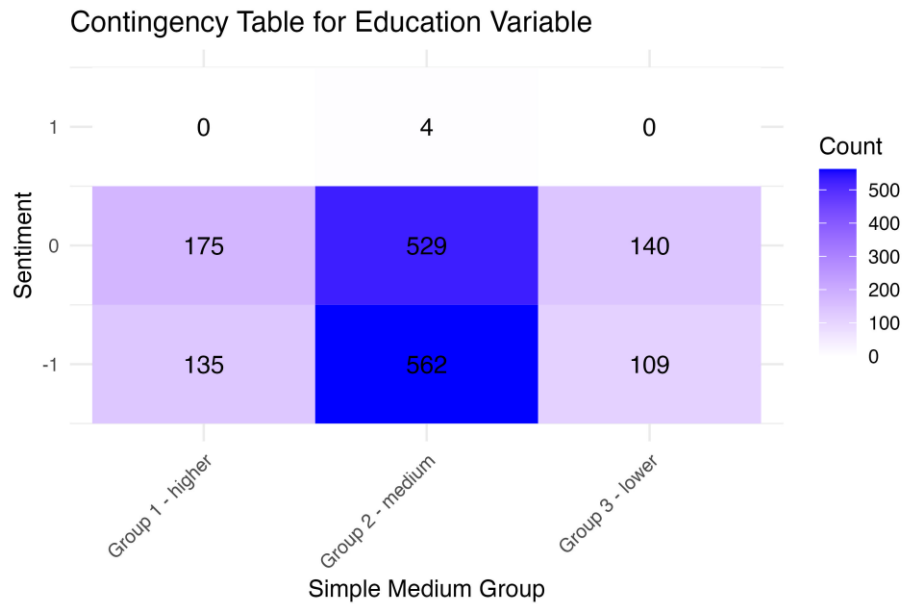


Figure 1 - Contingency Table with Education Variable for the Chi-squared Test
Source: Author

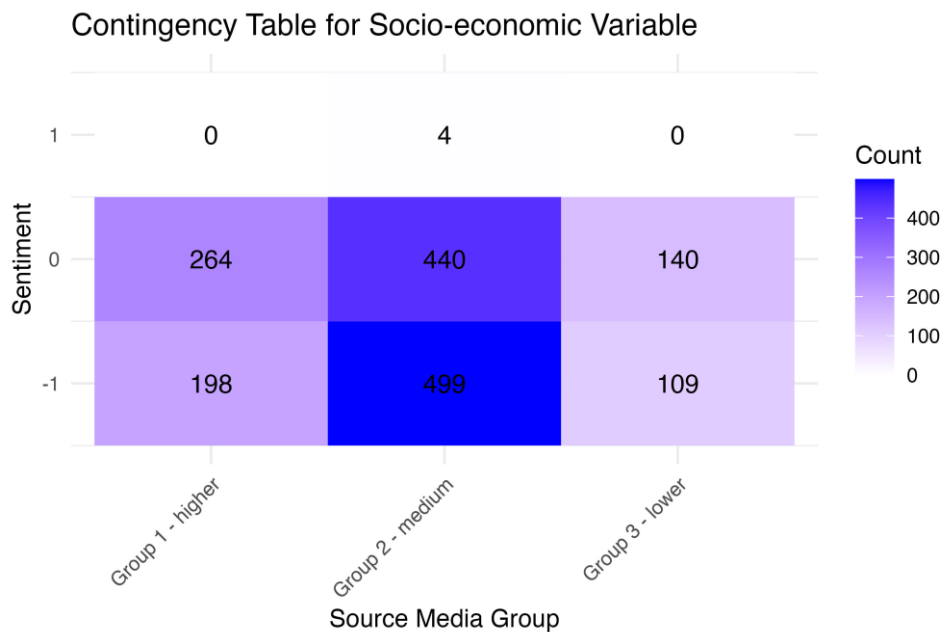


Figure 2 - Contingency Table with Socio-economic Variable for the Chi-squared Test
Source: Author

4 Discussion

In this section, we will present the outcomes of the research. Following three subsections will test presented hypothesis and afterwards stress out the limits of this work. Similarly to the rest of the figures in this work, also presented figures were created using R Studio package ggplot, the source code is therefore attached in the Appendix 2 as well as the data set in the Appendix 1. This should ensure replicability and transparency of this work.

4.1 Hypotheses 1 - descriptive statistics

The hypothesis H1 states that during the COVID-19 pandemic, there will be an increase in media coverage, with the content predominantly critical towards the World Health Organization. To assess this hypothesis, we examine the trends and sentiments presented in following figures.

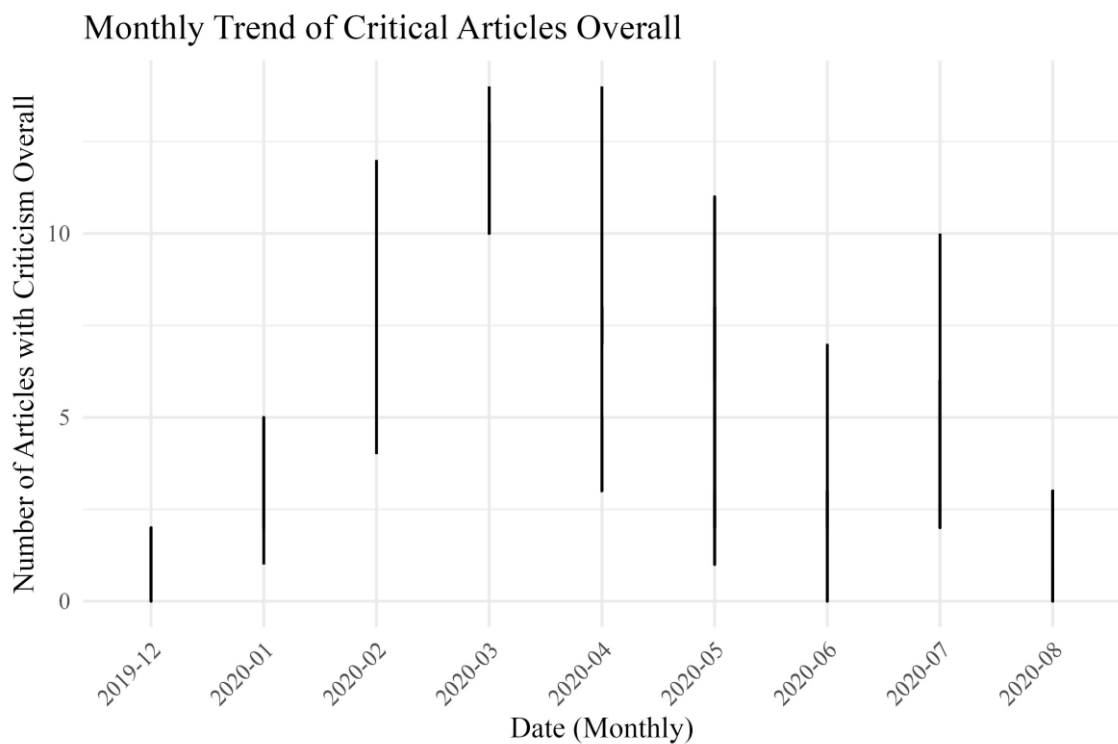


Figure 3 - Monthly Trend of Critical Articles Overall
Source: Author

Figure 3 illustrates the overall monthly trend of critical articles. The timeline suggests a notable increase in critical coverage in the early months of 2020, peaking around March and April. At this time the controversy about effectiveness of wearing face masks to prevent spread of the virus was a hot topic, a period characterized by heightened uncertainty and scrutiny of health authorities, including the WHO. Smaller peak can be

seen also in July same year. At that time the US president Trump announced withdrawal from this organization. The peak in critical articles during these months aligns with our hypothesis, which anticipates a surge in critical media coverage concurrent with the pandemic's progression. However, following this peak, there is a marked decline in the number of critical articles, indicating a potential stabilization or shift in the media's focus as the pandemic evolved.

Monthly Trend of Criticism by Media Source

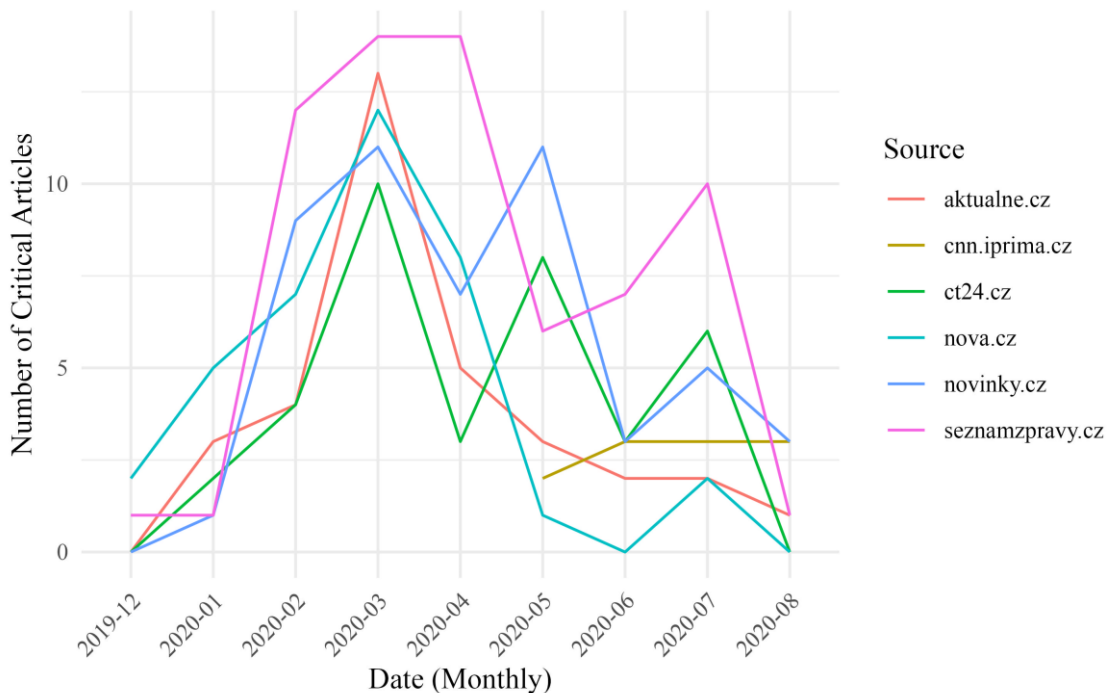


Figure 4 - Monthly Trend of Criticism by Media Source
Source: Author

In Figure 4, we disaggregate the data by media source to reveal distinct patterns in the coverage of WHO criticism. This might be one of the biggest contributions of this thesis. With even share, all of our selected media copy the overall peak from the Figure 3. Ct24.cz and novinky.cz indicate another peak in May that is not occurring for other observations. This may be caused by reporting on the previous controversial face masks policy crisis. Other sources demonstrate varying trends, with some showing moderate increases and others remaining relatively stable. This variation across media outlets could reflect different editorial stances or a divergence in the emphasis placed on WHO's role and response to the pandemic.

For better understanding in big picture, we have included the politicization calculation for each medium. Table 5 below shows us share of the critical articles for each medium. Although, the absolute number of critical articles could indicate that the

politicization occurred in the articles of SeznamZpravy.cz, table below shows otherwise and points us towards aktualne.cz and nova.cz. We have to keep in mind that the size of the medium varies and thus this comparison should be handled with caution.

Medium	Total articles	Critical articles	Politicization [in %]
Aktualne.cz	152	33	21,71
nova.cz	186	37	19,89
SeznamZpravy.cz	370	66	17,84
cnn.iprima.cz	63	11	17,46
ct24.cz	310	36	11,61
Novinky.cz	573	50	8,73

Table 5 - Table Showing Share of Critical Articles for each Medium
Source: Author

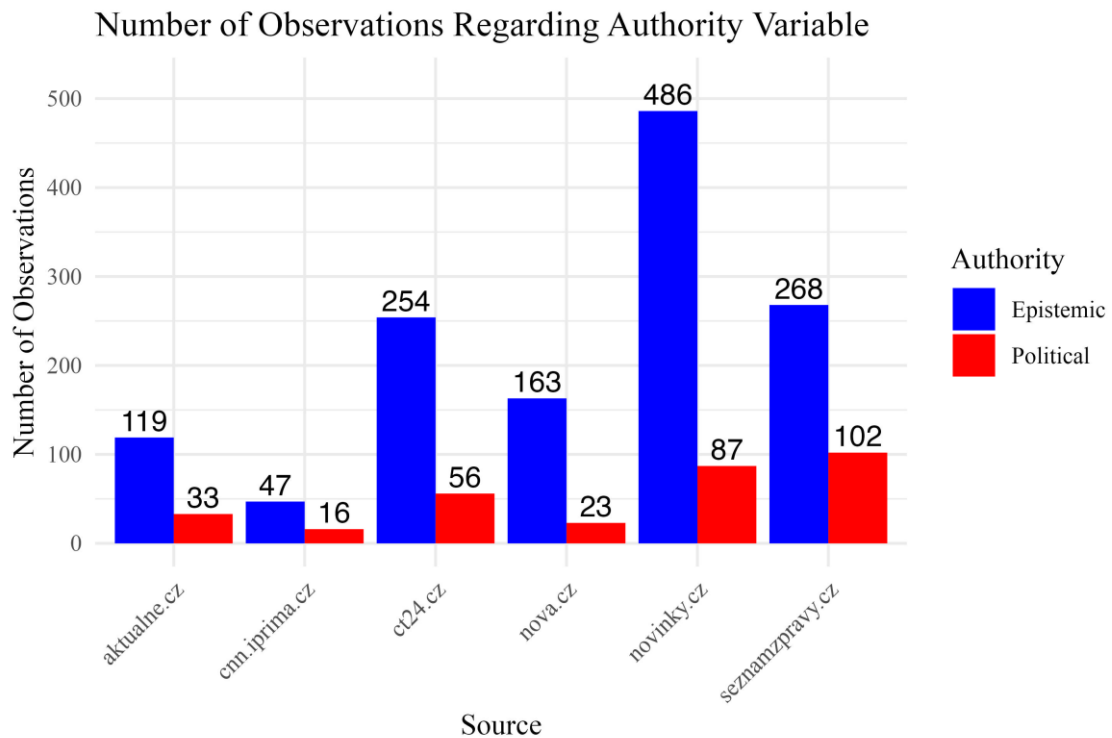


Figure 5 - Number of Observations Regarding Authority Variable
Source: Author

Figure 5 does not test our hypotheses but as this variable has been covered in the literature review we have decided to include it in our thesis. We have stated that the WHO is perceived as an epistemic authority but the figure shows us that some articles handle it as political. This is essential occurrence that is interconnected with the politicization. Articles mostly depict the WHO as political authority when reporting on US foreign policy regarding its funding withdrawal. The presence of both types of authority across

all media sources indicates a multifaceted scrutiny of WHO's response, encompassing both scientific and politics-related aspects. The predominance of epistemic reporting articles across most sources suggests that the media placed significant emphasis on the WHO's role as a knowledge authority during the pandemic.

The outcomes presented suggest a complex media landscape with respect to coverage of the WHO during the COVID-19 pandemic. The initial increase in critical coverage is consistent with the hypothesis, suggesting a heightened critical focus on the WHO's handling of the pandemic during its early stages. However, the subsequent decline in such coverage and the nuances observed across different media sources complicate a straightforward confirmation of the hypothesis.

While there is evidence to support an initial surge in critical coverage as expected, the data do not conclusively demonstrate a sustained increase throughout the pandemic. Moreover, the critical coverage appears to be multifaceted rather than uniformly negative. Therefore, while we observe partial support for H1 during the initial phase of the pandemic, the hypothesis cannot be fully confirmed without considering the temporal dynamics in media coverage.

4.2 Hypotheses 2 a and b - Inference statistics

Pearson's Chi-squared test – p-value report	
Education (H2b)	0,02434
Socio-economic (H2a)	0,00073

Table 6 - Pearson's Chi-squared Test with p-value Report
Source: Author

The hypothesis H2a states that *"Low-skilled readers prefer media that reported on the WHO in a more negative tone."* Based on the provided Chi-squared test results, the p-value for the socio-economic variable is extremely low as indicated in Table 6, which is well below the conventional threshold of 0.05 for statistical significance. This suggests that there is a statistically significant association between socio-economic status and sentiment in media reporting on the WHO.

Considering the context that lower-skilled individuals, who may face higher risks due to globalization, tend to be more skeptical about international cooperation, this significant result aligns with the hypothesis that such individuals would gravitate towards media outlets that mirror their critical stance towards institutions like the WHO. Given the significant p-value, we have evidence to support hypothesis H2a.

Hypothesis H2b was formed as *"Low-educated readers prefer media that reported on the WHO in a more negative tone."* The p-value for the education variable, as obtained from the Chi-squared test, is 0.02434. This p-value is also below the standard significance level of 0.05, indicating that there is a statistically significant association between education levels and media sentiment towards the WHO.

Given the theoretical context, which suggests that individuals with lower education levels are more likely to be skeptical about globalization and its institutions due to the risks they face, the result of the Chi-squared test supports this assertion. Hence, we find support for hypothesis H2b.

The statistical evidence presented through the Chi-squared tests allows us to infer that there is a relationship between both labor (socio-economic) status and education level with the tone of media reporting on the WHO. This inference is in line with the broader literature that indicates a negative bias in media coverage, particularly towards global organizations, and supports the notion that this negative slant is more appealing to individuals with lower socio-economic status and education levels.

The null hypothesis (H0) for both H2a and H2b would be that there is no association between the readers' skill level or education level and their preference for media that reported on the WHO in a more negative tone. Given that both p-values are less than the typical level of 0.05, we can reject the null hypothesis for both H2a and H2b.

These findings are significant as they underscore the media's potential role in shaping public opinion and IOs perception, especially among those who might be critical or skeptical of the processes and outcomes of globalization.

4.3 Research questions evaluation and limits

The nature of media coverage about the WHO during the observed period can be characterized by its variability over time, with a significant peak in critical coverage during the early stages of the pandemic, as indicated by Figure 3. This suggests an initial heightened scrutiny of the WHO's response to the pandemic, which aligns with global patterns of media behavior during crises—where media outlets often focus on the actions of pivotal organizations. However, the critical coverage did not maintain a steady increase throughout the period but rather showed a decline following the peak. This could reflect a complex interplay of factors, including evolving public interest, the media's response to new developments, and possibly the adaptation of the WHO's strategies in pandemic management – such as the shift in the face masks policy.

Regarding the second research question, the evidence from hypothesis testing (H2a and H2b) suggests that there is a statistically significant preference for negative media coverage about the WHO among low-skilled and low-educated individuals. The Chi-squared test results for both labor (socio-economic) and education variables point towards a specific media consumption pattern where these demographic groups in Czechia are inclined toward media that critically reports on the WHO. This finding is consistent with the broader literature which concludes that individuals facing greater risks from globalization—often those with lower skills and education—are more skeptical of international institutions and may seek out media that validate their views.

While the study provides valuable insights, it is subject to several limitations. Statistical limitations were mentioned in previous chapters, but we also have to acknowledge that the media selection has been limited because of the character of the thesis and the length of the data set. Another limit for media selection has been the availability of the supporting data from SPIR which remains unpublished because of its nature.

Further research may focus on other international organizations and its agencies. For the same time period we suggest testing the politicization of the EU and its response as well as the EMA agency that was subject to media attention in the time of vaccination.

Vaccination leads us also to another limitation that is the focus only on first wave and the beginning of the second one. As the crisis went there might have been new cases like investigation of the origin of the virus or the development of the US foreign policy towards the WHO.

Because of the approach in content analysis we have to stress out that as it was conducted only by one reader, bias can occur. The analysis would benefit from further investigation into the content of the coverage to better understand the nature of the criticism and its evolution over time. Additionally, incorporating a broader range of media sources and considering the impact of major pandemic-related events on media sentiment would provide a more comprehensive picture of the media's stance towards the WHO during the pandemic.

In conclusion, while our findings shed light on the nature of media coverage of the WHO and the media consumption trends among specific demographic groups, these should be interpreted with caution and an understanding of the work's limitations. Future research could address these limitations by incorporating qualitative analyses, broader data collection, and considering additional influencing factors.

Conclusion

The motivation for this work stems from the unprecedented global health crisis precipitated by the COVID-19 pandemic and the consequent scrutiny of international health governance, particularly the WHO. This thesis sought to unravel the intricate dynamics of politicization, media representation, and public perception during this tumultuous period, with a focus on the Czech media landscape.

The findings revealed a significant politicization of the WHO in media coverage, with distinct patterns of negative portrayal amongst Czech media outlets. This coverage was influenced by demographic factors, particularly showing that low-skilled and low-educated individuals in Czechia demonstrated a higher tendency to consume negative media coverage about the WHO. These results were contextualized within the broader literature on media influence and public perception, reinforcing the notion that media bias towards "bad news" and sensationalism can shape public opinion, especially during crises.

However, this work is not without limitations. The research was constrained by the nature of available data and the scope of media outlets analyzed. Additionally, the sole reliance on quantitative analysis could not capture the nuances of the coverage, and the focus on a specific geographical and temporal context limits the generalizability of the findings. Future research might expand on this work by incorporating qualitative analyses, examining other international organizations, and considering broader media sources and timeframes.

Závěr

Motivací pro tuto práci byla bezprecedentní celosvětová zdravotní krize, kterou vyvolala pandemie COVID-19, a následná kontrola mezinárodního řízení zdravotnictví, zejména WHO. Cílem této práce bylo odhalit složitou dynamiku politizace, mediální reprezentace a veřejného vnímání v tomto bouřlivém období se zaměřením na českou mediální krajinu.

Zjištění odhalila výraznou politizaci WHO v mediálním zpravodajství s výraznými vzorci negativního zobrazování v českých médiích. Toto pokrytí bylo ovlivněno demografickými faktory, zejména se ukázalo, že osoby s nízkou kvalifikací a vzděláním v Česku vykazovaly vyšší tendenci konzumovat negativní mediální pokrytí WHO. Tyto výsledky byly zasazeny do kontextu širší literatury o vlivu médií a veřejném mínění a posílily názor, že mediální zaujatost vůči "špatným zprávám" a senzacechtivost mohou formovat veřejné mínění, zejména během krizí.

Tato práce však není bez omezení. Výzkum byl omezen povahou dostupných dat a rozsahem analyzovaných médií. Navíc výhradní spoléhání se na kvantitativní analýzu nemohlo zachytit nuance zpravodajství a zaměření na konkrétní geografický a časový kontext omezuje zobecnitelnost zjištění. Budoucí výzkum by mohl tuto práci rozšířit o kvalitativní analýzy, zkoumání dalších mezinárodních organizací a zohlednění širších mediálních zdrojů a časových rámců.

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List of Appendices

Appendix 1 – data set.xlsx

Appendix 2 – figures and calculations.Rmd