

## Visible Beyond Control? Fragmented Attention and Hypervisibility Trap in the Online Media Coverage of Politically Active Youth

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This article analyzes online news media attention paid to youth political actors within the theoretical contexts of media fragmentation and hypervisibility. Quantitative analysis of more than 500 articles representing six cases of youth involvement in political or civic issues reveals their significantly selective coverage, absence on mainstream television's online news websites, and strong disinformation media interest in those actors whose activities either align with or contrast outlets' agendas. We argue that this media selectivity in the coverage of youth political actors and their tendency to spotlight them by stressing their identity aspects has significant consequences for democracy, both in terms of societal cohesion and the empowerment of youth political actors.

*Keywords: hypervisibility, media fragmentation, youth political participation, polarization, media attention, visibility paradigm*

Interest in various aspects of youth political and civic engagement has grown significantly in the last few years, particularly in the wake of Greta Thunberg's actions (Neas, Ward, & Bowman, 2022). Following considerable media attention, the Swedish activist and the Fridays for Future movement she inspired have drawn significant academic interest in recent years, including interest in how engaged young actors are treated by the media (Bergmann & Ossewaarde, 2020; Mayes & Hartup, 2022; Ryalls & Mazzarella, 2021; Vochocová & Rosenfeldová, 2023).

What many of these studies have in common is that they document different ways in which youth activism is denigrated in media discourses and excluded from the public sphere (Bergmann & Ossewaarde, 2020; Vochocová & Rosenfeldová, 2023; Vochocová, Rosenfeldová, Vancsó, & Neag, 2023). However, a recurring theme is also an overfocus on Greta Thunberg herself, which applies not only to her presence in the media but also within academia (Neas et al., 2022). The potential consequences and risks of such

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overexposure to one prominent figure are discussed. Some authors mention the risk of overshadowing other less prominent, engaged youth or obscuring the importance of collective efforts to address a given issue (Mayes & Hartup, 2022). The implications of singling out certain specific characteristics of exposed actors, such as their age or gender, are also of interest. Such media treatment can potentially undermine messages and agency, especially when their political activity is perceived as surprising, as is the case with young activists (Ryalls & Mazzarella, 2021; Taft, 2020).

Our article aims to build on the second line of debate about the overfocus on only some of the most exposed figures. Therefore, we focus on other, less exposed young political actors to map the online media's approach to them. In doing so, we draw on approaches that examine political actors' different forms of visibility, particularly their invisibility or hypervisibility (Dergić et al., 2022; Liinason, 2020), in the context of communication and representation theory. We also consider the possible implications of these different forms of visibility for the actors and for the quality of public discourse and democracy more broadly.

The different forms of visibility mentioned above are to be understood based on the specific context and not necessarily as clearly positive or negative (Liinason, 2020). Of particular relevance to our study, however, are arguments concerning how invisibility and hypervisibility can occur simultaneously. Potentially damaging, then, may be a specific type of stigmatizing hypervisibility imposed mainly by conservative and anti-liberal media on actors bearing liberal values (Dergić et al., 2022). The fact that political actors can be invisible in the coverage of some media outlets and simultaneously hypervisible in others leads us to ground our study in fragmentation theory (Mancini, 2013; Steppat, Castro, & Esser, 2022; Sunstein, 2007). In doing so, we argue that the attention paid by different segments of the online media sphere to different young, engaged actors is, to some extent, fragmented, and media outlets tend to specialize in particular youth actors in this fragmented environment (Steppat et al., 2022), leading to an increasingly polarized media landscape.

To explore the complex relationship between hyper/visibility and fragmentation in media representations of young political actors, we focus on how Czech online media approaches six cases of engaged youth, differing in the issues they raise, their forms of activism, and their personality profiles. More specifically, our sample consists of two young male activists involved in European initiatives and holding completely opposing positions toward the European Union—pro-EU activist Adam Trunečka and anti-EU activist Matěj Gregor. The other two cases analyzed are two environmental actors, namely the young Víravovy sisters, representing unproblematic, individual-based activism, and the nonbinary activist Alžbětko as an advocate of system-challenging environmental activism and representative of the Extinction Rebellion movement. We also analyze the media coverage of one civic activist at the municipal level (Jakub Čech), and finally, we focus on the collective protests against the government's COVID-19 measures represented by the student initiative "Get Us Out." Since we collected data using the Newton database, which monitors all Czech online media, we believe that we managed to cover all the young activists who have attracted media attention in recent years. In total, we conducted a quantitative content analysis of more than 500 contributions published by Czech online media concerning the abovementioned young activists to explore the visibility of these actors and its specifics.

We consider it essential to address how the media present young activists, especially in light of the crisis of democracy, as described by Coleman and Blumler (2009), which entails, among other things, the disengagement of mainly young people from politics. Although youth interested in political or public affairs and willing to advocate for their issues in the public space can control their media image to some extent, the publicity they need to make their messages visible is still largely dependent on the media. Invisibility, as well as stigmatizing hypervisibility, can have a harmful impact on young, engaged people—who often hold more liberal values—discouraging them from being visible actors in public and political life (Dergić et al., 2022, p. 364).

### **Hypervisibility as a Paradoxical Treatment of Public Actors**

The context of our study mapping media approaches to politically active youth asks for a thorough understanding of the problematic relationship between political actors' visibility in the public sphere and its extreme forms—invisibility and hypervisibility. In today's medialized world, which intensely affects political communication, the bearers of various public and political agendas are significantly dependent on publicity gained through media channels. However, they can control their medialized images only to a certain extent, and there is a high risk that the deserved public visibility enabling these actors to communicate their political messages to a broader community will translate into a rather damaging hypervisibility.

The typical focus of the in/visibility paradigm and of discussion on hypervisibility in social sciences are immigration/multiethnic societies and queer identities (Erensü, 2024; Liinason, 2020; Yamamoto, 2012) or the intersection of these aspects (Wilkins-Yel, Hyman, & Zounlome, 2019), typically within the context of identity politics. Liinason (2020) does not understand visibility and invisibility as dichotomous concepts and connects their ambiguity to "tensions" related to various marginalized identities, such as sexualized, gendered, and racialized (migrants, refugees, queer groups). Yamamoto (2012) reveals the invisibility/hypervisibility paradox related to indigenous and national minority groups by demonstrating how "minority groups are not able to express their particular identities and are rendered invisible" while, at the same time, "this systemic invisibility [. . .] can be coupled with day-to-day hypervisibility" (pp. 431–432). Typically, ethnic and racial minorities are systematically invisible as citizens but hyper-visible in daily life because of their visible difference from the majority, causing many negative consequences, including limited choices.

Historically, the marginalization of youth (or teenagers or adolescents) has copied the marginalization pattern of other identity aspects in modern societies where power relations and social constructions of reality are involved. Lesko (1996) mentions the social processes through which teenagers are systematically produced as a social construct during modernity, portrayed as seemingly natural, universal, and ahistorical, yet problematic and, thus, in need of control by others. She calls for the need to "denaturalize adolescence" to show that instead of being a "natural" phase of life, it is a result of a systematic creation of the concept in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Science, the educational system, and other institutions of modern societies created, according to Lesko, an "age-conscious" society in which adolescence was constructed as a step toward adulthood. Particularly important for our study is the conclusion that due to such a construction of adolescence, youth (or teenagers) are perceived as those who "cannot represent themselves and have to either be represented

or learn how to represent themselves" (Lesko, 1996, pp. 148–149), a treatment similar to that of racial and ethnic minorities or women (see Kulynych, 2001, for a similar conclusion about the exclusion of youth from the public sphere).

Many studies highlight the active role of marginalized actors in their in/visibility treatment. Lollar (2015) distinguishes between "culturally imposed invisibility and invisibility that involves agency" and shows how disadvantaged actors may strategically and temporarily make themselves invisible and reject the social and public spheres of oppressive environments to protect themselves from negative, stereotypical representations and perceptions "until new possibilities arise" (p. 298). Liinason (2020) suggests that visibility and invisibility should be understood as an axis of oscillation, on which all of these forms (invisibility, visibility, and hypervisibility) are ambivalent in terms of negativity and positivity due to various intersecting and context-specific circumstances.

However, in the context of communication and representations theory, Liinason (2020) stresses that marginalized groups are often represented by others without really having control over such representations. They may be ignored (or made invisible) in many contexts while being simultaneously "exposed to a kind of hypervisibilization" through stigmatizing representations (Liinason, 2020, p. 115). These paradoxical treatments, she argues, are part of a broader pattern that has recently been repeated throughout Europe and is influenced by conservative, far-right movements spreading nationalist and anti-gender ideas (Liinason, 2020, p. 115). Dergić et al. (2022) are specifically concerned with the consequences that this "imposed hypervisibility" from traditional conservative, anti-liberal positions can have on politically active youth who are often bearers of liberal values. Whereas, on the one hand, visibility provides marginalized actors and their agenda with recognition, Dergić et al. (2022) stress that, on the other hand, hypervisibility (as "imposed visibility") represents a trap as it potentially brings the already stigmatized groups new forms of stigmatization and discrimination (pp. 352–353). Similarly, Brighenti (2007) considers a situation in which a person pushes themselves or is pushed "over the upper threshold of fair visibility" and enters "a zone of supra-visibility, or super-visibility" where everything the person does "becomes gigantic to the point that it paralyzes [them]" (p. 8).

Wilkins-Yel et al. (2019) specifically examine the issue from an intersectional perspective, reflecting the experiences of people whose identities combine two or more marginalized aspects, such as in our case where being a (marginalized) child/youth actor in the public sphere often combines with other factors (such as being a young woman, a nonbinary youth, a young man with allegedly feminine appearance, etc.). People holding two or more subordinate identities often experience intersectional invisibility, a situation in which they are not fully recognized as representative members of either of their constituent groups. At the same time, their situation increases "the likelihood of being scrutinized" by the dominant groups (Wilkins-Yel et al., 2019, p. 51). Most importantly, concerning youth entering the public sphere, the authors stress that participants who hold "minoritized identities are hypervisible in spaces of low representation which results in experiences of being othered, considered 'deviant' and in turn marginalized" (Wilkins-Yel et al., 2019, p. 56).

### **Media Fragmentation and Societal Polarization**

Our article explores the main finding that the attention or visibility the media give to different youth civic and political actors, an emerging group of politically active people who tend to be excluded from the public sphere, is very fragmented. Thus, we are specifically interested in media studies knowledge related to a set of questions that Mancini (2013) summarized as “possible consequences of mass media fragmentation over the structure and the functioning of democracy” (p. 43). Media and audiences’ fragmentation is a well-described phenomenon (Mancini, 2013; Steppat et al., 2022; Sunstein, 2007), highlighting increased media supply and demand and the distribution of media audiences across a rising number of specific media outlets (Steppat, Castro, & Esser, 2023), connected with two main sources in the field—increasing commercialization and technological development (Mancini, 2013).

The abundance of the media offer and its variety may be praised as fulfilling the requirement for more diverse media perspectives in the whole communication system (Mosco, 2009). However, many scholars have emphasized the negative effects of the seemingly positive increase in available sources of information in recent decades (Davis, 2010; Fenton & Barassi, 2011; Kushin & Kitchener, 2009; Ruíz et al., 2011; Sunstein, 2007). In the age of online media dominance, the polarization of media landscapes occurs, with relatively homogeneous groups of users gathering around media outlets offering them their preferred political perspectives. Under such circumstances, fragmentation typically results in divided or polarized societies where distinct groups lack the possibility of sharing the frames of reference (Steppat et al., 2023, p. 5) or a common framework (Sunstein, 2007, p. 48) previously provided by mainstream media outlets. Thus, media fragmentation may be associated with changes in citizens’ participation and socialization, mainly due to the dwindling role of the mainstream media as “a common place to meet and debate contrasting views” (Mancini, 2013, p. 51) and with an increased level of social and political polarization (Mancini, 2013; Sunstein, 2007). More specifically, Steppat et al. (2022) highlight the media tendency in a fragmented media environment to specialize in terms of ideological leanings. According to them, this specialization results “in a stronger polarization of the media market in the sense that media outlets develop closer ties to certain political actors or ideologies” (Steppat et al., 2022, p. 86). That, they conclude, leads to a situation in which “middle-ground media outlets lose market shares to partisan media outlets,” especially in countries with a high degree of media polarization (Steppat et al., 2022, p. 86). In a fragmented media market where “news media addressed to a mass audience are gradually disappearing,” replaced by the newly dominant “niche news,” the media push this trend further as they need to distinguish one from another and create their segmented “niche audiences” (Mancini, 2013, p. 46).

Such a situation may represent a significant threat to democracy if we agree with Sunstein’s (2007) warning in his seminal work on media fragmentation. He accentuates the danger of a media system without “robust public forums and general-interest intermediaries,” in which people tend to “self-insulate” in their specific “speech communities” or echo chambers and speak only with like-minded people (Sunstein, 2007, pp. 5–6). According to him, such fragmentation of the media sphere leads to a lack of a common framework for a broad democratic discussion and results in severe complications in mutual understanding of diverse societal groups, difficulties in addressing social problems, and, in the worst cases, extremism, hatred, and violence (Sunstein, 2007, p. 13, 44). These effects of media and

audience fragmentation should be of special concern when they relate to a particularly vulnerable group that we focus on in our study—the youth political actors with a controversial public agenda entering the adult-governed public sphere.

## **Methods**

### ***Research Questions***

Following the theoretical background discussed above, particularly the concept of hypervisibility and the potential risks that hypervisibilization may pose to vulnerable political actors, such as the young activists we studied, our research aimed to map the Czech online media's approach to politically active youth. Specifically, we were interested in the visibility that individual cases received in different segments of online media discourse and the forms of this visibility. Our research, therefore, aimed to answer the following research questions:

*RQ1: What are the patterns of media interest in youth political/civic actors?*

*RQ2: How are the media approaching youth actors in terms of providing them with voice and control over their agenda?*

*RQ3: What is the valency of the media representations of youth political/civic actors?*

### ***Data Collection***

To select young activists for our study, we first thoroughly researched which youth actors have penetrated the media agenda over the past decade. Using the Newton Media Archive, which collects data for all Czech online news media, and the keyword "young activist," we identified a total of six cases of politically and civically engaged youth. Our sample included diverse areas and forms of activism, as well as the different personality profiles of young actors. In four cases, these were individual actors. We also had one collective actor in the sample (a student initiative called "Get Us Out") and two sisters who had attracted media attention by making videos about environmental issues and who were always featured together in media coverage. We also analyzed their media presence together. In terms of the areas and forms of activism, our sample included two environmental actors (the Víravovy sisters and the nonbinary activist Alžbětko as a representative of the Extinction Rebellion movement), one civic activist at the municipal level (Jakub Čech), two activists engaged in pro-European and anti-European initiatives (Adam Trunečka and Matěj Gregor), and collective protests against government COVID-19 measures (the student initiative "Get Us Out"). Our sample covered cases of engaged youth of different ages and genders (men, women, and a nonbinary actor).

To collect data on the volume and form of media coverage of these selected young activists, we again used the Newton Media Archive. We did not set a common period for analysis, as the time and length of public engagement varied for each case studied. Our keywords were activists' names, and we searched for all the media content that mentioned them between 2015 and 2022. We were only

interested in contributions related to activists under 18 years of age, which in the Czech Republic is the age individuals legally become adults and are eligible to vote in elections and thus “officially” participate in political life.

### **Data Analysis**

After removing duplicities and irrelevant articles (with other actors of the same names as our activists), we subjected the collected data to quantitative content analysis. For each article, we coded the media type and format to determine whether a particular segment of the online media environment tended to report more on a specific type or topic of activism. We segmented media outlets first by their *reach* (national or regional/local) and second by their *type*. Here, we looked at whether the article was published in mainstream media (online news media, websites of TV and radio stations), tabloids, disinformation websites (websites spreading disinformation and conspiracy theories identified and listed, for example, by the Endowment Fund for Independent Journalism—Nadační fond nezávislé žurnalistiky, n.d., or a watchdog news organization—Krejčí, 2017), websites specializing in environmental issues, weekly newspapers, social and cultural magazines, websites of state and non-state organizations, websites of political parties, or blogs. To gain even more insight into how young activists were represented in the Czech online media sphere, we also coded the *tone of the article toward young activists* (positive, negative, or neutral/ambivalent). About the *format of the article*, we mainly distinguished between news, opinion pieces, and interviews. We also explicitly looked at whether young activists were given a *voice* in the media (either by being quoted within the news story or by being interviewed). Using the variable *focus*, we assessed the degree of involvement of a given activist in the article. Here, activists could either be the main actors in the article, reported alongside other topics and/or actors, or only marginally mentioned. Finally, we were also interested in whether the media reported on activists in relation to the issue for which the activists themselves were advocating or in some other context (variable *topic*).

### **Results**

We identified considerable variation in the amount of media coverage for the individual cases in our sample over the period under review. While comparing coverage in terms of quantity was not our primary objective, we present these data here as the context for the following findings. Table 1 shows both the total number of media contents for each case (column 3) and the number of contents recalculated by dividing the total number of contents by the years in which a given case appeared in the media during the observation period (column 4). As the table shows, most media attention was paid to Jakub Čech, and his activities were reported by the media over a long period, with an average of 75 articles per year between 2015 and 2017. Roughly half of the articles per year were published in the case of Alžbětko, the “Get Us Out” initiative, and Matěj Gregor. At the other end of the spectrum were the Víravovy sisters and especially Adam Trunečka, with an average of only seven articles per year.

**Table 1. Amount of Media Coverage.**

Case	Years	Total articles	Articles/year
Jakub Čech	2015–2017	226	75.3
Alžbětko	2021–2022	76	38.0
Get Us Out	2021	34	34.0
Matěj Gregor	2020–2022	97	32.3
Víravovy sisters	2020–2022	53	17.7
Adam Trunečka	2019–2022	27	6.8

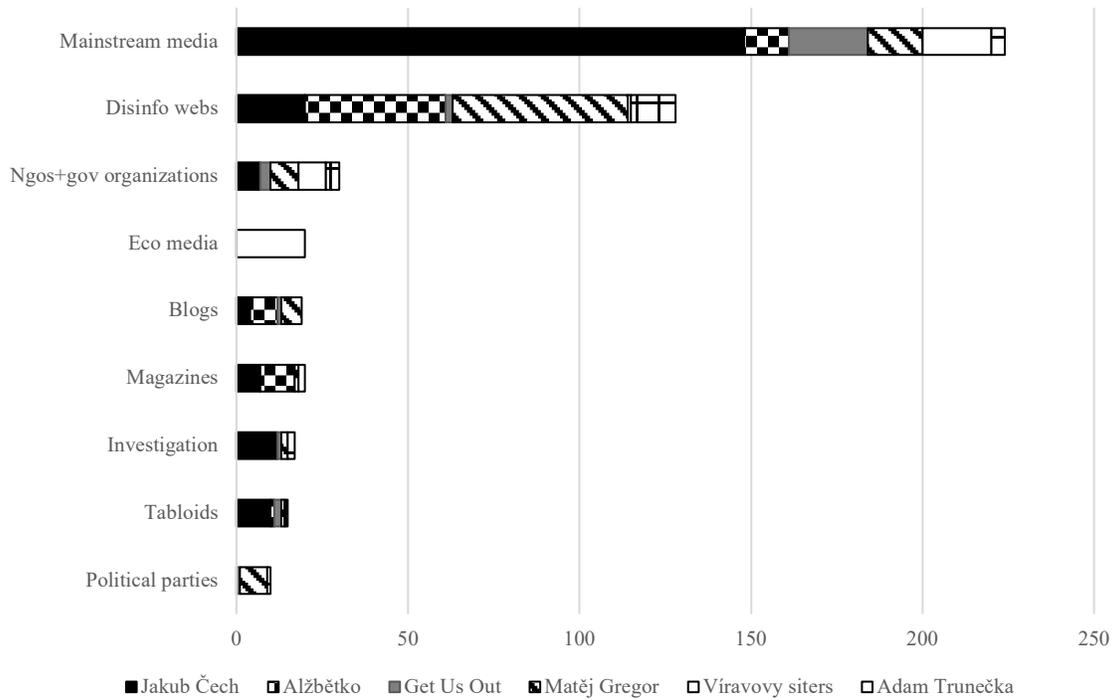
We then looked in more detail at which segments of the online media discourse reported on individual activists. Table 2 shows that overall coverage was dominated by the broadly defined category of mainstream media, followed by disinformation websites, but there were quite significant differences between activists in this sense. Attention within other media types was rather selective, covering only some of the cases under scrutiny, as seen in Figure 1. The activities of Jakub Čech and the “Get Us Out” movement were mainly covered by mainstream media (65.5 and 67.6% of the articles reporting on their activities were published in mainstream online media, respectively). In contrast, disinformation websites covered Alžbětko, Adam Trunečka, and Matěj Gregor in about 50% of the cases. The coverage of the activism of the Víravovy sisters falls outside these patterns. In addition to the mainstream media, their activities were quite often recorded by governmental and nongovernmental organizations’ websites and by ecological portals, with the latter not reflecting the activities of the other analyzed cases at all.

It is also worth noting that the news websites of mainstream Czech television channels provided little or no coverage of activists. The public television website (ČT24) mentioned them twice, while the largest commercial television (TN.cz) did not cover them at all. If we consider the rather smaller shares of tabloids, a picture emerges of a very limited representation of youth activism in the segment of mainstream media that have a significant reach, including among the older generations.

**Table 2. Structure of Media Coverage for Individual Cases.**

	Mainstream media	Disinfo webs	Ngos+gov organizations	Eco media	Blogs	Magazines	Investigation	Tabloids	Political parties
Jakub Čech	65.5%	8.8%	3.1%	0.0%	1.8%	3.1%	5.3%	4.4%	0.0%
Alžbětko	17.1%	53.9%	0.0%	0.0%	10.5%	13.2%	0.0%	1.3%	0.0%
Get Us Out	67.6%	5.9%	8.8%	0.0%	2.9%	0.0%	2.9%	5.9%	2.9%
Matěj Gregor	16.5%	52.6%	8.2%	0.0%	6.2%	1.0%	2.1%	1.0%	8.2%
Víravovy sisters	37.7%	1.9%	15.1%	37.7%	0.0%	3.8%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Adam Trunečka	14.8%	48.1%	14.8%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	7.4%	3.7%	3.7%

*Note.* Number of media outlets per category: mainstream media 31, disinfo websites 25, ngos+gov organizations 13, eco media 7, blogs 5, magazines 12, investigation 4, tabloids 4, and political parties 3. These outlets were not deliberately selected but resulted from a keyword search in the Newton Media Archive database, which includes all Czech online media.



**Figure 1. Structure of media coverage by media type.**

Based on the findings presented above, we can draw some conclusions about the visibility or invisibility of young activists in specific segments of online media discourse and the related fragmentation of this environment in reporting on young Czech activists. However, for a more comprehensive picture, we also focused on other characteristics of this coverage, such as its tone or format, whether activists were given a voice in particular media content, whether they were the main actors in this content, and whether they managed to push their own agenda or were covered in a different context (Table 3). In what follows, we will look at these variables in more detail and highlight the specific features of the coverage of each analyzed case.

**Table 3. Selected Characteristics of Media Coverage of Young Activists.**

	Positive	Negative	Only mentions	News	Opinion	Interview	Voice	Topic
Jakub Čech	8.4%	5.3%	7.5%	64.6%	17.3%	15.0%	53.5%	99.6%
Alžbětko	5.3%	69.7%	44.7%	15.8%	69.7%	6.6%	15.8%	44.7%
Get Us Out	0.0%	2.9%	0.0%	85.3%	14.7%	0.0%	52.9%	100.0%
Matěj Gregor	13.4%	10.3%	7.2%	50.5%	16.5%	19.6%	53.6%	100.0%
Víravovy sisters	3.8%	0.0%	7.5%	79.2%	3.8%	13.2%	37.7%	100.0%
Adam Trunečka	3.7%	18.5%	11.1%	59.3%	18.5%	11.1%	74.1%	100.0%

*Note.* Columns 2 and 3 refer to the tone of media coverage; column 4 (only mentions) expresses the percentage of content in which the analyzed cases were only marginally mentioned; columns 5–7 relate to the content format; column 8 indicates how often the voice was given to the analyzed activists; and column 9 (topic) shows the extent to which the media reported on activists in relation to the issue the activists themselves were advocating for.

### ***EU-Related Activism in the Spotlight of Disinformation Websites***

The Czech Republic has long been one of the most Eurosceptic countries, with topics related to the European Union significantly polarizing Czech society (European Commission, 2024; Urbanová, Kočí, & Grim, 2024). Our sample included two young activists who hold completely opposing positions on the European Union—pro-EU activist Adam Trunečka and anti-EU activist Matěj Gregor. Trunečka first appeared in the online media discourse in early 2019 as one of the faces of the European campaign “This Time I Will Vote,” which aimed to encourage participation in the European Parliament elections and attracted mainly mainstream media attention. He reappeared in 2020, but this time primarily in disinformation media, which often commented on his interviews with private online pro-EU television. In contrast, Gregor’s activities attracted the attention of disinformation websites from the very beginning, first for his interview with a controversial Czech journalist on Internet television and then for participating in various patriotic meetings where he represented the young generation as the founder of the “Leave” movement promoting the so-called Czexit. When he exceptionally broke into the mainstream media, it was mainly in connection with his participation in demonstrations against the government’s COVID-19 measures and his appearance in regular monitoring of the disinformation scene. Although the attention given to Gregor and Trunečka differed significantly in terms of quantity (it was considerably higher for Gregor; see Table 1), the coverage of both actors showed some common features. Both often spoke directly in the media (for Trunečka, the proportion of articles in which he was either quoted or interviewed was the highest in the sample at 74.1%, while for Gregor, it was over 50%), and in both cases, disinformation websites formed the core of their coverage. Both were also referred to by political parties advocating similar positions toward the EU on their websites (Gregor later became a member of one of these parties).

Their coverage differed most markedly, however, in its tone and the related way the disinformation media treated them. While articles related to Gregor, most often among the actors studied, were coded as positive in tone (13.4%), Trunečka was portrayed negatively in almost 20% of the articles (the second highest value in the sample). Trunečka was labeled a “young activist” or “pro-EU activist” by the disinformation media, and through his visibility in this specific segment of the online media, his positions were ridiculed. Gregor, in contrast to Trunečka, whom the disinformation websites represented as an example of the “brainwashed youth,” was described in the same media segment as a “movement founder” or “history buff” and was celebrated and praised: “His appearance made many people happy, especially because he was a representative of the young generation and gave the attendees, about three-quarters of whom were aged 50 plus, hope that even the current young generation is not completely lost” (Moravčík, 2020, para. 5). The younger generations are usually seen as favoring the EU more, which is also supported by surveys among the Czech public (Urbanová et al., 2024). Thus, the disinformation scene presented Gregor as young but educated and competent, but simultaneously an opponent of the EU, thus breaking down this established “stereotype.”

### ***Different Types of Environmental Activism in Different Corners of the Online Media Sphere***

For other young actors who shared a common interest in environmental issues, there were differences not only in the tone of their media coverage but also in the segments of online media discourse

in which they received publicity. While the Víravovy sisters attracted the first wave of media attention by winning a prestigious environmental award for running their environmental YouTube channel, Alžbětko became famous for sticking to the road to draw attention to the climate crisis. The unproblematic, individual-based activism based on sustainable lifestyle choices and represented by the award-winning sisters' educational videos caught the attention of mainstream—and often regional—media and eco websites, with coverage of their activities being exclusively neutral or positive. The eco-award brought the sisters seven interviews, but otherwise, coverage was dominated by news content, except for a few opinion pieces that highlighted that “the environmental education presented by the ‘Sisters in Action’ comes across very naturally” and is “something very different from ‘marketing Greta’” (Havel, 2020, para. 6). In subsequent years, their publicity declined, and they were only mentioned in the context of other eco-award nominations or in regional and local news coverage. Like Alžbětko, the Víravovy sisters were among the activists in our sample who were least often given a voice in the media. For the Víravovy sisters, this was the case in 38% of the contributions, while for Alžbětko, it was only 16%, significantly less than for the male EU activists described above.

Otherwise, however, the coverage of Alžbětko and the Víravovy sisters had no other common features. The system-challenging activism represented by the nonbinary Alžbětko elicited a response mainly in the disinformation scene (53.9%) and, in addition to the rather limited interest of the mainstream, attracted the attention of social and lifestyle magazines (13.2%) and the blogosphere (10.5%). However, the coverage of this actor showed several other specificities compared with all other actors. It was clearly the most negative (in 70% of the cases), particularly evident in the case of opinion texts, whose representation was by far the highest (also 70%) in this case. This is reflected in the fact that Alžbětko was only given a voice in the media in 15.8% of the cases and was interviewed only once. Moreover, over time, Alžbětko began to be mentioned only marginally, with only a brief reference (in almost 45% of the content), more as a label, a way of expressing disagreement with the type of activism represented by them, hence the progressivism associated with the young generation:

The legalization of gay marriage, Alžbětko stuck to the road with instant glue, the European Union throwing billions into the fight to “save the planet,” or perhaps the movement calling on people not to have children. All this is happening here or abroad today, right now, right here. And it will get worse. (Bok, 2021, para. 1)

It was also typical, then, that this actor attracted media attention not only for their environmental activism but often more for their ambiguous gender identity, which in many cases completely overshadowed the climate agenda (variable *topic* in Table 3). In fact, almost half of the articles that mentioned Alžbětko dealt exclusively with gender issues. Except for the texts in lifestyle magazines, there was mainly negative media coverage in the disinformation scene or rather conservative media. Thus, in the case of this activist, we could observe very strongly what Wilkins-Yel et al. (2019) described concerning bearers of two or more marginal identities: Alžbětko, as a young activist and also a nonbinary, was often a victim of othering and ridicule or considered deviant through his hypervisibility in the aforementioned spaces.

***Two Cases of Civic Engagement—The Long-Shining "Popstar Activist" Jakub Čech and the Limited Voice of the Student Initiative***

For activist Jakub Čech who broke onto the media agenda in connection with his fight for the right to equal access to information with local town hall back in 2015, the media coverage was the most varied, although he appeared much more in the mainstream than in the disinformation scene. In fact, in the first two years that we followed the media coverage of his activities, he stayed completely out of the spotlight of disinformation websites. His actions received publicity in both national and regional media, where he was presented the most often among our actors (more than a third of all content), given the nature of his activism. Coverage was often neutral or even positive (the second highest value in our sample), and Čech also spoke frequently in the media—we recorded 25 interviews with him in total, and he was among the most quoted actors in our sample. It is noteworthy that, unlike the other young activists, Čech managed to maintain media attention continuously throughout the study period. However, most of the time, he was covered mainly within his region. He only gained wider attention from the mainstream media and the disinformation scene when a national conservative politician referred to him as a "snitch" on his social media accounts (Čech was labeled so by the politician because he reported to authorities that the city hall did not fulfill its legal duty to provide citizens with information and drew attention to the misconduct of some municipal politicians—i.e., he "snitched"). This incident not only made it into the mainstream but also sparked the interest of the disinformation scene, which has since then focused on Čech's activities, often critically. Thus, the conflict with an established conservative politician gave the young activist greater visibility.

In contrast, the student initiative "Get Us Out" remained almost outside the attention of disinformation websites throughout the period under review, attracting attention mainly from mainstream media and partially from governmental and nongovernmental organizations' websites. The fact that the movement was primarily covered in the news sections of the mainstream media and was rarely the subject of opinionated content, providing more space for evaluative comments than news, resulted in the most neutral coverage among our cases. While several demonstrations against the COVID-19 measures adopted by the Czech government ensured that the initiative received relatively wide publicity in the mainstream media, in reporting on the initiative's activities, the media often privileged adult actors, particularly the teachers of the participating youth, who very often spoke on behalf of the young activists and commented on their positions. The youth actors themselves were either quoted significantly less or, in many cases, not at all and were thus much less visible in the media than the adult actors.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

Inspired by two theoretical concepts—hypervisibility and fragmentation—used dominantly in the context of different social phenomena, our research explores how these concepts interrelate in online news media representations of political and civic youth actors. It contributes to a better understanding of the risks of the hypervisibilization of vulnerable political actors beyond identity politics, the sphere typically studied. Our study focuses on the online media sphere and the hypervisibilization of youth actors who are not typical representatives of marginalized identity aspects and whose agenda is not primarily related to identity politics.

In response to RQ1, our study reveals the media-caused, undesirable hypervisibility of these actors as individuals, not as bearers of political agendas and ideas, in some media outlets. It also documents significant fragmentation in media attention on various levels—the attention paid to youth actors in the media agenda in the first place, the voice the youth actors are provided with when represented in the media, and the tone or valency about youth actors in different media outlets, reflecting both the youth and the medium's political position.

The implications of our findings are twofold, both related to the condition of democracy in society. The first relates to societal cohesion and the functionality of the public sphere based on the sharing of information, viewpoints, and public agendas among different societal groups. Our finding related to RQ1 is that the attention of the media paid to youth bearers of civic or political agendas is significantly fragmented and that some mainstream media, such as nationwide television stations, including the public service provider, completely ignore them on their online news websites, which can have severe consequences. As Steppat et al. (2023) and Sunstein (2007) point out, mainstream media outlets traditionally serve as providers of shared frames of reference. Our findings show that there is a limited representation of youth activism in the mainstream media segment with a significant reach targeting older generations. The rest of the media select only some of the politically active youth as newsworthy and often provide them with visibility reflecting the relationship between the youth actors' and the medium's ideological stance (such as positive coverage of Gregor and negative representation of Trunečka by the disinformation platforms due to their stances toward the EU, or the mocking of Alžbětko as a representative of allegedly aberrant gender identity by both the conservative and disinformation media). This seems to support Steppat et al.'s (2022) argument that in a fragmented media sphere, the media tend to specialize and build closer ties to specific ideologies. Thus, segmented "niche audiences" (Mancini, 2013, p. 46) are informed about different issues by their "partisan media," which results in the lack of a shared common network for citizens to discuss their contrasting views (Mancini, 2013, p. 46). This may deepen societal fragmentation and polarization and result in societal conflict and hatred among groups (Steppat et al., 2023). By resigning from the possibility of bringing youth actors and their ideas into public, the mainstream media gives up the opportunity to build intergenerational bridges, connect people with different perspectives, and set their common agenda.

Second, our conclusions have implications for youth as political or civic actors and for their willingness to participate in politics or public life. Our data suggest, in response to RQ1, that Czech online media pay little attention to the activities of the young actors studied. If we compare the number of contributions for individual actors with the attention given to Greta Thunberg and/or the Fridays for Future movement, which we focused on in our earlier research (Vochocová & Rosenfeldová, 2023) on a smaller sample of outlets, the figures are significantly lower in the current study. This is also true for Jakub Čech, who received the highest media attention within our sample. Furthermore, a significant number of articles about him appeared within regional media with much lower reach.

Within this limited attention of Czech online media, we identified other phenomena that could discourage active young people from participating in political and public life. These included privileging adult voices at the expense of the young activists themselves (in the case of the "Get Us Out" initiative), giving voice to young male actors more often than to female ones (RQ2), criticizing women who are not considered

normatively feminine (Alžbětko), or ignoring them—as is the case with the “unproblematic” activism of the Víravovy sisters.

Our analysis related to RQ3 revealed that some of the actors in our sample experienced a relatively high percentage of explicitly negative media representations (almost 70% in the case of Alžbětko and almost 20% in Trunečka’s case). This is mainly the case for youth with liberal agendas typically functioning as triggers of hatred (such as ecological issues in combination with transgender identity or a positive approach to European integration). These results show that political youth exposed by the media often have to face a strong backlash from the media themselves, not to mention the subsequent civic discussions contributing to overall public hatred (Vochocová et al., 2023). It thus makes these youth actors specifically vulnerable, especially when they attract media attention with aspects of their identity that can be hypervisibilized and mocked, rather than their own political/public agenda (as we show in response to RQ2 in the case of Alžbětko), or when they become targets of ideological clashes in the media, mainly the disinformation scene (Trunečka).

Our findings have other theoretical implications, specifically for the field of media and communication studies. Our data reveal a connection between the concepts of visibility and media and/or social fragmentation. We found that in a fragmented media sphere, the huge segment of mainstream media provides various youth actors with significantly selective attention—focusing on a few of them while ignoring others, thus making them almost invisible to their audiences. The reasons for this trend should be investigated in future research, focusing on media production rather than media content. Our data only suggest that the up-to-date political agenda or agenda related to the execution of political power, together with liberal values promoted by youth actors, may attract more media attention than anti-system or environmental issues. Some youth actors overlooked by mainstream media typically become the subject of another paradoxical media treatment—hypervisibility—in the anti-system, disinformation-spreading media, which employs all the well-known tools for marginalizing political actors: pointing out their alleged personal “abnormality” and focusing on it instead of on the topic the youth are promoting, denying them speaking for themselves, and preferring opinionated texts (providing with space for negative treatment) over balanced news coverage.

In our specific, nationally bound sample, it is necessary to relate such conclusions to the more general sociopolitical context of the Czech Republic. The country belongs to the Central and Eastern European post-socialist, post-transformation countries described as significantly polarized in terms of public opinion related to many crucial global political topics (Prokop, 2019). It also represents a key “battleground” for illiberal tendencies in Europe, typical of ideological and political polarization of media audiences, their vulnerability to disinformation, and rising hostility toward “liberal” ideas and lifestyles, such as multiculturalism and LGBTQ+ rights (Štětka & Mihelj, 2024). Our data reflect these broader trends, showing how youth bearers of many generally controversial issues are used in the fragmented media sphere as a means of ideological discursive battles.

Moreover, all these conclusions have one common denominator: the personalization of politics. It is obvious from our analysis that the media tend to create “media personalities” or even “celebrities” even among young political actors, focusing on their personal stories and identity aspects more than on the

message they are bringing to the public sphere. From all the possible consequences of such personalization of political issues raised by engaged youth, we would like to point out the consequences for youth engagement and for social cohesion—mainly the fact that such media treatment of youth political actors can obscure the importance of the topics they are raising and the need for collaboration and collective action in solving such problems (Dergić et al., 2022; Mayes & Hartup, 2022).

Our study has limitations resulting from the limited and nationally bound sample of youth actors who have attracted some media attention in recent years, as well as from the analytical method. Although we offer some interpretive insight into the quantitative data we present, a more in-depth analysis of various media approaches to youth political actors could reveal some important trends that remain invisible in the quantitative content analysis. Furthermore, research focusing on journalists' perspectives related to youth political actors' coverage would provide a necessary understanding of the surprising fragmentation of media attention to these actors, as well as a possibly specific media treatment of politically exposed youth. Our study also focuses solely on representations of youth actors in the news media. We are aware of the possibilities (as well as risks) of social media potentially providing marginalized actors "with control over their visibility" and "resulting in the increasing equality of visibility," as Dahlberg (2018) reminds us (p. 38). While he warns that "social media in many cases contributes to inequalities in (control over) visibility" (Dahlberg, 2018, p. 38), we encourage further research that would thematize the relationship between the control over visibility by civic and political actors representing themselves via social media and the hypervisibility potentially facilitated by social media and imposed on them.

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