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YEAR
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ISSUE

Volume 59 (LIX) 2014
DECEMBER
2

S T U D I A
UNIVERSITATIS BABEȘ-BOLYAI
EPHEMERIDES

2

STUDIA UBB EDITORIAL OFFICE: B.P. Hasdeu no. 51, 400371 Cluj-Napoca,
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SOCIAL STRUCTURES IN VIRTUAL COMMUNITIES -CASE STUDY STARWAKE-

ANDREI COSTINA¹

ABSTRACT. This paper aims to peek into the intricacies of the social structures that exist in a virtual community formed on computer mediated communication. By means of combined methodologies new social dynamics can be revealed and correlated to traditional ones to further borderline fields of study such as digital anthropology and ethnography. Delving into a theoretical background that is just a few years old this paper also establishes a few milestones in the impact of technological development on society and culture.

Key-words: social, communication, digital anthropology, technology

Introduction

The Internet as we know it is constantly evolving towards new paradigms, both in terms of content and of means of delivering information at a conceptual level. Lately, the idea of Web 3.0, the so called *semantic web* is more outlined than ever. The existing web 2.0 is doing more than linking computers, it links people and in a gradual growth it links concepts.

The idea of linking computers together in order to mediate human interaction is by no means new. The concept has been quite popular among users since the earliest of networks such as Usenet, Listserv and even Arpanet. Then in the proto-internet structure, a new system appeared and began to change the face of computer facilitated human interaction. It was the Bulletin Board System, in short BBS. In fact, nothing more than a message board, the BBS allowed a new type of interaction between users that completely disregarded geographical location for the first time. In the following years Murray Turoff developed a server-based system called

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EIES, Electronic Information Exchange System. This is one of the main components of the proto-internet and its principles still stand as the basis for the nowadays World Wide Web (Castells 1996).

From those ideas of linking information, the digital society has evolved to linking persons, and more creating along the boundaries of these digital communities, entire virtual worlds. This paper will follow several key points of the dynamics of the virtual communities in this particular context of the Massively Multiplayer Online Role Play Games according to a new paradigm that may be called digital anthropology.

I. Social Networking

A. The Network Society

Since the dawn of mankind, community has been the key concept for evolution. Resource sharing and communication between the members of such social structures have empowered the human race to be what it is today. However, traditional communities have always been geographically oriented in a so called *space of locations*, as Manuel Castells (2004) puts it. Nowadays, digital or virtual communities are based on an informational flux continuum and have new rules and social patterns that need to be researched in depth in order to define how they function and what the main characteristics that define them are.

In this perspective, the most involved individuals will tighten up their relationships by means of electronic communication and form the social center while others will gradually distribute along the informational network according to their level of interest and involvement. Conceptually speaking, the digital community is not determined by a geographic location, but rather by a certain set of common interests.

In this respect, virtual communities have their own dynamics and structure, much like the physical ones.

The Internet, regarded as the framework for virtual communities, may be defined in this respect as the sum of all the informational human interactions achieved by using the interconnected network systems. Even though this definition may seem simple, it contains some key elements that must be underlined. Firstly, the information in itself: the whole network is

pointless without the content. Secondly, the exchange: the reason to be of communicational networks is the exchange of information. Thirdly, the human side: there is no point in having technology and informational networks without the human beings that send and receive information. There is no exchange of information between machines just for the sake of disseminating certain types of content.

By the end of the nineteenth century, Tonnies has defined the existence of social groups by two key concepts ported from philosophy: *gemeinschaft* that is the totality of the direct and personal connections between the individuals that share the same set of values, in other words the communicational background of a certain group, and *gesellschaft*, that is the sum of the formal, impersonal links that operate at the level of social organization. Durkheim has provided a more non-individualistic explanation stating that social phenomena can be considered to take place when the sum of interactions between the individuals generate a certain reality that can not be defined exclusively by characteristics that are specific exclusively to the individual. In this respect he defined two types of societies, the traditional one - the so called *mechanical*, in which the differences between individuals are minimized - and the modern / contemporary one, also known as *organic* society, which thrives on individuals that have very distinct roles, positions and characteristics. Out of these models, hundreds of various platforms have developed, be it in an already considered classical way, or specifically targeted in frameworks such as Ning, that promotes a vertical hierarchy among the users. Of course there are ups and downs concerning the implementation of such services. Educational and distance learning projects are bound to benefit, internal communication in a company can be boosted significantly, virtual job markets are created (a good example of such so-called professional network is LinkedIn), or simply their originally intent purpose to encourage people to interact with one another is also beneficial. However, the downside is that within corporate networks too much idle conversation will significantly decrease productivity, also one's abilities to socially interact in a direct manner may decrease abruptly since the individual is using a computer generated interface and an avatar instead of a smile and good manners to socialize. Regardless of the consequences and in whatever form they may exist, social networking services are the main element of virtual communities.

B. Digital Communities

Digital, virtual or online communities, regardless of their formal designations, can be defined as social groups in which individuals interact in an indirect manner, meaning that the sum of communications is mediated by a computerized interface. Besides the services described above, there are numerous other alternatives to complete the communicational process. Newsletters, forums, instant messaging, video chat or even email come together to complete the digital information exchange puzzle. Even if they are aggregated in the traditional formats of the community that does not necessarily mean that there is always a strong connection between the members. According to Howard Rheingold (2003), the links in this type of communities are forged in time, over a rather long period of exchange of information, and the real strong interpersonal connections come into being only when an individual has shared enough sentimental content in public.

In the context of a larger and larger implementation of the Web 2.0 concept, a fusion between the specific technologies and the social mechanisms becomes clearer and more and more voices are already outlining the concept of 2.0 communities, as the virtual communities depend directly on the level of interaction between the users. Therefore, in all cases, a decisive factor of the wellbeing of a virtual community is reciprocity, perhaps the most important aspect in the unwritten social contract between the members. Reciprocity is at the core of all the file sharing communities, and even stands for most of what the Open Source concept is nowadays.

Yet, virtual communities are infinitely diverse by their intrinsic nature and most of the members are largely unaware of the advantages and disadvantages of being in a certain position in this hierarchy. Also the levels of interaction, in terms of intensity and duration, vary significantly. The range spreads from comments and tags, basically the electronic equivalent of a message board, to the most intense form of immersion in the virtual - the MMORPG (Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Play Game).

C. Social Networking Systems

Taking into consideration the present tendency in the development of social networking systems, of merging them with or transposing them over existing systems, the economic actors of the online market seek solutions for quick profit out of their popularity. This type of fad can provide the surge in interest needed in developing world-wide webbed educational models.

One of the best tries at defining social networking sites describes them as being *web services that allow individuals to build a public or semi-public profile within a closed system, to input a list of other users that are connected to them in some way or another and visualize their own and the others' lists of connections (the nature and naming of these links may vary)* (Boyd et. al. 2007). Most often, building a profile means inputting some content (be it personal data or some other information/media valuable to the community). Sometimes, individuals interact solely through the content they share with the community. There are always some rules for differentiating successful or popular content from the less desirable kind like rating, ranking, tagging or commenting.

II. Virtual Communities on the Web

A. Social Networking services

The first social networking services as we know them in the present, yet with considerable less functionality, have appeared in the early nineties. In 1995, among the most popular ones was classmates.com, which as the name states allowed the user to find online former classmates and interact with them. In 1997 the top of the market was held by SixDegrees.com, the first social network service that allowed indirect links between members. All registered users could upload any kind of profile and send messages to anyone, even to complete strangers, the search for discussion partners could be based on any given criterion, usually based on whatever interests the users declared in their own personal profile page.

With all these options in a single platform the project didn't make enough money and eventually shut down. Years later all these options would make the key to success for the most popular social networking services, but the time had not come for such leaps in introducing the computer in the personal life.

Gradually, things have evolved at their own pace and while the users gained more and more control over what they could do with what they uploaded, the content in itself became more and more diverse. Between 2002 and 2004 three remarkable platforms were introduced on the market. The first one was Friendster, which Google tried to acquire in 2003, than MySpace and Bebo. In 2005 MySpace has reached the top in terms of

members and hits, but it was overrun by Facebook, launched in 2004. A platform that has rapidly grown over the years, and was the first platform to allow plugins and “outsourced” external applications. At the same time, this platform provided for every user the graphic representation of the social network that every individual creates by using the service, thus binding together the concepts of social network and social network service. In time, this particular social networking service has grown into the largest platform of its kind on the web, adding numerous functionalities like photo and videosharing, instant messaging/chat, geotagging and geolocation applications, groups and events management, so on and so forth.

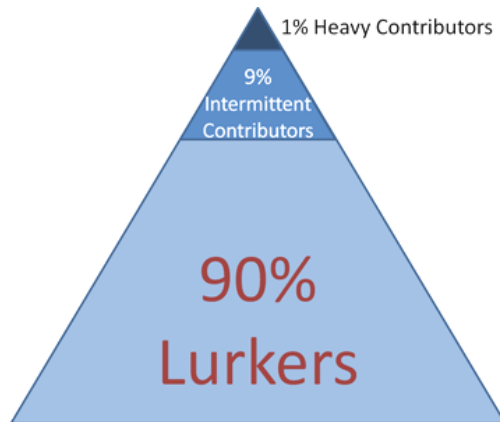
Along with the takeover of MySpace by Rupert Murdoch’s News Corporation and the launching of another competitor Yahoo360, both in 2005 it became clear that social network services are a marketable product, which not only pushed the boundaries of anthropology into the digital on a global scale, but also made a lot of money.

Out of these models hundreds of various platforms have developed, be it in an already considered classical way, or specifically targeted in frameworks such as Ning that promotes a vertical hierarchy among the users. Of course there are ups and downs concerning the implementation of such services. Educational and distance learning projects are bound to benefit, internal communication in a company can be boosted significantly, virtual job markets are created, a good example of such so-called professional network is LinkedIn, or simply their originally intent purpose to encourage people to interact with one another is also beneficial. However, the downside is that within corporate networks too much idle conversation will significantly decrease productivity, also one’s abilities to socially interact in a direct manner may decrease abruptly since the individual is using a computer generated interface and an avatar instead of a smile and good manners to socialize. Regardless of the consequences and in whatever form they may exist social networking services are the main element of virtual communities.

B. Virtual communities

Social aggregation remains an issue in the virtual as it does in the physical world. There are, of course, personal relationships that transcend space, time and the borders of organizational structures in the virtual environment. But as appealing and as idealistic as it may seem, there is always the other side, that of a dystopia, of false communication in an

impersonal system in which the actors are not necessarily real but can be fabricated according to some twisted personality that lies behind an electronic profile. It has happened with the worst consequences on more than one occasion, probably the case that had the greatest impact on the media is that of Megan Myers, the teenage girl that committed suicide because of a failed virtual relationship with a fake character.



On another level, researcher Amy Jo Kim (2000) underlines a potential difference between structured social aggregation (forums, messages, chats, etc.) and that which is centered on the individual and interaction on multiple levels, which is specific to Web 2.0. In this respect she defines a certain lifecycle of the members of a virtual community. At first, any potential member is just a visitor, and if that person becomes interested passes to the first stage, that of the *lurker*. This means that s/he just monitors everything, reads public messages, is acquainted with the formal rules of that community, but never, or almost never contributes with personal input. The next stage is that of the novice, the inbound character which is beginning to be considered a part of the community but has not yet reached the status of full membership. The third stage is that of the regular member, the insider, the one who contributes like the majority of the visible members and has full rights. The fourth stage is that of the leader, the person with more experience and influence, who is not a ruler but rather a mediator for the interactions of the regular members and stands for a point of reference regarding the content that the other members add, thus outlining the social norm of the group. The final stage, that of the outbound is characterized by a steady decrease in contribution, due to changes

in focus and perspectives which ultimately will lead to the individual leaving that specific group usually to join another more suited to the needs and wants of the moment.

In this respect, one of the key figures in Internet research, Jakob Nielsen (Musser et. al. 2006) states that most individuals involved in multi user communities and online social networks contribute very little to the system that they are involved in. His empiric research has lead him to a 90-9-1 rule in which 90% of the users are lurkers to some degree, 9% are intermittent contributors, and only 1% of the total stand for the heavy contributors section. So in this type of digital media, in Nielsen's opinion, one can get 90% of the information from 1% of the users, which is hardly representative for the whole group. Issues of representativity have risen since the late nineties, but it would appear that even though the core of any virtual community is just the tip of the iceberg, it has grown significantly over the past years along with web 2.0 becoming more popular and the interfaces more accessible to any kind of users. Projects such as Wikipedia stand to prove that. By putting these opinions together it would seem that the core of heavy contributors has increased to encompass all the full members, and the leaders have been "promoted" to mediators.

III. Virtual Communities in MMORPGs

A. MMORPGs

As the online encyclopedia Wikipedia states it: *Massively multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG) is a genre of computer role-playing games in which a very large number of players interact with one another within a virtual game world.* In essence it is a very accurate definition, yet the contemporary reality is a lot more diverse and complex since this is the most intense form of immersion in the virtual realm. The first feature of such a system is that it has a persistent character. This means that the virtual world of the game exists independent of the user. In a regular game, once the user exits the game the virtual environment is terminated. Since persistent virtual worlds are hosted on a dedicated server, the environment exists independent of the user, so whenever the user exits the application, the world will continue to exist. Obviously, the virtual world will evolve, even if some of the users are not logged in, both the status of the user's profile and the changes that user has inflicted upon the environment will remain in the database of the server.

Another possible definition (Cimpoi et. al. 2008) states that Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs) are a new class of *Multi-User Domains* or *Multi User Dungeons* (MUDs) - online environments where multiple users can interact with each other and achieve structured goals. The first MUD - an adventure game in a persistent world that allowed multiple users to log on at the same time - was created in 1979 by Roy Trubshaw and Richard Bartle. Even if MUDs descended from *Role-Playing Games* (RPGs), the two genres emerged around the same time and co-evolved beginning in the early 70's and became popular during the 80's. Both games allowed users to create characters based on numerical attributes (like power, dexterity, intelligence) and combat-oriented roles (i.e. warrior, archer, healer, cleric, druid etc.) with different strengths and weaknesses. Game-play typically revolved around a combination of interactive story-telling and logistical optimizations under the guise of slaying monsters and attaining higher levels and skills. In RPGs, a designated Game Master controlled the outcome of events based on dice-rolls and references to charts and tables. In MUDs, this was controlled by the server. As the graphical and processing capabilities of the modern personal computer increased, and as accessibility to the Internet became widely available, it became possible in the early 90's to build MUDs with graphical front-ends.

B. History

The first virtual world that had a pseudo-graphical interface was designed in 1973 and was called *Mazewar*. But it was followed by a series of other games and most of them were adapted to meet the requirements of the more and more complex network protocols, and thus MUD became a genre not a single application. Many MUDs and later MMORPGs are based on the type of story that made *Dungeons and Dragons* famous, the idea of numerous human adventurers immersed in a strange virtual world aiming to destroy or save that environment. One of the main goals of such a game is for the user to develop the character, in terms of improving the statistical abilities and there is an "established" algorithm of classes and skills for each specific persistent world. However, in this perspective socializing and communicating with other players in order to complete certain goals is another one of such goals.

The game that established the graphical interface MMORPG as a genre was *Ultima Online*, launched in 1997, and was followed soon in 1999 by *EverQuest*, a game which was the most popular game in the United States for over five years (Cimpoi et. al. 2008).

Nowadays the most popular MMORPGs are as follows:

1. WoW – over 13 million users
2. Lineage – over 3 million users
3. Lineage II – over 2 million users
4. RuneScape – over 1 million users

C. Classification

There are several ways in which MMORPGs can be classified, the first one, being the obvious: text-based and graphics-based. The text-based ones stick to the original format of the game, in which players experience the virtual world via text and static imagery, while the graphics-based are more intensive and the user creates a visual avatar, a virtual representation of one's self that is not only statistically but also aesthetically customizable.

Another classification is the structure of the software behind the game, especially the means by which the user can access the virtual world. Simpler games are browser-based, so the user does not need anything special to play, s/he can do so simply by using any web browser. More complex platforms, with a sophisticated graphical interface require a client, this being the means of the user to connect to the game server. Usually, the more graphic intensive games offer a wide variety of possibilities to interact with the virtual world, while the text-based ones are focused more on the interaction between players, community and strategy. Vast persistent world like those involved in *Second Life* or *Entropia Universe* are based on developing a virtual society similar to the real one in structure and economy, while the simpler ones are focused on attaining specific goals and developing the character. In this respect, the following case study on a browser-based text only MMORPG is relevant as to how the virtual communities function in a digital environment.

IV. Case Study – Starwake

A. Description

Starwake is developed and maintained by the company OGN (Online Gaming Network), specialised on browser based, text oriented games. Actually, Starwake is not the most popular product of the company, it

is Dark Warriors, but starwake has a more comprehensive player structure making it easier for data mining. A peculiar, yet not so uncommon strategy is designed for this particular type of game, in order to succeed in efficiently developing the character, the user must try to level up as slowly as possible, because as the player gets stronger, the challenges and tasks become harder to fulfill. This is opposed to the regular RPG (Role-Play Game) theory in which the player has to become stronger as fast as possible. Since the game does not have an active graphical interface (as can be seen in the picture above) a pseudo-turn based system is implemented. This means that the persistent world “resets” on a hourly basis, allowing the user to perform a certain number of actions at no cost in the economy of the game.

The game in itself is within the Sci-fi genre and is small sized in terms of user pool. At the time this paper was written there were 42,248 registered users, which stands for a small community as compared to the very large ones that have been taken into consideration earlier. Gameplay is based more on interaction between player and long-term strategy and less on the structure of the game itself. It does not have a pre-defined story but the diverse forms of interaction between players shape the virtual universe.

B. Gameplay

The game structure is turn-based, thus enhancing its main trait which is user interaction, not particular gaming skills. This means that any given user has a limited number of actions that can be performed in a certain period of time. Because of this it has an intricate system of alliances and rankings allowing the user to play various roles, be it in an alliance, or in the general social hierarchy of the game. Also as it is based on continuous communication between players, not only it has a forum, mailing lists and a chatroom, but the interface in itself is designed with a sidebar chat viewer on the right column, as can be seen below. The interface per se is efficient enough, but rather cluttered with information and not necessarily the most intuitive one. Taking on a website model, as opposed to the contemporary HUD (heads-up-display) the main screen is divided into three columns with a navigational menu on the left, contextual menu in the middle and chatroom on the right.

The chatroom is defined as a bar on a distant space station where pilots who roam the galaxy go to drink and have fun. In almost four years of direct observation, the bar has not changed its tradition, players take

turns at being barkeeps, obviously serving drinks that are no more than colored words, talk to customers encourage them to play dice or cards, or anything that would promote interaction.

Communication, coordinated moves and reciprocity are the keywords in building a good strategy for this this game. Taking all this into consideration one can state that it is more of a social networking service based on a game platform. In this respect, users can and must communicate via numerous channels in order to achieve the goals of the game and to progress efficiently.

Without the use of complex graphic interfaces, players must interact a lot in order to succeed in becoming better either as solo-player or as a group. Yet there is another particularity to this game, a certain parameter called spectra which allows other users to define the main characteristics of one's avatar Although the social networking traits of the system are quite visible, a particular feature changes a bit the avatar building paradigm: user profiles are less customizable by the user itself, instead the other users cand evaluate the player ang "grade" it according to the actions performed. This means tha a certain character will be perceived by others not by what the user wants to say and do, but actually by what the user does (e.g. being aggressive, helpful, insightful, etc.).

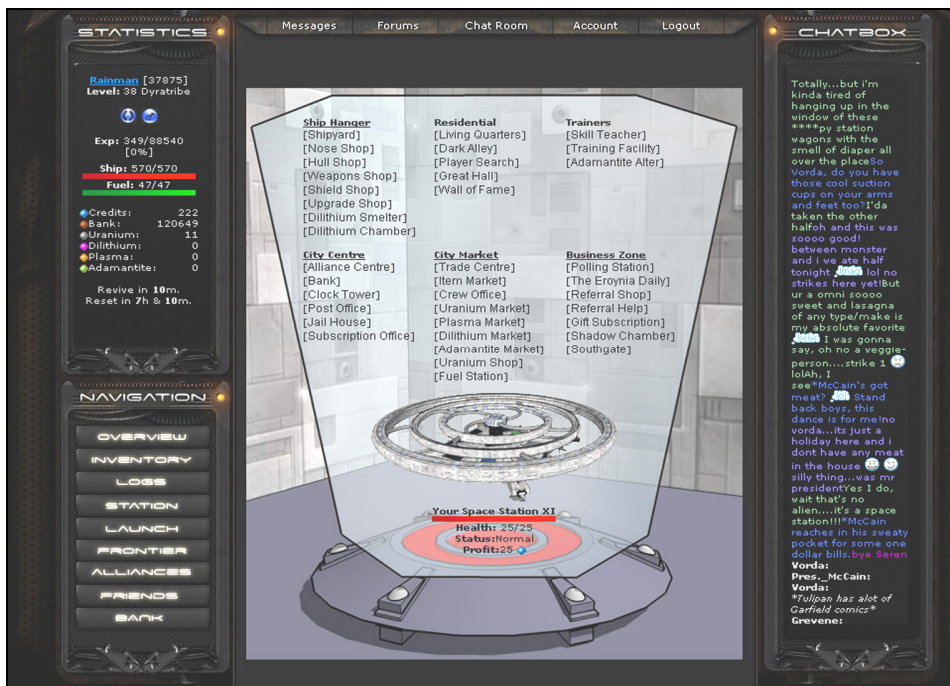
C. Methodology

In order to better understand virtual worlds, a new scientific approach is required, a sociology of the virtual. Ben Agger (2004) states that this type of sociology wilol mor or less de-professionlize the sociologist as we commonly perceive it, transforming the statistician into practician thus shifting the focus from statistic analysis to the individual as an active member of the community. This particular approach would allow a more profound study of the impact the web has on society and culture, but also on the concepts of self and community, that are constantly redifining themselves in such a context.

Obviously, such a change does not mean marginalizing traditional quantitative and qualitative methods, but rather broadening the field of study to adjacent areas in order to provide adapted and in-depth analyses of contemporary social phenomena.

Agger's (2004) vision on a sociology of the virtual is comprised of three aspects: 1. The impact of the virtual on the self, society and culture - that are basically in a state of flux as communication speed increases, the importance of any kinds of borders and limitations decreases and the limits between the public and the private fade away; 2. The importance of individual discourse,

the message sent by one individual, increasing visibly with the development of social media – an aspect supported by the importance of influencers in various types of social media and online audiences becoming an economic model; 3. A less standardized scientific approach on research – allowing the use of many tools and combined methodologies to research virtual space, with the downside of blurring the limits between the amateur and expert and the addition of a postmodern aspect to sciences in terms of movement from the boundaries towards the center.



In this particular case, the methodology used is a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods and aims to answer the research question how to define social norm in the context of the Starwake community and how do members perceive and define each other using the Spectra parameter, correlated with this norm.

The first step in achieving this goal was direct and observatory participation within this community for 42 months with an average of one visit a day ending at the start of 2012. Even though this method has its limitations it completes the statistics leading to a better understanding of what happens on an individual level of the players in the game.

A second step is taken from the broader field of social network analysis and consists of a few stages. The first one is to collect the raw data, in terms of scraping various datasets out of user profiles, friends, alliances and ranks in order to accurately map the network. A second stage is to focus on the data regarding the spectra parameter and create rankings for each one. Then all this must be correlated with the general forum and alliances forums by direct participative observation on the side of the researcher.

V. Results

A. *The Spectra parameter*

Normally, in any role-playing game, a user's profile content is mainly up to the user. Each fills in details that best characterize the avatar. In this case, each individual is defined by his/hers actions and the other members contribute to this endeavor awarding a certain trait to that character. In order for the players not to abuse this function, each individual can cast a vote maximum 6 times a day, at two hours intervals and never two consecutive ones for the same player. In this respect the spectra parameter looks a lot like Richard Bartle's typology of players, but with some differences. There are 6 different types of traits that define the player:

1. Aggressive - The player is of a more or less aggressive nature attacking other players, but can be threatening on a verbal level as well. The won to fought battle ratio is high for aggressive players and they often challenge other players to a fight. This is very similar to the killer model in Bartle's scheme, but does not have a negative connotation since one of the purposes of the game is to fight.
2. Helpful - The player does not hesitate to help others, be it with information (chat and forum), or with resources, in-game currency or equipment. Presenting strategies for improving one's game style is also considered helpful, as is helping other members of the same alliance in any way. Usually these are players that have already reached a certain level, both in ranking and in understanding the game mechanics, who like to share their knowledge of the virtual world.

3. Funny – is awarded to players who have an extensive sense of humor, always making jokes and replying to others in ways that amuse the community. Very close to Bartle’s socializer they care less about the game per se and more about the interaction. They often attack players a lot stronger than them and then make fun of how they lost the battle.
4. Insightful – Awards an aura of seriousness to the players that have it, usually individuals that understand the game very well and have a well contoured strategy, planning in advance and having specific purposes. Intelligent and insightful conversations are also triggers for this type of tagging that resembles a lot Bartle’s achiever type.
5. Creative – represents the concept taken ad literam. Basically players that make use of the (rather limited) resources of a text-based game to be creative and non-conventional. This can apply to profile configuration, declaring cultural preferences, how interesting the stories these players tell are and so on. Creative players are easily noticed because they resemble but not wholly the explorers in Bartle’s scheme.
6. Spammer – is a category that novices many times abuse awarding it to those who attack them, instead of tagging them as aggressive. A spammer talks a lot generating pointless conversations that everyone hates, ignores the rules of the chat, is always present but no one enjoys that company.

Basically, these parameters allow the community, the other players to define one individual and is one of the hot topics on the game forum. In this respect we can safely state that it is the closest it gets to a form of social norm within this particular community, as it is a measure of what each player does and says perceived by others. Extracting the profiles for the entire population via data-mining allows us to classify all players according to spectra, but we have opted for top 5 rankings for reasons of precision. These rankings can identify the informal leaders of the community as only popular and influent persons get spectra from a very high number of players. The Spectra parameter is also relevant because the game developers forbid multiple accounts so a user with a certain IP can only have one account, a direct consequence being that the same person can not vote for avatars that he/she owns. The number of spectra tags received is cumulative and never resets so the votes that the top players get have been counted since their joining the platform.

Aggressive Spectra

As can be easily noticed there is a very low percentage of aggressive votes awarded by the total population on the aggressive niche. This means that there is no social stratus playing the killer role exclusively, or at least not one that is perceived as such by the general population. It is more likely that players oriented towards an achiever role to be categorized as being aggressive by the other denizens of the Starcraft world.

Aggressive Spectra			
Rank	Name	Points	Percentage
1	~[~{SALT}~]~	514	4.67%
2	~* Reborn *~	414	3.76%
3	Tiger Bill	356	3.24%
4	~Abyssinian~	267	2.43%
5	DonBobo	265	2.41%
Total number of points in game:			10998

Also the differences between the first places and the following are rather small, the votes being evenly distributed. As one's avatar grows in ranking, it will attack more thus increasing the chances of being tagged as aggressive. A ground rule is not to use any kind of automated system to attack other players, those caught doing so will be suspended from the game for a certain period of time "jailed".

Helpful spectra

Helpful players are very appreciated within the community, especially since the interface may be cumbersome for newbies. Obviously there are volunteers that are part of the game staff who help others, but generally an alliance leader or a more talkative player that responds to others solving their issues is to be tagged as helpful.

Helpful Spectra			
Rank	Name	Points	Percent
1	~* Master *~	1,173	5.85%
2	~Starblade~	668	3.33%
3	[The_Raven]	505	2.52%
4	~Abyssinian~	471	2.35%
5	GF-4	465	2.32%
Total number of points in game:			20056

By far, the total number of helpful votes exceeds that of the aggressive ones. Because the process of developing the avatar is rather complex, even the understanding of the game mechanics can be challenging for some, help is treasured and rewarded. Even though each member has few direct friends, the system of interwoven links in the social network is rather tight and by means of alliances even tighter.

Funny Spectra

Any social group has a certain social layer that plays this role, an unending source of jokes and humor. Starwake is no exception, the funny ones being a numerous group in this world. In a text world a funny profile picture can get a few funny tags.

Funny Spectra			
Rank	Name	Points	Percent
1	Tinfoil Hat	373	5.76%
2	ComfyChair	240	3.71%
3	DonBobo	155	2.39%
4	~[BuStErMoO]~	144	2.22%
5	~* Master *~	141	2.18%
Total number of points in game:			6477

The role of these players is not that of jokers, many wannabe jokers will be tagged as spammers, these are astute individuals that have a certain spontaneity in their replies and are able to sustain the general good mood. They are the bindings of the community, popular, but less oriented towards achieving the goals of the game, only one of the top 5 funny is in top 5 aggressive. Nevertheless this is also a rather even distribution of points, but with a noticeable decrease in the total number of points.

Insightful Spectra

Each MMORPG has a certain category of players who understand the finer points of the game mechanics. Bartle (2004) calls them explorers and further develops them into scientists. These one are more of the latter, but four of them can be found in the rankings of those who are also helpful. The fact that they are able to do so is a direct consequence of their good understanding of the game, and the ability to communicate this to others places them at the top.

Insightful Spectra			
Rank	Name	Points	Percent
1	~* Master *~	400	4.63%
2	DonBobo	338	3.91%
3	~Abyssinian~	311	3.60%
4	GF-4	215	2.49%
5	hanlinoo	194	2.25%
Total number of points in game:			8636

Considering that some differences in power between the players may be acquired by purchasing in game objects with real money, insightful players may be considered those who are able to reach a certain level and status without paying for it, but the vast general knowledge of the player is the key factor for this parameter. The social status of the insightful members is that of the elders of a community, if we are to take into consideration Amy Jo Kim's (2000) classification, these would be the leaders that are capable of offering help to others.

Creative Spectra

Creative players in the Starwake universe get some votes on their "appearance", that is profile building and visuals, but the great majority they acquire by telling stories and describing situations, mainly in the chat room. Over the years of observation we have noticed that most of these characters are talented writers able to convey information in various ways for others to understand. In a way, it is only natural, given the textual nature of the game and the scarcity of visual elements, the individuals that fit their roles best and are very imaginative are to be considered creative since they can add a lot of imagination to actions that sometimes may seem repetitive and grinding.

Creative Spectra			
Rank	Name	Points	Percent
1	~* Master *~	302	5.02%
2	DonBobo	300	4.99%
3	~Abyssinian~	255	4.24%
4	GF-4	188	3.13%
5	Ancient One	175	2.91%
Total number of points in game:			6011

The most creative players are not distributed like the most aggressive, the following percentages drop abruptly, proving that there are rather few those who can be perceived as being creative in such an environment. One of the reasons is that it is time consuming to create stories for others and interact with the audience. Many of those who just want to play the game are focused on achieving the goals and will not get any votes for creativity.

Spammer Spectra

If one were to forcibly transpose the Starwake spammer into the real world, the end result would be something like a drunk stopping people in the street only to have someone to talk to, rather harmless but annoying. Of course there are some who actually spam, as in an attempt to advertise something, but these are rather few. Usually they just try to promote themselves and may end up harassing other players in order to do so, or even tag others as spammers.

Spammer Spectra			
Rank	Name	Points	Percent
1	Cowboy_Thor	104	2.29%
2	RabidRabbit	102	2.24%
3	Pres. McCain	96	2.11%
4	StrikeOne	93	2.04%
5	coolt	79	1.74%
Total number of points in game:			4548

Out of observation, we have noticed that there is a certain ciclicity to the spammer phenomenon. If they are branded as spammers by others, not only they will not give up the practices that got them there in the first place, but enhance them until public measures are taken against them. As a rule of thumb they are marginalized and their interest in offending others drops in time, eventually leaving the virtual community. As it is easily noticeable these players are very few in numbers and the first ones get most of the votes, from a certain point on those who get a very small percentage of votes are not really spammers but individuals who are easily misunderstood or difficult to like.

On a social level, those who break the social norm frequently, deliberately and often ostentatively try to take pride in it. Practically it is just a form of deviant behavior from the social norm of the community, but are

strongly repelled by the community. Though many have some friends, they are unable to integrate in the virtual world and for most of them the ultimate resolution is to leave the game, but not before causing as much confusion and stress as possible. In this respect they are closest to Bartle’s grievors, not very successful at playing the game, not killers, but rather drawing negative attention and spite.

Community leaders

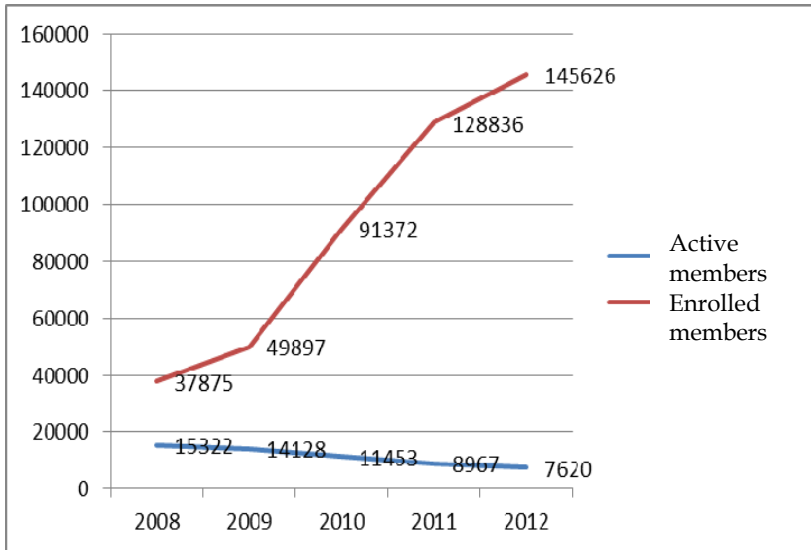
In order to better define the hierarchy at the top of this community and to better determine who poses as leaders, or persons of influence the following table correlates all the parameters of the individuals that can be found in any of the top five rankings so far.

Community leaders									
Name	Points						Friends	Alliance	Hierarchy
	Aggressive	Creative	Funny	Helpful	Insightful	Spammer			
~* Master *~	246	302	141	1173	400	9	9	~Jedi Templar~	1st place Creative, Helpful and Insightful, 5th place Funny
DonBobo	265	300	155	455	338	8	8	~Jedi Templar~	2nd place Creative and Insightful, 3rd place funny, 5th place Aggressive
~Abyssinian~	267	255	128	471	311	15	6	~Jedi Templar~	3rd place Creative and Insightful, 4th place Aggressive and Helpful
GF-4	191	188	117	465	215	13	28		4th place Creative and Insightful, 5th place Helpful
~Starblade~	128	144	140	668	185	23	6	~*ODD ALLIANCE*~	2nd place Helpful
[The Raven]	116	54	66	505	76	4	140	[THE DOMINION]	3rd place Helpful
hanlino	161	132	60	224	194	4	34	~Jedi Templar~	5th place Insightful
Ancient One	105	175	50	222	135	1	20	B.R.O.T.H.E.R.H.O.O.D!	5th place Creative
~[~(SALT)]~	514	125	64	365	193	2	15	~Jedi Templar~	1st place Aggressive
~* Reborn *~	414	135	137	208	149	44	102		2nd place Aggressive
Tiger Bill	356	11	18	71	15	11	17	The Elite Destroyers	3rd place Aggressive
Tinfoil Hat	42	21	373	59	31	46	12	[THE DOMINION]	1st place Funny
ComfyChair	10	19	240	109	30		8	[THE DOMINION]	2nd place Funny
~[BuStErMoO]~	143	107	133	244	114	45	122	SpAmMeRs	3rd place Funny
Cowboy_Thor	40	3	13	12	4	104	3		1st place Spammer
RabidRabbit	1	7	23	11	10	102	8	[THE DOMINION]	2nd place Spammer
Pres. McCain	42	12	57	31	18	96	13		3rd place Spammer
StrikeOne	6	9	12	23	9	93	9	B.R.O.T.H.E.R.H.O.O.D!	4th place Spammer
coolt	9	6	6	22	5	79	31		5th place Spammer
Total points	10998	6011	6477	20056	8636	4548			

B. The Starwake universe in numbers

The research on this topic began in 2008, at the time 15322 players filled the ranks of Starwake pilots as active members. In January 2012, only 7620 were left as active members, though the total number of enrolled

players had risen to 145626 from 37875 initially. Though a bit of a paradox, it shows that the general interest for browser based text only MMORPGs has dropped abruptly, in the sense that more people were willing to try it, but fewer and fewer were willing to actually play it in the long run.



The main reason for this phenomenon is the structure of the platform per se. Those who understand and are willing to make an effort to undertake the conventions of such a virtual world are interconnected and form a community with tight bonds. On the other hand the lazier ones detach from this nucleus and will soon leave this type of MMORPG.

Of course another visible problem is related to the technology of the platform in itself. It is of an old design and not yet fully compatible with mobile devices, nowadays a fatal flaw for any web development.

VI. Conclusions

The Starwake virtual community is a type of a social system that is extremely relevant in the process of defining virtual worlds in a social perspective. The analysis of the data mined from the entire population of this community revealed a “tribe” centered on relationships formed after

communicating in an electronic, computer mediated environment, often on more than one channel simultaneously. The study of this community taking into consideration the Spectra parameter revealed both informal leaders and a certain set of rules that aggregate into a form of a social norm of this group.

Another concluding statement is that browser based MMORPGs can be important social networking tool. Even though the more graphic intensive ones are more popular, the latter can be more effective. In theory, text interface is more efficient than graphics for community building because it allows the user to focus more on the interaction than on the surrounding environment.

The social dynamics of the game are similar to the fully immersive social interactive games even though it is combat based, and one may think that it is all about the action, but being a lot less graphical it is less distracting. The social hierarchy in the game allows diversity and domination on various levels giving the user numerous possibilities to evolve and integrate in that social structure that s/he chooses and believes to be more suitable.

As technology massively impacts everyday life social structures tend to undertake their own metamorphosis, virtual projections of real entities tend to be more and more complex and various forms of social media transform the way we relate to each other, and in some occurrences, as is the case of enhanced reality alter even the surrounding, tangible environment.

Virtual worlds and their study outline new forms of science in the social realm such as digital anthropology and ethnography, and their scientific rigourosity is increasing as exact sciences are combined with psychology, sociology and communication sciences. Moreover, this kind of study constitutes itself as a point of convergence between disciplines as we strive to understand more thoroughly this relationship between the individual and the virtual representation.

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OBSERVATIONS ON THE CURRENT STATE OF THE ROMANIAN REPORTAGE. AN ANALYSIS BASED ON IN-DEPTH INTERVIEW WITH AWARD-WINNING JOURNALISTS

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ABSTRACT. The present analysis aims at revealing the current state of the Romanian print media reportage, as this is perceived by practitioners themselves. Research was carried out via in-depth interview, as we believe it represents a qualitative method that best suited our interests. Ten Romanian reporters, awarded at various major competitions – both national and international – were interviewed. The discussions with the journalists revealed that the reportage has suffered significant demise due to lack of financial input and limited time resources, necessary for the production of this journalistic text type. Moreover, the interviewees underlined that in contemporary journalism, obsessed by minimal costs and speediness in delivering information to the public, the survival of this genre depends, on the one hand, on the media editors' willingness to invest in it, and, on the other, on the journalists' ability to find the formula to captivate those readers who moved away from print outlets and took refuge in literature.

Keywords: Romanian reportage, contemporary media, in-depth journalism.

Introduction

As a text of an “ambiguous identity” (Brunea-Fox 1979, 24), the reportage has always been seen as a genre between journalism and literature. Its affinity with literature derives from the writing style, often “adorned” with figures of speech, while its journalistic nature refers to what researchers have called “context dependency” (see van Dijk 1990 and Dumistrăcel 2006) –

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an obligation that the reporter has to reflect in his or her writing the extra-linguistic reality. This oscillation between literature and journalism has been sustained for decades by the fact that many of those who were writing reportages were also literary people themselves. There cannot be determined the concrete moment in time when journalism and literature went on separate ways, and neither which way the reportage took. The sole certainty regarding the reportage refers to the difficulty of finding an all-embracing definition, although dictionaries, both generalist and specialized, made serious efforts in this respect. There has always been a “but”, and there has always been a fault. First of all, this impossibility to define the reportage and place it in one category (either literary, or journalistic) is due to the various geographic and cultural spaces in which the reportage has developed over the years; language, culture and civilization particularities are the most difficult to shift from one country to another, from one journalist tradition to another. Secondly, within the same tradition, the impact of paradigmatic changes should be taken into consideration, because these transformations have reshaped the reportage in ways that make defining it even a more difficult task for journalists and researchers alike. For instance, there are some very well known reportage “schools” that have trained journalists who wrote reportages following their schools’ norms and recommendations – some of them unwritten – regarding the structure, composition, style or certain rules on choosing the topics to be covered, on talking to sources etc. To give an example, the American tradition, illustrated by the New Journalism phenomenon, considers that narrative journalism is the equivalent of the European “le grand reportage”, a creation of the French journalism school. Adding to that, Poland has its own Polish reportage school; as a matter of fact, in 2010, the Reportage Institute – Instytut Reportażu – was created as a response to decreases in financing of investigative journalism. This school’s main purpose, represented by reporters such as Mariusz Szczygiel or Małgorzata Rejmer, is to carry along the journalistic heritage of the famous Ryszard Kapuściński or Hanna Krall, who wrote reportage books that have been translated in various languages, including Romanian. Similarly, we can also consider that a Romanian reportage school exists, founded by Brunea-Fox and Geo Bogza, carried forward by Cornel Nistorescu and maintained nowadays by the papers that still publish consistent long-form reportage (such as *Formula AS*, *Decât o Revistă*, *Opinia studentescă* and *Dilema Veche*) or by some independent journalism projects, like *Casa Jurnalistului*. Consequently, this paper aims at probing all these aspects, by means of which we can evaluate the current state of affairs for the Romanian reportage.

Literature review

Over the years, extensive amount of research was dedicated to the role of reportage in journalism, either in newspapers, scientific studies or trade journals. Since the purpose of this paper is to examine the current state of the Romanian reportage, this theoretical background takes the form of a document analysis and highlights the relevant moments when the reportage caught the public eye and rose up for debate within the gild. Consequently, this part of the present study will not focus on the theories proposed by various researchers in exegeses dedicated to reportage – which undoubtedly have their importance –, but on first-hand information delivered by reporters themselves – practitioners of the genre studied here. Several iconic moments have been selected for further presentation: the debated initiated by Geo Bogza in *Vremea* magazine in 1934 and two special issues from *Dilema Veche*, published in 2012 and 2013, coordinated by journalists Iaromira Popovici and Marius Chivu. All three debates have in common the need to define the reportage and to establish its relation to literature, but the topic is covered differently because while 80 years ago the reportage was very popular among journalists, the two more recent ones reveal a concern about being less and less present in newspapers and magazines.

The 1934 series „What is the reportage? An investigation among our writers”³ comprises of discussions between the reporter and N. D. Cocea, Felix Aderca, Nicolae Davidescu and Filip Brunea-Fox during March and June of 1934. In the debate introduction, Geo Bogza considers that the reportage has to be much more than a pleasant reading, assuming a more profound mission, and argues that this kind of text „is not only the most sensitive seismograph of our daily lives, but also it has become a worthy instrument, useful for the [social] transformations to come” (Bogza 1934, 4). The same idea is shared by Filip Brunea-Fox, who believes that the reportage has a “social significance” that explains both its existence and origin. “In the times when papers were not what they are today –that is, merely retailers of news –, the role of the reporter was played by historians and chroniclers. For those times, they were enough. Events ensued slower, they were more distant in time, and public interest was more limited. Nowadays, the reporter must be seen within the new dimensions of this new life and its rhythm. The reporter has been created by the big city,

³ The debate initiated by Geo Bogza was published in the following editions: 329 (March 11, 1934), 334 (April 22, 1934), 339 (May 27, 1934) and 342 (June 17, 1934).

which represents the heart of social concentration” (Brunea-Fox 1934, 8). Fox considers that the social mission of the reportage should not be shadowed by the literary form this text often takes, because, the reporter explains, such a view is reductionist, is one-dimensional.

Since the times of Geo Bogza and Brunea-Fox, two established reporters for the Romanian school of reportage, the evolution of this journalistic text has been marked by the Communist era, when its role was, with few exceptions, entirely propagandistic. The reportage has also been scrutinised during those times, but generally the research took the form of monographic studies, as it is George Ivaşcu’s book from 1964, *Reflector peste timp* [*Mirror over time*], or *Valori lexicale și stilistice în publicistica literară românească* [*Lexical and stylistic value of the Romanian literary journalism*], published in 1981 by Victor Vişinescu, in which the reportage was also analysed.

However, as we mentioned at the beginning of our study, we are interested especially in investigating the current state of the Romanian reportage by using the input from the “practical experience” of those producing this type of text. In contemporary media, the reportage has been the main topic of two special issues published by *Dilema veche* cultural magazine in 2012 and 2013. Stela Giurgeanu, Liviu Iolu, and Eugen Istodor were some of the journalists that contributed to the special issue from 2012. According to Iaromira Popovici, who coordinated the debate, the purpose of the editorial team was to identify the current situation of the reportage in the Romanian print media. “Of course, reportages are still published today, even in daily papers, but mostly in magazines and on blogs. And sometimes they’re really good. Unfortunately, not so many, due to a superficial impatience from a certain kind of journalism which focuses on promptness and *rating*” (Popovici 2012, I). But the scarce presence of the reportage in newspapers and magazines does not necessarily mean that the genre is about to disappear. In his text, contributor Liviu Iolu, a multi-awarded journalist in various journalism contests asks a rhetorical question: “Who said that the reportage belongs to daily papers only? It moved to places created by reporters attentive to details in order to be able to express themselves more freely. We can still find reportages in independent magazines such as *Decât o Revistă* or surfing the Internet” (Iolu 2012, VI).

A year later, near the end of 2013, another special issue, entitled “Reportajul polonez” [“The Polish Reportage”] was published in *Dilema Veche* magazine. Although the discussion selection was inspired by a project of the Polish Institute in Bucharest, “The Polish reportage – «We all know little about everything» (Ryszard Kapuściński)”, those invited to write on the

topic ended up talking about the Romanian reportage. Journalist Marius Chivu, the coordinator, noted that, along with the transformations suffered by print media within the last years, it is difficult to anticipate how the reportage will look in the future. He notices a tendency across Europe which is worth paying attention to: “everywhere in Europe, and mostly in the Scandinavian countries, because of the decay of generalist media audience, the so-called «long form journalism» seems to revive in some niche magazines with growing circulation. This phenomenon seems to appear in our country too, where, due to this recent period of [social] protests, there’s a demand again for [quality] reporting, and [this is why] an independent journalism project such as *Casa Jurnalistului* continues to exist – due to popular support and private donations” (Chivu 2013, I).

The second special issue published the answers of 11 Romanian reporters – of different ages and writing for different media outlets – to three questions: (1) “What do you need in order to write a good reportage?”; (2) “What is missing in our country to write a reportage?”; and (3) “Which is your favourite topic to write a reportage on?”. According to the journalists who answered, the reportage nowadays has to deal with some problems. Oana Dan, a writer for *dela0.ro*, considers that lack of time and money represents two major obstacles in writing a good reportage. “Unfortunately, if you work in an editorial office, you’re in a complicated relation with time resources, and if you are *freelancer*, you’re in a complicated relation with the financial resource. And this is why nowadays it is complicated [for a reporter] to meet these two basic criteria for a good reportage. Of course, interest, passion, culture, the availability for listening and understanding, and tolerance are to be added.” (Dan 2013, VI). Sintia Radu, from *Esquire Romania*, compares the situation in Romania with the one from abroad. “Even abroad not much is invested in this [n.a. reportage] and people aren’t usually big fans of long form journalism, as long as those stories aren’t written on a really interesting topic. It is no surprise that we live in a fast-paced world and that we all function on fast-forward. In other words, if you want to write reportages for someone to read them, you must find great topics and you need to work a lot. This is how it is done everywhere” (Radu 2013, VII).

Apart from these special issues dedicated to situation of the Romanian reportage – the first one analysing it in its glorious times and the others in the moments when different voices, including ones inside the guild, were foreboding its death –, this genre received constantly media attention, but most of the times this materialised into interviews with reporters or ex-reporters

when the discussion occasionally touched the reportage. In the archives, including online ones, we can find, for instance, interviews with journalists such as Cornel Nistorescu, Viorel Ilișoi or Liviu Iolu, where different definitions for the reportage, the reporter or the reporter's work were put forward.

Methodology

As noted before, the central interest of this paper is to picture the current state of the Romanian reportage as this is perceived and described by award-winning Romanian reporters. The research method selected for such study is the in-depth interview, a qualitative research technique that involves conducting intensive individual interviews with a small number of respondents to explore their perspectives on a particular idea, program, or situation (Boyce and Neale 2006). Moreover, in-depth interviews can also be used to validate a hypothesis or to verify a premise. Here, the premise to be verified resulted from the document analysis previously performed and described: the reportage, as an illustrative type of text for investigative journalism, is less and less present within the Romanian newspapers that generally publish „degraded” versions of it, due to the lack of time and money which are required for this type of press, the need for promptness in reporting, and tabloidization of quality journalism.

Another argument in favour of choosing this qualitative research method over a quantitative one (which would have allowed us to draw generalisations from the results based on the answers obtained from the interviewees) is that it offers researchers the possibility of gathering much more detailed information on the studied phenomenon. Therefore, this research focused on interviewing ten Romanian journalists who won, with the reportages they've written, national and European competitions, such as “Premiile Clubului Român de Presă”, “Tânărul Jurnalist al Anului”, “Premiile Superscrieri” and “Reporter European”. We consider that the argument for the interviewees' selection is a solid one, because it offers a plus of objectivity and relevance regarding the researched topic. Obviously, at the same time, our selection took into account the need of diversity among the subjects interviewed. Thus, their profiles are different, based on criteria such as gender, time spent working as a journalist, competitions won, media outlet they were working for at the time of the interview etc. In the end, the individuals selected included independent journalists, reporters who are currently working for local or national papers, and journalists who write reportages for long form journalism-based magazines.

Given the dynamic nature of the profession of those interviewed and therefore the difficulty to provide identical circumstances for interviewing, the interviews varied from face to face meetings (personal interviews), to interviews conducted over the phone or by Internet (e-mail or *Skype*). The in-depth interviews were performed using an identical guide for all respondents. A thematic guide was elaborated and the questions and categories resulted from the analysis of the documents mentioned in the theoretical section of our research. Each category included four to six questions, and a total of 21 questions were addressed in order to analyse (1) the current state of the reportage; (2) the reportage seen as a journalistic product; (3) the reportage as a journalistic practice and (4) the reading habits of the reportage's public.

The interviewed journalists were, in alphabetical order, Andrei Crăciun (independent journalist), Cristian Delcea (*Adevărul*), Cătălin Hopulele (*Ziarul de Iași, Mediafax*), Viorel Ilișoi (*Jurnalul Național*), Simina Mistreanu (*The Oregonian*), Vlad Odobescu (independent journalist), Oana Sandu (*Decât o Revistă*), Paula Scînteianu (*Ziarul de Iași*), Andrei Udișteanu (*Digi 24*), Vlad Ursulean (independent journalist)⁴. The interviews were conducted between February 16, 2014 and June 12, 2014.

Analysis of the interviews

1. The current state of the Romanian reportage

Regarding the presence of the reportage in print media outlets nowadays, most of the interviewed journalists agreed that less and less attention is given to this type of journalistic story. Their explanations resort to the lack of financial support from editorial management:

“The reportage is an expensive genre. It involves movement, and a lot of time spent on documenting. It's time and money consuming, and so the solution was for the editorial office to support all those costs and pay the reporter to write two or three stories per month. But currently an editorial office in Romania rarely publishes a well-written and well-documented reportage. At the same time, a form of independent journalism emerged, financially supported by different sources, which allows the reporters to engage in some sort of adventure all by themselves: if they want to publish the

⁴ The information between parentheses reveals the workplace of the reporters at the moment of the interview.

story no matter what, they'll even spend nights sleeping here and there (...) My view is that we have to keep looking for a system that can allow for financial support of the reportage. It's all about the money." (Ilișoi, *Interview*).

Among the solutions found on the media market to combat this lack of financial support, the interviewed reporters identified *Casa Jurnalistului*, an online platform dedicated to independent journalism projects. Also, they mentioned *Decât o Revistă* and *Formula AS*, a trimestrial and a weekly magazine where readers can find reportages. As for the daily papers, the reporters named *Adevărul* or *Jurnalul Național*, pointing out that reportages are published rarer and rarer within newspaper pages. This reality was explained by the fact that generally print media management considers that investing in reportage is unprofitable:

"Editors-in-chief and media managers are afraid of reportages and for most of them keeping a reporter in the newsroom is a pain in the neck. They believe that it is not fair that such an employee should write an excellent story once every two weeks while the others produce 10-20 texts on a daily basis, obviously collected from the Internet. And we do not even mention the costs: it is pure luxury for a newsroom to afford a reporter and a photo-reporter to cover a story." (Odobescu, *Interview*).

Consequently, a common denominator is the one relating to resource management – financial and time related – which have decreased significantly. Limitation of financial resources is connected with the recent economic recession, which led to dissolution of more and more editorial offices, or, in better cases, just to page adjustments, in order to reduce printing costs. Inherently, this limitation affected the reportage as a long-form journalism genre, which requires a generous editorial space:

"It is one thing to write a two-page piece of reportage, because you need this space to tell a story. Beyond raw information, a piece of reportage must deliver a certain state of mind, a certain feeling. In today's media the reportage has developed a minimal resistance form. I'm not saying that one cannot write a 3000-characters piece of reportage, the rule is that every topic requires a certain editorial space to be covered, and as a reporter one must know where to stop." (Ilișoi, *Interview*)

The lack of financial support and time related constraints in reportage production have become a leit-motive in the discourse of the interviewed journalists, who described the current situation in relation to how journalists used to write their reportages 50 years ago or more:

“In today’s reality you cannot travel to Valea Jiului like Geo Bogza used to do, and stay there for a month; financially, it is not sustainable anymore. The reportage cannot remain captive in that era. It is difficult to compare the current reportage with the reportage from that era, because time flows differently in today’s newsroom. The tools useful for reporting are different too. Now you have a laptop, you can travel to Valea Jiului and report live on what is happening there.” (Delcea, *Interview*)

In order to better illustrate the current state of the Romanian reportage, the in-depth interviews included a section where the contribution of online medium to the development of the reportage has been scrutinized. The reporters underlined the fact that this shift from print to online involved also a change in the type of discourse preferred: the reportage becomes a multimodal discourse, the content being revealed not only by using text, but also by using still images, audio and/or video files. On this matter, the interviewed journalists explained that these two communication channels (print and online) can complement each other, but that there are also risks that need to be taken into consideration:

“It is a good thing to work on the visual side [of the story] too when you have a great text online. When reading a piece of reportage, I look both at the text and the visuals. But as for users who just access a website, it is highly possible that they will enjoy watching the photos or videos available more and, so, the power of the text diminishes. Maybe, seduced by ten wonderful photos, the reader will not even make it until the end of the text and will not pay attention to the structure and the architecture of the reportage. In the online environment, where there is so much visual, audio and video information, the essence of the text runs the risk of fading away.” (Udișteanu, *Interview*)

2. Do in-depth reporting and the reportage still play a key role in the current print media?

Our study also tried to discuss the role the reportage plays in the current media, especially evaluated in this new communication environment, in which news and general novelties spread extremely fast and the public appears to be allowed only a quick reading of the huge material at its disposal, with the media being trapped between poor financing and political partisanship. Therefore, when enquired about the power they attribute to

the reportage in order to offer quality journalism when media today fail, the interviewees offered varied answers that sometimes show contradicting perspectives on the matter. Firstly, they promoted the idea that the press should evolve in synergy and that the general quality of a publication should not be judged based on a single type of text, such as the reportage. Secondly, some of them agreed that the reportage has the power to “rescue” an issue of the paper, but only rarely does so and under certain circumstances, such as when

“there is nothing new, no events to report on [and] nothing new internationally. The media today, as diversified as they are, have many deficiencies. Nothing can save a newspaper but a well done job and, in this case we can call the reportage the crown jewel. A good reportage can save a newspaper on a certain day.” (Crăciun, *Interview*)

3. Practicing the reportage in contemporary print media

There is a general saying that the reportage represents one type of journalistic text that cannot exist without field work. To report means to be out there, in the middle of the events, and not in the newsroom. In other words, the journalist must meet with the people he or she writes about, investigate and get familiar with the facts narrated. Nevertheless, there are situations when fulfilling these requirements of the craft results impossible, even if we are talking about reportage. And again the explanation refers to the already mentioned lack of money and lack of time:

“Many times news appear first on TV and for journalists it is more convenient to write about a corruption investigation based on what they see on TV, and not go there. Field work is rare in print journalism; it is more a television thing nowadays.” (Delcea, *Interview*)

As for the sources that journalists use to find their stories, answers also vary. While some of the interviewees said that they look for potential stories among the daily news or miscellaneous news columns, others mentioned that they find stories browsing the social networks or from what others tell them. Among other sources used in a reporter’s work there were mentioned a journalist’s imagination itself, a journalist’s flair or archives files that they can access to document a topic. Social media were evoked not only as sources, but also as tools for reportage documentation or promotion.

Concerning the digital era, the reporters we interviewed suggested that it is just a matter of time before this in-depth form of reporting shifts from print to online formats, on the online versions of the print editions, on blogs or other online platforms for independent journalism.

“I think that the reportage will slowly disappear from print media, even though it should not. I watch how the print media try to compete foolishly with TV and Internet in delivering news. It should be the opposite of that, namely it should stick to in-depth reportages, investigations, documentaries, opinion articles and analyses. Newspapers are published at a slow pace, and the reportage has always been a niche genre, of course, it had its golden days, but there has never existed a newspaper that delivered reportages exclusively. (...) Ten years from now, what I am writing today will not be called ‘reportage’ anymore, technology will change that. But I am bound to it until my very end.” (Ilişoi, *Interview*).

Online platforms allow for texts – including reportages – to be organized in a multimodal manner, which means, according to the opinion of some of the interviewed journalists, moving away from the “classic” way of reporting, where style and writing represented key-elements. Therefore, they underlined that the identity of the reportage is affected by online environment, in the sense that it restrains the power of the only thing that makes this genre unique – the written text, with its stylistic and compositional apparatus. Not all the interviewees agreed that its writing represents the core of good reporting. Some of them considered that the story *per se* is equally important. The reporters explained how a weaker story can be saved by a good writing, and that a story, no matter how worthy, can be ruined by bad writing.

4. *Reading habits of the public*

Our research tried to cover not only the journalists’ self-image and the image they project unto the product, but also how they, as reporters, see the reader of their creations. We believe that knowing how this image is profiled can contribute to improving communication between sender and receiver, based on the so-called “*contrat de lecture*” (Minet 1997). An interesting observation highlighted by the interviewees was that the reportage – although part of mass communication production – is not written for the public at large, but for an elite readership. Following this idea, journalist Cristian Delcea approximated that in Romania there are around “60.000 people (...) generally youngsters, students, people passionate about literature and people who

work or will work in the media” (Delcea, *Interview*) that form the readership of the reportage genre. An “identikit” of such reader, referring to both socio-demographic and psychographic features, was suggested by Viorel Ilișoi:

“The [reportage] consumers are well-read educated persons of different ages and with jobs that allow them the free time to spend on reading; also, the consumer has to have an income and the money to buy the newspapers where reportages are published. I’ve never thought until now what my readers look like; I just feel them through the monitor of my personal computer, when I engage in conversations with them. They are people who use grammar properly, and speak articulately; they have their opinions and ideas, they’re selective and keep their feet on the ground.” (Ilișoi, *Interview*).

Although the interviewees criticized the influence of online environment on the reportage, the belief that the length of this type of text favours reader disengagement made them reconsider and suggest that for the media nowadays it is necessary for the reportage to combine text with elements from a multimodal discourse, such as images, audio and video, interactive charts etc.

“People don’t have the patience to read anymore. The reportage implies writing a lot and this is why, as a classic form of written text, it will lose out. But, on the other hand, if the author manages to combine text with other elements, like pictures or music, it will win. You can create a reportage in which the text is interrupted by an audio insert. People want to see this kind of thing, [because] they are tired of reading plain texts.” (Delcea, *Interview*)

The traditional way of reporting has now become obsolete and, although the reporters we have interviewed agreed on the importance of the writing (style, sense of composition and structure), they also insisted that the reportage needs to adapt both to the new online environment and to the new reading habits of the public that this environment has moulded.

Conclusions

Nowadays, there is a small number of papers (daily or not) that are willing to support financially the production of this journalistic piece. To name some of the preeminent print media outlets that still feature long reportages within their pages, the interviewees mentioned *Decât o Revistă*, *Formula AS*, *Dilema Veche*, *Opinia studentească*. Explanations for this scarcity

varied from lack of interest in this journalistic genre by media managers to the interviewees' claim that this genre is not as appealing to the general public as it used to be, for instance, in the interwar period. Also, placing this journalistic text in the proximity of literary genres made it difficult for the journalist specialized in in-depth reporting to adapt their writing, structure and style skills to the requirements of online medium. Some of the interviewed reporters even suggested that although the technological changes affecting all media forms will eventually transform the print reportage, they will not easily let go of the "traditional" way of reporting. Nevertheless, the digital paradigm was not considered entirely unfavourable to the evolution of the reportage: using multimedia elements (audio and video files, infographics) could attract new fans of this genre. But the problem of supporting this genre financially still remains. Also, the lack of time necessary for in-depth quality journalism is an issue waiting for a solution.

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THE EFFICIENCY OF LEGAL AND ETHICAL NORMS PROTECTING THE RIGHT TO PRIVACY OF PUBLIC OFFICIALS AND THEIR CORRELATION WITH THE CONCEPT OF PUBLIC INTEREST

SÎNZIANA-MARIA JURĂU¹

ABSTRACT. The study assesses the efficiency of the legal and ethical norms regulating the right to privacy of public officials in relation to the concept of public interest. Part of a wider research, the study-case uses a test similar to the DIT (Defining Issues Test, adapted to the Romanian characteristics by referral to some of the most notable media ethics dilemmas of the last years, and it presents the results of this evaluation concluding on the moral reasoning of the journalists as determined by the relevant legal and ethical provision.

Key words: moral reasoning, media law, right to privacy of public figures, public interest

Research design

As in the case of the two previously published studies², the current case-study is one of the three that were designed for research purposes, as part of a research project conducted to determine the moral development stage of Romanian journalists by assessing how they relate to the professional ethical dilemmas they have faced in the last five years and the recent legal developments that took place. The cases were designed based on the model of the DIT (Defining issues test), with regard to Kohlberg's work into the connection between moral development, intellectual development and education.

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² *The Efficiency of the Norms Protecting the Public Image of Public Officials on the Moral Development of Journalists* published in *Studia Universitatis Babeş-Bolyai Ephemerides* 2/2012, pg 3-14, and *The efficiency of legal and ethical norms protecting the image of a deceased and its family* published in *Studia Universitatis Babeş-Bolyai Ephemerides* 1/2013, pg 53-70

The research design is identical, therefore, for any supplementary details regarding the research method and the sample characteristics, we kindly refer the reader to the previously published studies. However, for an easier reading of the current study, we reiterate the general research hypotheses tested, which were:

1: There is a significant correlation between the type of media in which the journalist is active and his current moral development stage.

2: There is a significant correlation between his work experience and his moral development stage.

3: There is a correlation between the journalists' education and his moral development stage.

The research case

While walking with his son through the park on a Sunday afternoon, a journalist noticed a warm encounter between a famous single actress and the Secretary of State of the Ministry of Regional Development. The Secretary of State was walking together with his five years old son. The journalist decided to photograph the meeting remotely, without revealing himself. The next day he was required to write on the subject. Following the two persons around town, he took a series of pictures of the Secretary of State going in and out of the building where the actress lived with a huge teddy bear in his arms. The same day the journalist receives at the newsroom, from an anonymous source, a copy of an employment contract the actress signed as a presenter for some of the festivals organized by the Ministry. Contacted for further details, the actress and the Secretary of State declare the fact that they are old family friends.

Alignment of the research case with the research scope

The proposed case is a situational replica of the investigation "The mistress of Emil Boc", published by CanCan newspaper in May 2007. Both Emil Boc (mayor of Cluj Napoca and president of the Democrat Party at the time) and Liliana Calin (his alleged mistress) were followed around in Bucharest by paparazzi that photographed them. CanCan reporters sent flowers to Liliana Calin and even tied the gate of the building where she allegedly spent the night together with Emil Boc in order to cause an incident in which the two could be photographed together. It was only in the sequel of the article

that the journalists implied a public interest for the investigation, revealing the existence of possibly rigged auctions or preferential procurement contracts caused by "the activity of the blonde (Liliana Calin) within the Democratic Party empire".

The journalists disclosed Liliana Calin's birthday, marital status, the percentage of shares held in the company (10%), type of car driven (Touareg) and all the details necessary to identify her, including her picture. Her husband and neighbors were interviewed about her marriage relationships and the privacy of both families was invaded.

The research case also takes into account previous sexual scandals that involved public sector employees, scandals that were extremely popular in the media of the past three years. Sex- teachers, judges and gay policemen were brought to the public eye by journalists (occasionally) struggling to find incompatibilities between the private life of these public employees and the public office they held.

The research case aimed to incite the journalists to reflect upon the nuances of the story that can lead to potential misunderstandings and manipulations of the case in the media. In our case the Secretary of State, a public official, enters and exits a building with the teddy bear, fact that can mean anything: a romantic gift refused or a gift for one of his children. It is for the journalists to decide the meaning and the interpretation, as well as whether they will inform the public about the "detail". The existence of a potential contract awarded in an illegal manner, or a series of such contracts was submitted for evaluation to the respondents, in order to force them to assess both potential information (a moral and sexual scandal and a possible criminal offense that would be of public interest) from the perspective of ethics rules.

Journalists were required to reflect upon the provisions included in the Code of Ethics regarding the private lives of public figures as well as the provisions regarding the obligation to present an objective reality and given the protection of minors. From a legal standpoint, journalists had to decide whether a potential crime of libel may be committed, and if the image and dignity of the people involved in this case could be compromised by the disclosure of the information. The provisions of the New Civil Code regarding the protection of reputation and public image of a person, as well as the provisions of the Regulatory Code for Audiovisual Content had to be taken into consideration.

The analysis

In order to determine how journalists relate to the issues presented by this case without being influenced by potential answers we have prepared for them, they were initially asked to write a short motivational essay explaining whether they would recommend disclosure of the information or not. These essays were analyzed using the content analysis method in an attempt to determine journalists' prevailing values and how they relate to them in the decision making context. After expressing freely their motivations, journalists were the required to grade on a Likert scale how motivating they would find for their final recommendation a set of statements that were designed to reflect the six stages of moral development. The following answers were submitted for evaluation:

Table 1: The correlation between the levels and the stages of moral development and the incentives and suggested motivational sentences

Level	Stage	Incentive	Motivational sentence
Pre-conventional	Punishment and obedience	Punishment (avoidance of)	The publication of information affecting the private and family life of a person, information that is not of public interest, is punishable by law.
Pre-conventional	Naive instrumental hedonism	Reward	The media institution (the employer) will reward the journalist with a bonus.
Conventional	Morality based on interpersonal relationships	Position within the group (pursuit of recognition based upon observing the norms)	The other journalists of the newsroom would do the same without hesitation, and we should all have the same standing on this.
Conventional	Morality of order and social relationships	Duty to observe the norms and preserve the social institutions	Ethical norms support / suggest this decision.
Post-conventional	Observation of the individual rights and social contract	Social contract, civil duties	Journalist' decision is based on the relationship between the public's right to be accurately informed, respect to the public image of the person and the right to have a private life.
Post-conventional	Self-chosen ethical principles	Own beliefs	The journalist should guide his behaviour as his reasoning and conscience dictate him.

For each Likert scale a chart was designed in order to structure the analysis of the extent to which journalists considered motivating the statements.

Content analysis of the motivational essays

The content analysis of the motivational essays written by the journalists had the objective to determine the values taken into account to decide on the framing in which the story should be reported to the public.

Table 2. Subjects' motivations correlated with the years of work experience in the media

Work experience	Yes	No	Yes, but only publishing the statements of the two persons involved	Yes, because the topic is of public interest	No, because the topic is of public interest	No, because it damages the personal life of the persons involved	No, because there are insufficient information
Under 2 years	5	1	1	4	2	2	2
2-5 years	8	2	2	6	5	3	3
Over 5 years	8	7	5	11	2	1	6

Regarding this case, both journalists with less than two years experience and those with two to five years experience suggest full disclosure, the decision relying mainly on what they identified as information of public interest. However, journalists with two and five years experience set forward a debating scene formed by those who argue that the information is of public interest against those who disagree and identify no element of public interest in the information. Both groups based their argumentation on contextual details, adding to the case either a potential conflict of interest, or defending the right of the private life of public figures, hence identifying the correct values in conflict.

The desire to serve the public interest by publishing information was prevalent among journalists with over five years experience. We observed within this group a greater concern for accurate and impartial reporting and a keen interest in enabling all parties to express their point of view,

which is why we consider legitimate the assumption that the respondents of this category will be the ones included in a higher percentage ratio in the fourth and fifth stages of moral reasoning.

Results reported based on likert scale

1. The publication of information affecting the private and family life of a person, information that is not of public interest, is punishable by law.

Table 3:

Degree of motivation	Number of respondents	Percentage
1	8	8.4%
2	17	17.9%
3	9	9.5%
4	17	17.9%
5	44	46.3%

A percentage of approximately 64% of the respondents stated that they were highly motivated in their decision by the statement "The publication of information affecting the private and family life of a person, information that is not of public interest, is punishable by law." The percentage is relevant, as it is lower than in previously studied cases. Most likely the reason for this phenomenon is caused by previous experiences, due to the fact that if this kind of information is presented in a "celebrity gossip" manner, the certainty of a law-suit based on the articles of the Criminal Code regulating defamation is low. In contrast, the new provisions of the Civil Code concerning the honor, dignity and reputation, significantly increase the potential impact of such processes. Given the current legal situation (the text regulating slander was repealed and there is a limited jurisprudence relating to the New Civil Code), a possible explanation might be that journalists are unable to estimate a clear applicable penalty appropriate to this case.

2. The media institution (the employer) will reward the journalist with a bonus.

60% of respondents stated they did not find a potential bonus motivating. It is noteworthy the fact that most respondents assessed the case in their motivational essays taking into consideration the role they believed journalists had in society, separating "tabloid" contributions from news of public interest.

Table 4:

Degree of motivation	Number of respondents	Percentage
1	38	40%
2	19	20%
3	21	22.1%
4	7	7.4%
5	10	10.5%

3. The other journalists of the newsroom would do the same without hesitation, and we should all have the same standing on this.

Table 5:

Degree of motivation	Number of respondents	Percentage
1	34	35.8%
2	21	22.1%
3	18	18.9%
4	11	11.6%
5	11	11.6%

Regarding the group attitude as a motivational factor, 58% of the journalists declared they found it insufficiently motivating in order to adopt a particular position. The motivational essays revealed the attention that journalists would give, hypothetically, to the distinction between privacy and public interest regarding these public figures. Given the fact that most of those who recommended publishing the information clarified that only the news regarding friendship-biased government funding allocation is relevant, the weak interest in the support of the professional group is justified.

4. Ethical norms support / suggest this decision.

Table 6:

Degree of motivation	Number of respondents	Percentage
1	9	9.5%
2	11	11.6%
3	22	23.2%
4	18	18.9%
5	35	36.8%

55% of respondents found "motivating" or "very motivating" the fact that legal and ethical norm support or suggest a specific decision. Thus they indicate that they are willing and interested to comply with the rules, regardless of a potential benefit that may arise from compliance.

5. Journalist' decision is based on the relationship between the public's right to be accurately informed, respect to the public image of the person and the right to have a private life.

Regarding the statement that characterizes the fifth stage of moral reasoning, a percentage of 62% of respondents found it "very motivating" for their final decision, while 21% find the statement "motivating". The 81% result is the highest obtained, surpassing all other possible motivations. The statement, relevant for what is considered to be the state of conformity with what is perceived by the subject to be "the social contract", reveals the interest of the journalists in acting as responsible parties of society, fulfilling what they identified as their role.

Table 7:

Degree of motivation	Number of respondents	Percentage
1	2	2.1%
2	1	1.1%
3	13	13.7%
4	20	21.1%
5	59	62.1%

6. The journalist should guide his behaviour as his reasoning and conscience dictate him.

Table 8:

Degree of motivation	Number of respondents	Percentage
1	4	4.2%
2	12	12.6%
3	20	21.1%
4	23	24.2%
5	36	37.9%

The statement representing the sixth stage of moral reasoning was considered "highly motivating" by 38% of respondents, while another 24% consider it "motivating". It is notable the fact that a similar percentage of respondents considered the statement neutral from the motivational stand point.

Respondents were required, after the completion of this stage, to rate on a top 3 scale the statements they personally considered the ones "the most motivating".

Table 9:

Motivations	Ranking
Journalist' decision is based on the relationship between the public's right to be accurately informed, respect to the public image of the person and the right to have a private life.	1
The publication of information affecting the private and family life of a person, information that is not of public interest, is punishable by law.	2
Ethical norms support/ suggest this decision.	3
The journalist should guide his behaviour as his reasoning and conscience dictate him.	4
The media institution (the employer) will reward the journalist with a bonus.	5
The other journalists of the newsroom would do the same without hesitation, and we should all have the same standing on this.	6

We observe, in this case, the fact that journalists included in our research-sample stated that they were motivated by the existing "social contract", and willing to comply to it. The second motivating statement reveals the interest in avoiding a potential punishment or penalty, as a reason why journalists are inclined to follow the law. The interest for a fair balance between the legal and the ethical provisions, regardless of the consequences, places as a third motivating statement.

Analysis of the results

The analysis of journalists' moral development stage correlated with their education

With regards to education, we note that attending long term higher education classes does not cause a significant variation in terms of the main trend of the final stage of development of moral reasoning. However, a significant difference in this case can be noted between the respondents who attended specialized long term courses, compared to those who attended ethical or media legislation classes, the latter being absent from the second stage of moral reasoning development, therefore not being motivated by a potential bonus.

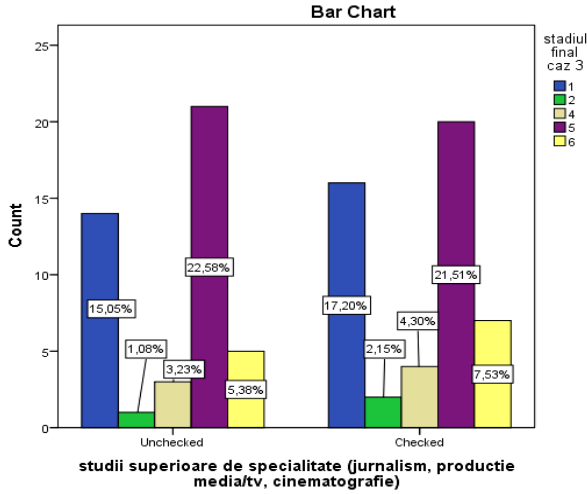


Fig. 1: Moral development stages histogram for journalists that have a specialized higher education training

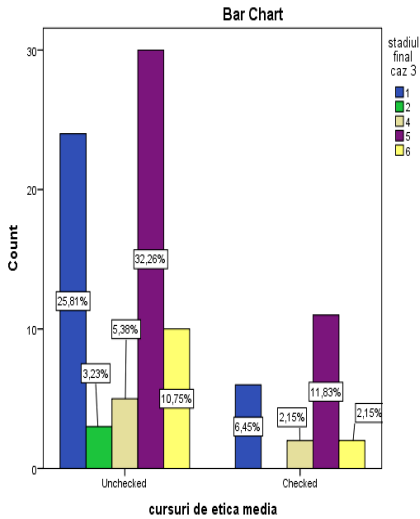


Fig. 2: Moral development stages histogram for journalists that followed media ethics training

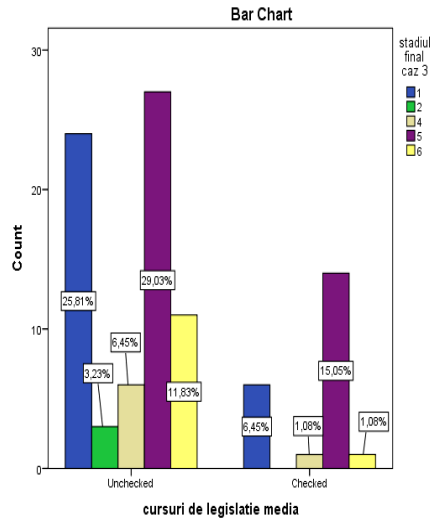


Fig. 3: Moral development stages histogram for journalists that followed media legislation training

The analysis of journalists' moral development stage correlated with the type of media that employs them

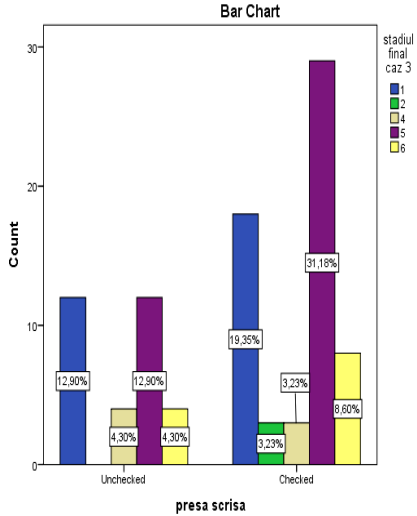


Fig. 4: Moral development stages histogram for journalists employed by written media

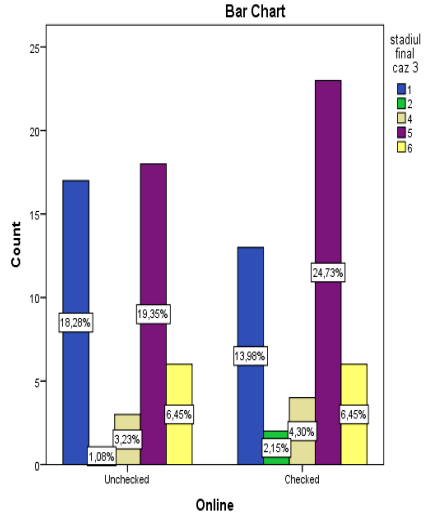


Fig. 5: Moral development stages histogram for journalists employed by online media

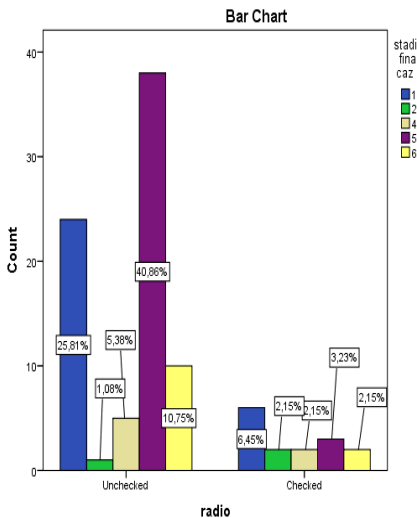


Fig. 6: Moral development stages histogram for journalists employed by radio

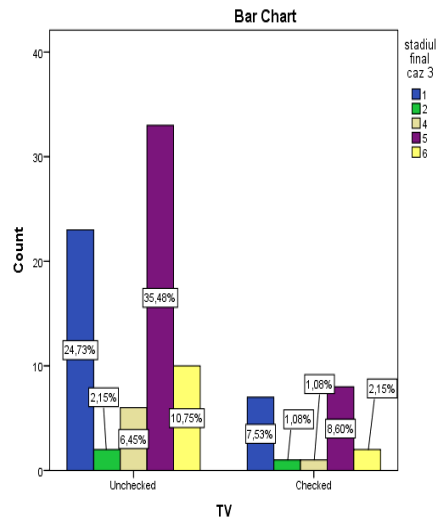
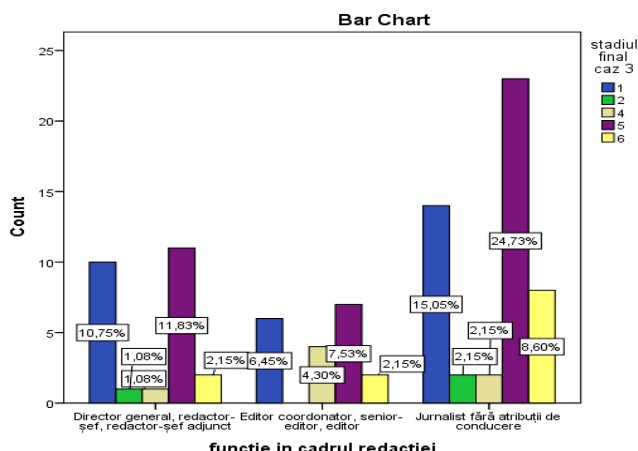


Fig. 7: Moral development stages histogram for journalists employed by televisions

Print and online media present a high degree of similarity in terms of the respondents' distribution on each of the stages of moral reasoning development. The phenomenon has, most likely, as two main causes: firstly, the fact that some print-media journalists are also publishing their articles in the online, and secondly, the fact that they have to comply with the same general legislation applicable. In court, printed articles are usually used as evidence, and cases involving print media are more frequently encountered, therefore the high percentage of journalists fearing a potential penalty (as revealed by Fig 6 and Fig. 7) comes as no surprise.

The journalists that work for radio subscribe, as a group, in a significantly lower percentage relative to the group of journalists working for televised media, in the fifth stage of moral reasoning development. Though the first stage of development of moral reasoning is prevalent in these two professional groups too, we can observe the significantly smaller percentage, compared to the print and online media. The Audiovisual law, along with the Media content regulatory code, provide with a clear system of legal norms and a predictable sentences if the norms are disregarded. The limits of freedom of speech are clearer, and furthermore, a specific "exception" that provided for the specific case of intrusion in the private life of others in order to protect the public interest has been stipulated. Therefore journalists working in these domains feel more confident on their decisions, and exhibit less fear of a potential penalty.

The analysis of journalists' moral development stage correlated with the hierarchical position within the media institution



With regard to their hierarchical position, we note several significant anomalies. Firstly, journalists in the position of coordinating editor, senior editor and publisher group themselves to be not at all stimulated in their decision making process by the possibility of obtaining a bonus, most likely because, traditionally, from the legal standpoint, they are the ones considered responsible of the published or broadcasted content. Journalists without management powers are characterized, in this case, in a large majority, by the fifth stage of development of moral reasoning, in which decisions are taken in cases of moral dilemmas aiming to achieve fair balance interest for all parties concerned.

The moral development stage of the respondents - first level - pre-conventional stage (punishment and obedience orientation)

In the studied case we noted that the highest percentage of respondents was characterized by their inclusion in the fifth stage of moral reasoning development, characterized by a genuine interest in respecting the social contract, as they identified and understood it, therefore by showing the due consideration and fair treatment to all parties involved. The second diagram shows a secondary stage development in which the interest for the ethical norms is increased, showing the value deontology could ideally occupy.

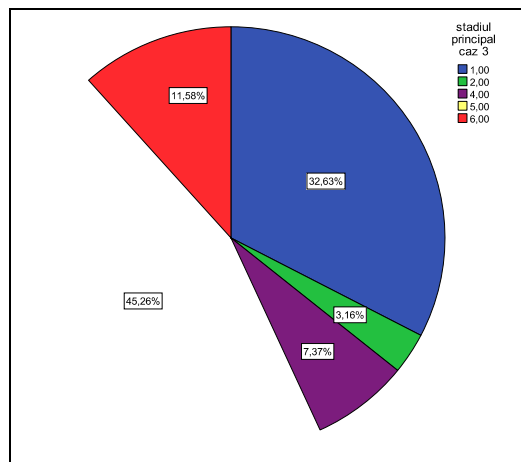


Diagram 1. Structure diagram illustrating journalists' moral development stage (main stage)

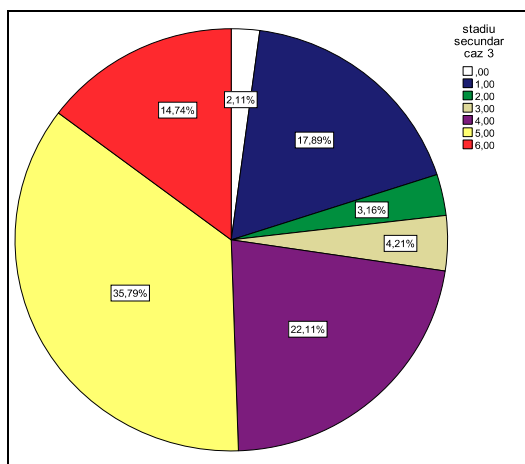


Diagram 2. Structure diagram illustrating journalists' moral development stage (secondary stage)

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DISCURSIVE PATTERNS IN FAKE ONLINE NEWS. AN ANALYSIS OF TIMESNEWROMAN.RO ARTICLES OVER FIVE YEARS

RADU MEZA¹

ABSTRACT. This research takes a big data quantitative content analysis approach to studying discursive patterns in online satirical news parody or “fake news” in Romania. In the context of a global increase in the interest towards news parody, as demonstrated by shows like *The Daily Show with John Stewart* and *The Colbert Report* – U.S. based shows whose content is being syndicated or distributed globally, but also *The Onion* fake news website, many national cultures have gone through different formats in an attempt to satisfy this increasing need, possibly stimulated by distrust in the traditional media formats. The paper presents an investigation of discursive and publishing patterns in over five years of publishing history of the most popular Romanian satirical news parody website – *timesnewroman.ro*.

Key words: *online satire, parody, fake news, new media, automated data collection*

The recent rise of satirical news parody

The last decades have seen a significant increase in the rise of satirical news parody or “fake news” formats, mainly on TV and on the Web. Other than well-known globally syndicated U.S. shows like *The Daily Show with John Stewart* or *The Colbert Report*, “news parody appears as a truly universal phenomenon” according to recent scholarly work that means to make an account of “the global flow of parody formats, and the multiple ways in which news parody adapts to differing political, economic and regulatory contexts” (Baym and Jones 2013).

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Emerging TV news parody formats have gotten increasing attention globally, from Australia (Harrington 2012) to France (Doyle 2012), Italy (Cosentino 2012) or Germany (Kleinen-von Königslöw and Keel 2012) – with a localization of *The Daily Show*. The scholarship on Romanian TV satire and parody shows published in this context (Baym and Jones 2013) focuses on the popular show *Tattler’s Tale* (in Romanian “*Cronica cârcotașilor*”) (Bardan 2012) – which does feature satirical treatment of TV news (and also other TV shows), but does not exactly keep to a strict satirical TV news parody format and would not fall in the “fake news” genre. There were however some pioneers in the Romanian TV “fake news” genre in the late 90s – “*Știrile de sâmbăta asta*” – a show produced by regional Romanian Public Television subsidiary, TVR Cluj, which, following its success, was later distributed nationally.

Although most of the scholarship on the subject focuses on U.S. TV news parody, most prominently on the already mentioned *The Daily Show with John Stewart* and *The Colbert Report* (Amarasingam 2011, Gray, Jones, and Thompson 2009), online news satire – a form arguably accessible to a larger number of potential producers, not necessarily attached to the traditional media industry, is also receiving some attention from researchers (Kaye 2010, Waisanen 2011). These articles refer to probably the most visible online “fake news” website based in the U.S. – *theonion.com* and *The Onion News Network* (who publish video newscasts online). *The Onion* (*theonion.com* – launched in 1996) has a monthly readership of about 8.4 million unique visitors from the U.S. and 11.3 million globally, while the four websites *Onion Network* total an approximate 20 million unique visitors globally², but that is of course building on a national print brand (the print satirical newspaper was circulated nationally from 1988 to 2013).

Most scholarship on the topic of satirical news parody or, in a stricter sense, the “fake news” formats more prominently studied in the area of television, explains the recent rise in popularity of these formats in correlation with a decline in the audience’s trust in the news media and its authoritative treatment of an unpredictable reality. Some also note that this might be a reaction to increasingly perceiving the big media institutions as part of the power block, as contributing to the discourse of power.

² Source: quantcast.com

Theoretical framework

This paper takes into consideration the broad *Uses and Gratifications* framework in conjunction with the more recent *Spiral of Cynicism* (Cappella and Jamieson 1997) theory – taking into account the relation between media, politics and the development of cynical attitudes in citizens reconsidered by newer research done in Europe (Brants et al. 2009, De Vreese 2005) – to explain an increase in the popularity of online satirical news parody or the “fake news” format, both globally and in the Romanian national context. This paper’s position is based on assumptions drawn from the two theories – that readers (especially young educated adults) look for a way to keep in touch with current events and cultural trends, while at the same time refuse to accept accounts of social and political reality as delivered by most of the mainstream media which they perceive as being biased and driven by the economic and political interest of business people and especially political interest groups. Some interest in exploring the relation between cynicism (and kynicism) and ideology in contemporary society can also be observed in the works of philosophers such as Sloterdijk and Žižek (Sloterdijk, Eldred, and Adelson 1984, Sloterdijk and Eldred 1987, Žižek 1989). We might note that Sloterdijk and subsequently Žižek employ a distinction between kynicism, which “represents the popular, plebeian rejection of the official culture by means of irony and sarcasm” and cynicism which “is the answer of the ruling culture to this kynical subversion: it recognizes, it takes into account, the particular interest behind the ideological universality, the distance between the ideological mask and the reality, but it still finds reasons to retain the mask” (Žižek 1989).

In terms of discursive patterns, we need to take into account that the “fake news” genre is a subgenre of satire, it is parodic as it makes use of conventions of the journalistic texts, and it makes generous use of ironical tropes.

“Parody is one of the most delightful forms of satire, one of the most natural, perhaps the most satisfying, and often the most effective. It springs from the very heart of our sense of comedy, which is the happy perception of incongruity” according to (Highet 1962). In Highet’s *Anatomy of Satire* (1962) – the most famous and representative product of satirical parody is the hoax, which he clearly sets apart from the swindle: “Hoaxes are lies or exaggerations intended to deceive. Swindles are lies or exaggerations intended to deceive. The purpose, it is the purpose that defines them. The

hoaxer wants to prove something. The swindler wants to get something. The swindler wants to deceive everyone permanently (or at least until he has died in triumph). The hoaxer wishes at some time to be exposed, or to reveal his own jest. The result of a successful swindle is gain for the swindler. The result of a successful hoax is a hearty laughter – although it is the laughter of satire, in which the victim rarely joins.”

Satire, as a broad type of emplotment according to (White 1975), as a macro-structure, represents reality and characters in its account of reality as being incapable of changing and becoming something more than helpless beings tied to circumstantiality, as being stuck in an absurd social reality, just like everybody else.

Parody emphasizes the conventions and tropes associated with genre. In this case, it is the structures associated with reporting the news based on different accounts or sources (e.g. “who said what”, eye-witness accounts, press conferences or press releases) which form the core of the recognizable forms of informative journalism – which has become a global professional standard of writing being taught in Journalism schools throughout the 20th century. Tabloid journalism uses sensationalist clichés to anticipate or amplify reader reaction or emotion – these however speculate about the nature of their audience’s interest – make assumptions about the reader’s curiosities and attitudes. On the other hand, the so-called “quality press”, generally associated with the informative and interpretive authoritative approach imposed by the New York Times model and enforced as a norm by formal journalism education, uses expertise (e.g. experts, specialists, researchers) which builds on the ultimate authority in contemporary society – science.

Irony is a negational (White 1975) stylistic trope which generates comedic effects through absurd juxtapositions (such as oxymorons). It turns meaning around to its reverse, it amplifies the inescapable absurdity of social existence, by playing on contradiction.

Literature review

Earlier studies on satirical news parody looked at this content by making use of Boorstin’s concept of pseudo-events (McKain 2005).

Studies done in the last years have also tried to take a uses and gratifications approach to explaining the success of satirical news parody in the context of increasing cynicism towards the media and politics – sometimes seeing the enjoyment of such content as “relief in hard times” (Lance Bennett

2007). Researchers are split between cynicism and critical thinking -whether this kind of treatment of both socio-political reality and the news form itself serves to develop a better understanding of politics, or it just feeds a pre-existent cynical attitude (Brewer and Marquardt 2007). More recent studies have focused on the interplay between real news and “fake news” - either by looking at the perceived realism of “fake news” (Balmas 2012), or by looking at what real news say about “fake news” (Brewer, Young, and Morreale 2013). The research on discursive patterns in news parody (Druick 2009) focus again mostly on the very popular *The Daily Show*. According to (Druick 2009) “news parody has proved popular with comedians and audiences alike [...] precisely because it lampoons an official and sober discourse. [...] although one may certainly laugh at the news one moment and then turn to it for information the next, news parodies indicate the always potentially subversive political aspect of dialogism that suffuses culture.”

Online satire in Romania

In the aftermath of the crisis of the print press catalysed by the global financial crisis, which saw a decline popularity for satirical weeklies coupled with the repeated disruptions of the best known Romanian satirical weekly, *Academia Cațavencu*, there was an apparent gap in this niche market, which magazines such as *Kamikaze* or *Cațavencii* never got to fill. Although these publications also have online versions, their satirical formats relied on semi-fictionalized accounts of real events coupled with humorous photo-montage and satirical cartoons. As their writers come from the media, they did not include a very strong media criticism component.

Times New Roman (timesnewroman.ro) started regularly publishing fake news in September 2009 with little visibility. It lacked connections with the mainstream media sector or a print brand to push it to prominence, and although they published up to around 180 articles per month (as the graphs below show) their growth was slow in the first quarters of activity, leading to a steep decline in content publishing, followed by a period of steady organic growth of popularity (as measured in number of likes on Facebook) coupled with an increase in articles published monthly.

The timesnewroman.ro formula is not very complex and suffers little variation. They mostly publish short fake news stories (generally ranging from 1000 to 1500 characters). They starting publishing collaboratively authored listicles in the last couple of years as the genre became globally popular.

They also publish a satirical cartoon section. Their recent increase in popularity has led to the production of a weekly “fake news” TV show on Prima TV, now in its second season, trying to capitalize on their online popularity. The episodes are also available online on tv.timesnewroman.ro and on their YouTube Channel. According to the Romanian Transmedia Audit Bureau, they generally range between 50.000 and 100.000 unique visitors per day³. The website reached a peak in popularity during the recent presidential elections in Romania, accumulating over 900.000 likes for November 2014 (as shown in Fig. 4) and an estimate of over 2 million unique visitors as stated by the publication’s managing partner Alexandru Dona in a recent interview⁴. At the moment, the website is the undisputed leader on the online “fake news” and satire market.

An analysis of timesnewroman.ro articles over five years

The general purpose of this research is to identify patterns in the discourse of popular online satire over the whole publishing history (five years) of the best-known satirical website published in Romanian.

Research Design

This exploratory, mainly descriptive, big data research aims to answer the following research questions about the discursive patterns in the most successful Romanian online “fake news” website – timesnewroman.ro

RQ1: How are journalistic discursive patterns employed by timesnewroman.ro articles?

RQ2: What are the co-occurrence relationships between real public figures, fictional characters, power structures and common areas of media discourse?

RQ3: What are the stereotypes that can be identified through frequent co-occurrence of reference to region, ethnicity or nationality and areas of media discourse?

RQ4: How has the websites adapted its forms and publishing patterns over time?

³ <http://www.brat.ro/sati/site/timesnewroman-ro/trafic-total/>

⁴ <http://www.iqads.ro/articol/31119/pe-timesnewroman-au-ras-2-000-000-de-romani-in-noiembrie-alex-dona-pur-si-simplu>

Methodology

Content analysis is the primary research method used. Taking into consideration the ambitions of the present research and the increasingly powerful trend towards working with bigger and bigger datasets, we chose to collect and analyse the data using automated tools. As such, we will be presenting quantitative approaches to the analysis of satirical fake news, which are mostly the results of using automation over the entire population of articles published by timesnewroman.ro. No sampling or selection was done, but a negligible number of records were deleted in the process of cleaning the dataset due to their incompleteness.

Data collection

The data set consisting of N=8040 records was collected by scraping the timesnewroman.ro website at the end of 2014. We used Helium Scraper - a visual scraping software that allows users to define patterns in HTML pages which are dynamically generated by a Web Content Management System - which is the kind of web application most (news) websites use to manage and display content. We scraped the 337 archive pages, each containing links to 24 individual articles published since the site was launched (September 2009) to the end of 2014 (over five years).

For each of the articles in the website's database we collected the following information:

- Title of article
- Full text of the article (articles have sizes around 1000 characters)
- Author
- Publishing day of the week, date and time
- Category
- Tags
- Number of likes on Facebook
- Number of tweets
- Number of shares of Google Plus

The dataset was divided into two parts and analysed separately. The full text of the articles was analysed using KH coder for co-occurrence patterns in the paragraphs of the text. The rest of the data was analysed using Tableau Public for publishing and reception patterns over time.

Analysis

Co-occurrence networks

For the purposes of producing visualisations of co-occurrence networks in order to emphasize patterns in the satirical discourse of fake news we coded several terms to concepts that are of particular interest in the study of media representations of reality, but also in the study of parodic structures employed by fake news when mimicking the style of real news.

Here are a few of the main concepts coded and recognized frequently in the large text corpus (approximately 9.2 million characters) processed with KH coder and appearing in the diagrams below (we've chosen to also keep the Romanian original labels for these concepts):

- Journalistic structures / *structuri jurnalistice*: terms and phrases that very common in the discourse of news, marking reported speech, statements, referencing sources, witnesses, press releases and press conferences;
- Sensationalist clichés / *clișee senzaționaliste*: phrases that seek to trigger emotion and that are very common in the discourse of sensationalist tabloid news (e.g. "horror", "shocking", "scandalous" etc.);
- Expertise / *expertiza*: terms that signal the use of scientific authority very commonly in the discourse of news (e.g. "expert", "specialist", "researcher", "analist" etc.);
- Alcohol / *alcool*: references to drinking alcohol of any type, being drunk or alcoholism;
- Sexuality / *sexualitate*: terms and phrases that reference sex, sexual acts, sexual orientation, genitals etc.;
- Money / *bani*: terms that relate to monetary value in Romanian lei, euros or dollars, but also valuable metals like gold or silver;
- Business / *afaceri*: terms that belong to the vocabulary of business and refer to financing, employing, investing, buying or selling;
- Justice / *justiție*: terms that refer to judiciary processes and actors within it, such as the Romanian equivalents for "judge", "prosecutor", "lawyer", "trial", "sentence" etc.;
- Corruption / *corupție*: terms that refer to corruption within the public system, namely crimes such as bribery or influence trafficking - commonly found in the discourse of watchdog journalism;

- Stupidity / *prostie*: terms that are used to label stupidity, incompetence etc. in general, or particularly incompetent or stupid people;
- Violence / *violența*: terms that denote violent acts or behaviour (“rape”, “murder”, “beating”);
- Theft / *furt*: terms that reference thievery;
- Political parties / *partide*: abbreviations associated with the political parties and political alliances of the past five years in the Romanian political system;
- Government / *Guvern*: terms connected to governing and government, central public administration (i.e. references to the cabinet, ministers or the prime minister);
- The Church / *Biserica*: terms that denote Romanian Orthodox Church hierarchies and actors (e.g. “priest”, “bishop”, “archbishop” etc.);
- CNA: references to the National Audio-visual Council in Romania, and implicitly criticism of what is being broadcasted in the traditional audio-visual media.
- Religion / *Religie*: references to Christian religious rituals and holidays – Easter, Christmas, St. John, St. Mary etc.

We have also coded concepts referring to nationalities (British, German, Spanish, Italian, Russian, French, Hungarian/Magyar) and inhabitants of certain regions of Romania (“olteni”, “moldoveni”, “ardeleni” etc.) or even the cities or regions themselves (București, Constanța, Cluj, Județul Sălaj, județul Vaslui etc.) in an effort to capture stereotypical representations of such categories of people.

The rest of the coded terms are proper nouns referring to fictional characters (the two most frequent characters used by the timesnewroman.ro writers being Decebal Popescu and Robert Acrisor) or to real-life public figures involved in national politics, the media, tabloid celebrities, world leaders.

Figure 1 shows all of the concepts coded that have a high enough frequency. Nodes displayed as larger discs have higher frequencies, thicker edges denote more frequent co-occurrences of the pair of adjacent nodes. Different colours or shades mark the clusters identified in the corpus – sets of concepts that tend to co-occur with each other in the same paragraphs.

The next two figures, Figure 2 and Figure 3, adhere to the same notations, but have had some elements excluded in order to emphasize relations between the remaining ones and improve visibility.

It is immediately visible that at the centre of the co-occurrence network we have the patterns of journalistic discourse mimicked by the fake news published by the site. It is not an unusual result, as parody is expected to enforce, or rather emphasize the style and conventions of a genre - in this case - the short news story. Thus, the highest betweenness-centrality coefficient for "journalistic structures" shows that the parodic form ties together the satiric content in the increasingly popular fake news genre.

Closest to the position of these structures in the diagram, we can observe concepts such as "Sexuality", "Money", "Alcohol", "Education", and "Business". This blend of concepts clearly points out towards the moralizing discourse of satire - criticizing vice (through references to sexuality and alcoholism). "Money" is a very frequently used quantifier for value in journalistic discourse and as such, its place is not unusual. The same go for "Education" and "Business" - very important areas of common journalistic discourse.

The peculiarity here might be the connection between "education", "Bucuresti", "Money" and "sexuality", but this in fact relates to a topic sometimes approached by the satirical website when criticizing over-sexualized and materialistic teen behaviour by stereotypical and quite frequent representations of "female high schoolers in Bucharest".

The two fictional mainly characters used by the writers appear to be, as is expected, in close connection to the conventional structures that mimic the journalistic style. Whereas, Robert Acrisor seems to be strongly connected just with the core of "journalistic structures" as there is no definite pattern to the position he is mentioned in (as reporter, eye-witness, information source, interviewee etc.), Decebal Popescu on the other hand co-occurs with "expertise" as he is usually cast as an authority on every matter, serving as a specialist/expert source of statements.

The concepts of "expertise" and "sensationalist clichés" show up on different sides of the "journalistic structures" cluster as they represent two very different sets of tropes in newswriting - one represents the authoritarian treatment of news by the so-called "quality press", while the other represents "tabloid sensationalism", of course, in close connection to references of "sexuality".

One of the other concepts relating to expertise is the “British” concept. This shows how the writers play on a familiar trope (a cliché in fact) in the Romanian media discourse – “British scientists” as the ultimate scientific authority, able to get away with even the most absurd discoveries or interpretations. This relates as well to a stereotypical representation of the British in Romanian and perhaps continental European culture. The “Americans” are also connected to “expertise”, but to a smaller extent.

By leaving out any of the references to real-life public figures in Figure 2, we can have a closer look at the relationships between the other concepts.

We can see how “stupidity” co-occurs with both references to “education” and the “government”. Also “theft / *furt*” and “violence / *violența*” which did not show up in Figure 1 (due to a lower frequency of occurrence), show up as being slightly connected – though “theft” also co-occurs, quite predictably with “Money”, while “violence / *violența*” (comprising terms such as “rape”, “murder”, “beating”) co-occurs with “theft”, “alcohol” and “Americans”.

References to foreign nationalities are clustered together – co-occurring only in the same contexts together, except references to the British and the Germans, the latter of which are associated with new President “Klaus Iohannis” – a German ethnic (Fig. 1). The former President Ion Iliescu is connected with the “Russians” as he is often presented as having had ties with the USSR, Moscow and the KGB as high official in the late communist era and then leader of the most important political group after the Romanian Revolution of 1989, interim President and then first elected president of democratic post-communist Romania.

The concept of “corruption” – one favoured by the watchdog journalism model displays connections with “political parties”, “Government” and “stupidity / incompetence”, but the strongest connection with “justice”. This mirrors recent events in Romania, as a stronger, more independent justice apparatus, especially devoted to fighting high-level corruption managed to make headlines by prosecuting and eventually jailing powerful figures (probably the most notable are former Prime Minister Adrian Nastase and media mogul Dan Voiculescu).

DISCURSIVE PATTERNS IN FAKE ONLINE NEWS

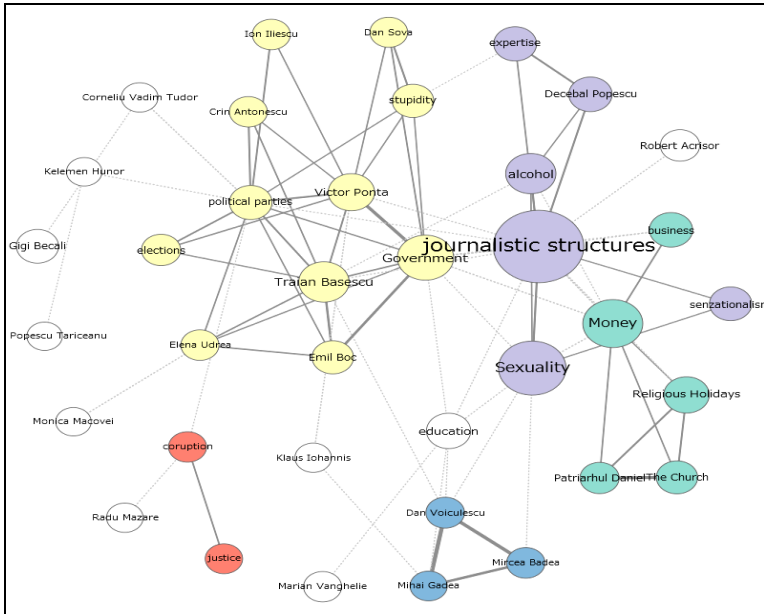


Fig. 3: Public figures and power structures

In Figure 3 we have excluded references to nationalities, ethnic groups or regions and focused on public figures mainly involved with politics and the media.

There are several interesting patterns displayed in Fig. 3. First, there is a very strong co-occurrence connection between three figures – jailed media mogul Dan Voiculescu and two of the show hosts in the media trust controlled by him – Mihai Gadea and Mircea Badea. And all three have some co-occurrence with terms denoting sexuality. In fact, most of the articles that have produced this result feature different takes on how the two show hosts are absurd, ridiculous, most often grossly portrayed, brown-noses. The connection to former President Traian Basescu originates from representations of an antagonism between him and the media trust controlled by Voiculescu, especially news television Antena 3.

Another interesting co-occurrence pattern which can be observed in both figures 1 and 3, but is more clearly visible in Fig.3, is the one between “Patriarch Daniel”, “Religion”, “Church” and “Money”. The criticism here is quite obvious from this connection. In fact, timesnewroman.ro has constructed Patriarch Daniel and the Romanian Orthodox Church as vapid, money hungry, confidence men. There is a large number of stories based on

fake statements supposedly issued by the Patriarch. One of such stories (about the Patriarch announcing the Church's intention to place a tax on having a Christian name) is actually by far the most liked story on the website with over 170.000 likes. Its success is mostly due to it becoming a quite successful media hoax as it was taken seriously by some people and even republished by small, local media outlets as serious news on St. Michael and St. Gabriel Day in 2012 (which are of course quite common Christian names in Romania). Given the publication date, we can assume that its spreadability - to use Henry Jenkins' concept (Jenkins, Ford, and Green 2013) - is mostly owed to circumstantial prank/hoax value.

There are four entities that frequently co-occur with the concept of "stupidity/incompetence". All are associated with the political system: "political parties" and the "Government" - Prime-Minister Ponta and Şova as a spokesman for the Government and later a Minister himself. This goes to prove that criticism of the political system is a common occurrence and it is one of the components associated with the rise of satire as the population grows increasingly distrustful and cynical.

Former President Traian Basescu's name co-occurs with many different concepts, although mostly with the political cluster, but also with media mogul Dan Voiculescu's cluster, "journalism structures", "sexuality" and "alcohol" nodes. The media trust control by Dan Voiculescu has been attacking President Basescu violently and regularly in the final years of his second term to the point where the efforts of the two show hosts and others could become a subject of ridicule in satirical discourse. The writers of the satirical website prefer to often portray the former president (a navy captain by profession) as a drunkard as a quite gentle form of criticism - hence the connection to alcohol.

Several politicians have connections with fewer concepts as they are constructed as flat characters, employed to denote the same thing every time they occur, re-enforcing stereotypes and representing larger categories as they stand for entire groups (framing through synecdoche): local baron Radu Mazăre, Mayor of Constanța, connected with "corruption", Vanghelie, Mayor of a sector of Buchares, in connection with education as the website (and sometimes other media outlets as well) point to his poor use of the Romanian language as a signifier for the low level of education in the political class, prominent nationalist extremist Corneliu Vadim Tudor is connected with the president of the political party representing the Hungarian ethnic minority in Romania - thus pointing out a pattern of ironic co-occurrence.

A new-comer in the political arena, President Klaus Iohannis has yet to feature in satirical articles enough to form clear connections (other than those to stereotypes about the German ethnics – as seen in Fig. 1). The two connections – with Victor Ponta, his counter-candidate in the elections of 2014, and with show host Mihai Gadea, have little significance.

Publishing patterns

The second part of the data analysis and interpretation will deal with publishing patterns studied longitudinally over a 5 year period of regular publication (from September 2009 to December 2014). We are interested in publishing frequency over different time intervals, the popularity or success of the posts as quantified by the number of Likes on Facebook for each article. Although we also collected the number of tweets and Google Plus shares for each article, we have chosen to discuss only the evolution of Likes on Facebook as this social media platform seems to be the predilect medium for distribution of published messages. The use of Twitter or Google Plus shares is sporadic at best (most of the articles score 0 for both of these) and as such bears little relevance.

Figure 4 displays the evolution of the number of articles published versus the sum of likes per month over the entire publishing history.

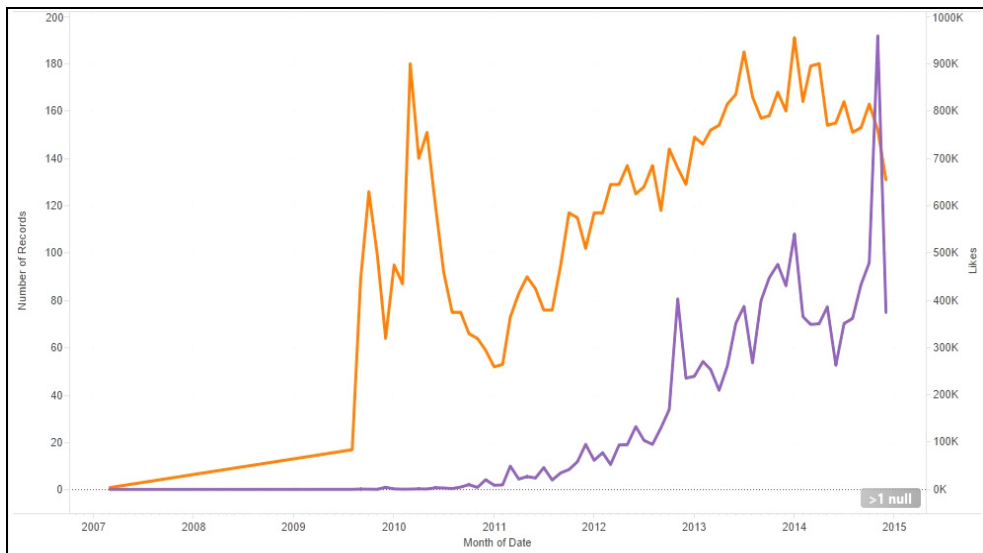


Fig. 4: The evolution of articles published versus Likes received per month over 5 years

One can notice several spikes in the early history of the website, in late 2009 and early 2010, peaking at 180 articles published per month in March 2010. This might be associated with the writers' initial enthusiasm, but as one can also notice from the diagram, in the early history of timesnewroman.ro there seems to have been little interest for the articles in social media.

After that first period, we can notice a steep fall followed by a steady growth which is this time reflected by a similar steady growth in terms of total number of likes per month. In 2013 and 2014 the number of articles published matches the initial period of enthusiasm (between 160 and 180 articles per month).

The large spike in terms of number of likes in the fall of 2014, peaking at over 900 thousands likes, points towards an increased interest in satire, especially on political topics during the presidential elections.

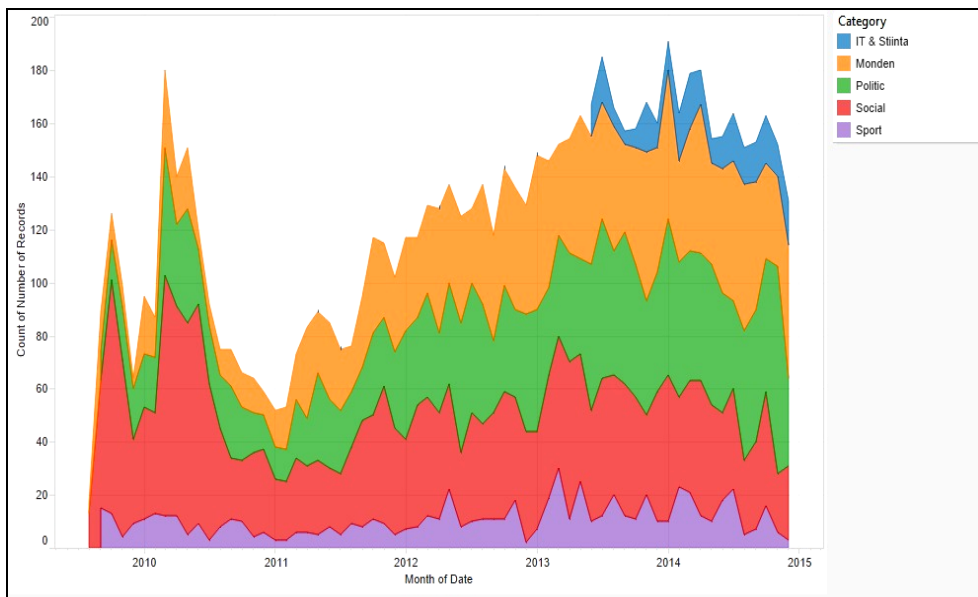


Fig. 5: The evolution of articles published under each of the website's main categories

Looking at the evolution of articles published under each of the website's main categories in Figure 5, one may notice, that the initial publishing period is characterised by a large number of articles being filed under the "Social" category. The steep fall in late 2010 and then the steady

growth that follows from 2011 to 2014 sees some sort of balance between three main categories (“Social” / Society, “Politic” / Politics and “Monden” / Celebrity News), an expected stability in the “Sport” category and an emerging fifth category “IT & Știință” since early 2013. Although these developments point towards the emergence of a stable formula as the site becomes more successful, one should not forget that some times articles are posted in a certain category with a sense of irony.

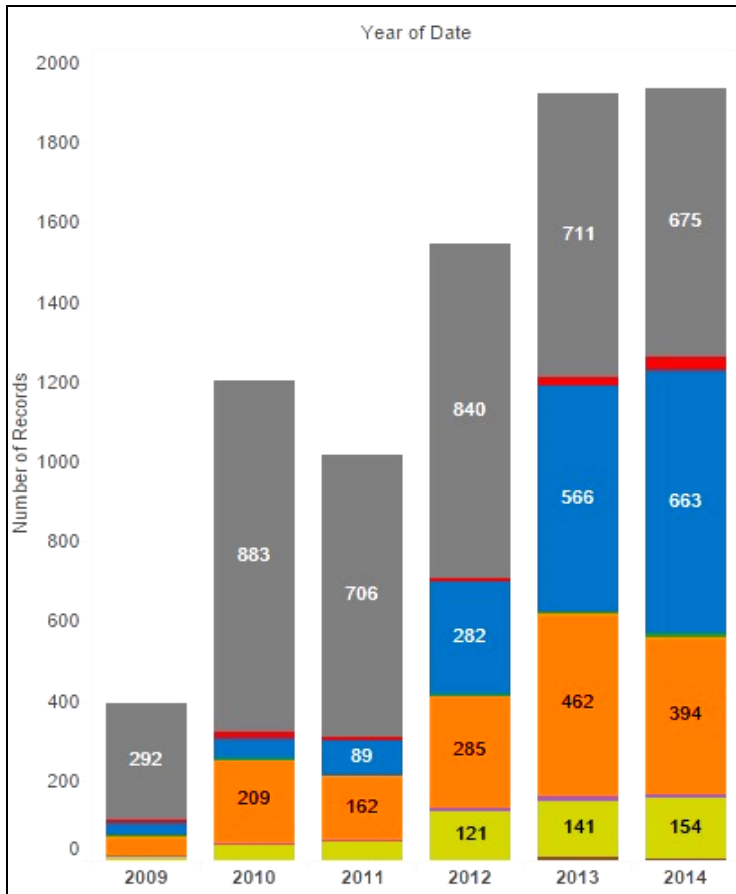


Fig. 6: Punctuation used in titles over 5 years: (from top to bottom) no punctuation (grey), interrogation (red), exclamation (blue), colon (orange), colon and exclamation (yellow) – the other combinations (colon and interrogation, interrogation and exclamation have small number of occurrences – shown in purple and brown).

The final point of our investigation of timesnewroman.ro's development of publishing patterns over time is looking at titles. Figure 6 shows the combination of punctuation being used in titles and Figure 7 shows the evolution of the sizes of titles (in numbers of characters) over the five year period.

In both images, we can definitely notice trends: as the average size of titles grows steadily over the five years, titles contain more exclamation marks (pointing out to an emphasis on emotion), more colons (generally indicating the presence of statements attributed to a source) and combinations of the two.

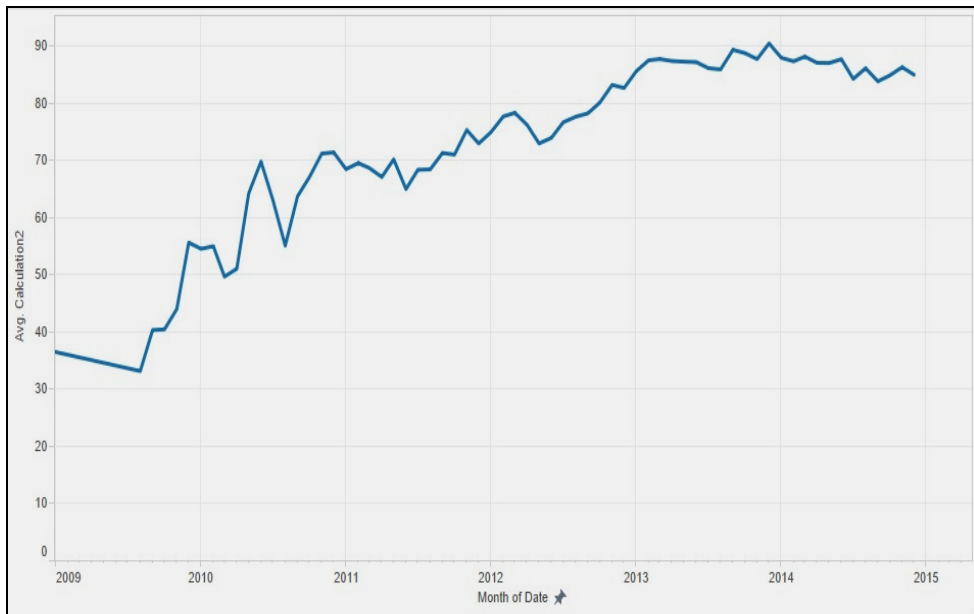


Fig. 7: The evolution of the average length of titles over five years (in number of characters)

The publishing patterns of timesnewroman.ro (in terms of the evolution of titles) seem to follow a more general trend where online publications rely heavily on longer, more exciting, more attractive titles, generally accompanied by images, that are more *spreadable* (Jenkins, Ford, and Green 2013) in social media.

Findings

Journalistic structures associated with reporting on reality based on different information sources are at the core of the discursive patterns identified by doing co-occurrence analysis on the full text of all the (over 8000) articles published by timesnewroman.ro over the last five years. They appear with the highest frequency and also have a high betweenness-centrality coefficient – meaning they tend to connect most of the other structures (they co-occur with most of them most frequently). Sensationalist clichés and authoritative sourcing play their parts in consolidating parody of both the style and conventions of tabloid and informative news.

Real public figures co-occur in the same contexts they would in the real news. The patterns of connections with each other, the party system and the Government mirror social reality as it is depicted by the informative news media. However, the links between the “stupidity / incompetence” code and the Government and other public figures connected to the power structures within the last five years, show that these texts are openly critical, taking advantage of the special place the satirical press occupies. Tabloid celebrities are mostly isolated or form separate clusters that have little or no connection with timesnewroman.ro’s representations of political or social reality.

The two most prominent fictional characters employed by the writers seem to be strongly connected to the journalistic patterns and are, as such, just tools in parodic satire. However, their re-use in different, but recognizable positions points towards the hoaxer’s purpose – to be caught lying. *Decebal Popescu* shows a strong connection with expertise, with the frequently invoked authority of science which legitimises the interpretations of hard news.

There are several stereotypes that become visible in the co-occurrence analysis: the connection between the British and expertise, the connections between Religious Holidays and alcohol consumption, the connection between the inhabitants of Vaslui county and alcohol consumption, the connection between the Romanian Orthodox Church, The Patriarch and money, the connection between education, money, sexuality and Bucharest – referencing the stories about spoiled over-sexed high-schoolers in the capital. Some of these stereotypes mock clichés of the mainstream media, but most of them exaggerate reality to the absurd to emphasize social problems in the form of satire, which relies on stereotypical representations of behaviours and attitudes as it constructs social reality as inescapable, unchangeable and absurd.

A brief analysis of the websites' publishing history shows a steady organic growth in popularity and in numbers of articles published and a gradual stabilization between the weights of the three main categories used to publish articles under – a sign of a consolidated publication formula. The evolution of title size and punctuation in titles fits more general trends in the online press – longer titles – delivering information, emotion and often making use of statements, coupled with attractive, amusing or ambiguous images.

Conclusion

This analysis of discursive patterns in online parodic satire, or “fake news” website was meant to be exploratory in nature. Satire emerges as a powerful form, especially online, whether it emerges in popular culture forms that mimic artefacts of mass-culture like most image macro internet memes might be looked at as a parody of advertising, or it becomes pseudo-institutional and deals mainly in hoaxes – like in the case of “fake news” websites that are apparently rising to popularity over older satirical forms as they distance themselves from both the discourse of power, and the discourse of media, more and more seen as either biased or as “infoganda”. These approaches seem to feed the needs of an increasingly polarized public that mistrusts politicians and, at least partially, the media.

Our analysis of timesnewroman.ro articles showed how it employs the conventions of journalism, both “quality” and tabloid (in different articles) to emphasize existing stereotypes and also to ambitiously create new ones. Its development shows growth and consolidation over the last couple of years. Possible future work (on this data set, in conjunction with possibly others) includes an analysis of topics over time in order to see how the satirical agenda relates to the mainstream media agenda.

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THE FRAMING OF ROMANIAN PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS' SURPRISE RESULT IN THE INTERNATIONAL MEDIA

ANDREEA MOGOȘ¹

ABSTRACT. Important media outlets from Europe and US reported on the Romanian Presidential elections and the surprise winner using similar frames: *the competition between Victor Ponta and the Transylvanian German Klaus Iohannis, the other former Romanian leaders, corruption vs. justice, and the Romanian diaspora and protests.* Nevertheless, cultural peculiarities marked each media discourse and its approach to the event.

Key words: media framing, presidential election, social construction of reality

Introduction

The Romanian presidential campaign and elections were among the most visible events in the media in 2014. Fourteen candidates² entered the competition, but the real battle was between the social democrat Victor Ponta and the liberal Klaus Iohannis, who were the challengers in the presidential runoff election.

After the first round, when Victor Ponta gathered 40,44% and Iohannis 30,37% of the votes, the analysts and the public opinion from both Romania and around the world were expecting to see Victor Ponta as the next Romanian

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² Victor Ponta (PSD-UNPR-PC), Klaus Iohannis (Alianța Creștin-Liberală), Elena Udrea (Partidul Mișcarea Populară), Kelemen Hunor (Uniunea Democrată Maghiară din România), Dan Diaconescu (Partidul Poporului - Dan Diaconescu), Constantin Rotaru (Partidul Alianța Socialistă), Corneliu Vadim Tudor (Partidul România Mare), William Brînză (Partidul Ecologist Român), Mirel Mircea Amariței (Prodemo) and Szilagyi Zsolt (Partidul Popular Maghiar din Transilvania). There were four independent candidates: Teodor Meleșcanu, Călin Popescu-Tăriceanu, Monica Macovei and Gheorghe Funar.

president. But several factors triggered an unexpected high turnout among the voters living inside and outside the boundaries of the country³ and an overturn of the result. We will only mention here three of them: the voting incidents from the diaspora, the online mobilization of the young generation and the negative vote.

The scarcity and the malfunctioning of the voting stations in cities across Western Europe prevented a number of Romanians from diaspora to express their vote. According to the opinion poll conducted by IRES on late November 2014, *“a quarter from the voters made up their mind between the first and the second round, but 32% declared that they were directly influenced by the incidents from the diaspora”*.⁴

Another factor that contributed to this surprise result was the effective mobilization through the social networks (mainly, Facebook). The same IRES poll shows that 46% of the internet users followed online the presidential campaign and 24% of them actively involved in it (liked pages or messages of the candidates).

The populism displayed by Victor Ponta during the electoral campaign, framed by the intense mediatization of DNA investigations on political corruption (bribery, influence peddling, abuse of office, tax evasion) and the voter fear of electoral fraud determined a negative vote, which favored the candidate who was most-liked by the majority and least-hated by the rest.

This complex network of factors resulted in a surprising turnaround in the runoff elections, won by Klaus Iohannis, the German ethnic mayor of a mid-sized Transylvanian city (Sibiu) and former Physics high school teacher.

Unexpectedness adds a consistent deal of newsworthiness to the news stories and, in the same time, challenges the use of frames, which are helping to define a situation, to define the issues, and to set the terms of a debate. This is why our attention will focus on how several media outlets from Western Europe and USA reported on this unexpected victory, what frames were used to make the event meaningful and how the frames were used to organize the structure of the texts.

³ For the second round, the voter turnout was 64,10% (11.719.344 voters), the highest turnout in the last three presidential elections.

⁴ <http://www.ires.com.ro/articol/282/genera-ia-facebook-%C8%99i-convergen%C8%9Ba-media-au-dus-la-victoria-lui-klaus-iohannis>

Theoretical framework - Frame analysis of the media texts

Frame analysis has its origins in symbolic interactionism paradigm, which sees reality as social construct, developed in interaction with others. Following this line of thought, Herbert Blumer (1969) starts from the premise that: *"Humans act toward things on the basis of the meanings they ascribe to those things."* In *Frame Analysis* (1974) Erving Goffman assumes that *"definitions of a situation are built up in accordance with principles of organization which govern events – at least social ones – and our subjective involvement in them; frame is the word I use to refer to such of these basic elements as I am able to identify."*

When applied to media texts, the frame analysis is focused on answering two questions: **what** the text says and **how** it is said. Thus, the research is focused on the picture of the reality offered by the text through its thematic structure and discourse schemas.

Gitlin (1980) revised and extended the frame definition offered by Goffman: *"Frames are principles of selection, emphasis and presentation composed of little tacit theories about what exists, what happens, and what matters."* But in the same book, Gitlin emphasizes the role of the frames in defining the boundaries within which the definitions of reality are able to contend with each other. Therefore, when performing the frame analysis of media texts it is important to be aware of these two roles of the frames: as *internal principles of textual organization* and as *external possibilities of meaning*.

Media uses framing schemas that provide the ways in which public events as elections are reported, discussed, interpreted and understood. Hall (1996) emphasizes that *"How things are represented and the 'machineries' and regimes of representation in a culture do play a constitutive, and not merely a reflexive, after-the-event, role."*, thus reinforcing the social constructionist approach⁵ proposed by Berger and Luckmann (1966).

Media provides reports through which reality is **defined** and **constructed**. Framing reflects the richness of media discourse and the subtle differences that are possible when a specific topic is presented in different ways. Tankard (2001) points out that media framing can have subtle but powerful effects on the audience, due to its ability to define the terms of a debate without the audience realizing it is taking place.

⁵ The sociology of knowledge understands human reality as socially constructed reality.

In order to offer a perspective on how the surprise victory of Klaus Iohannis was represented and framed by the main international media outlets, our research will take into account the two previously mentioned roles of the frames: as text schemas and as means of social reality construction. As a complement to the qualitative method of frame analysis a content analysis will be performed to identify the intention of the writers by ranking the most frequently used symbolically charged words and syntagms.

Methodology

The research sample contains 20 articles published online late at night on November 16, 2014 and early in the morning on November 17, 2014⁶ by several relevant mainstream media outlets from the following countries⁷:

- Germany (*Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, Die Welt, Die Zeit, Der Spiegel*)
- France (*Le Monde, Libération, Le Figaro, Le Parisien, Ouest-France*)
- United Kingdom (*The Guardian, The Telegraph*)
- United States of America (*The New York Times, Washington Post*)
- Spain (*El País, El Mundo, La Vanguardia*)

The content analysis was performed in order to identify the names frequency of the two candidates Klaus Iohannis and Victor Ponta, together with other relevant concepts (the German origins of Klaus Iohannis, former Romanian leaders, corruption and the reform of the justice system, diaspora and protests). Furthermore, for some of the categories previously mentioned, a semantic analysis was operated, in order to grasp the nuances that constitute the cognitive frames for this event.

Most of the media outlets partially used the information flow of the press agencies (Reuters, Associated Press, DPA, AFP, EFE), this is why some paragraph resemblances could be noticed. Nonetheless, each newsroom chose its own approach and angle, making selections and emphasizing some contextual elements, which revealed the main frames used to organize and present the event.

⁶ An exception is the piece from *Washington Post*, which was published on November 13, 2014. In addition, we analyzed the relevant paragraph from *On Velvet Revolution's anniversary, a reinforced commitment to democracy*, from November 21, 2014.

⁷ The texts were read in the original language.

Findings

Iohannis vs. Ponta

When talking about the main actors of the event, it is interesting to see that the winner's name - Klaus Iohannis - appeared in the British and US media twice less frequent than the one of Victor Ponta (*28 times for Iohannis vs. 52 times for Ponta*). This could have two explanations: on one hand, as the Prime Minister of Romania since 2012, Victor Ponta was more involved in public events, therefore more visible in the media; on the other hand, Victor Ponta was expected to win the turnoff election, so the international media was more interested in gathering information and portraying him.

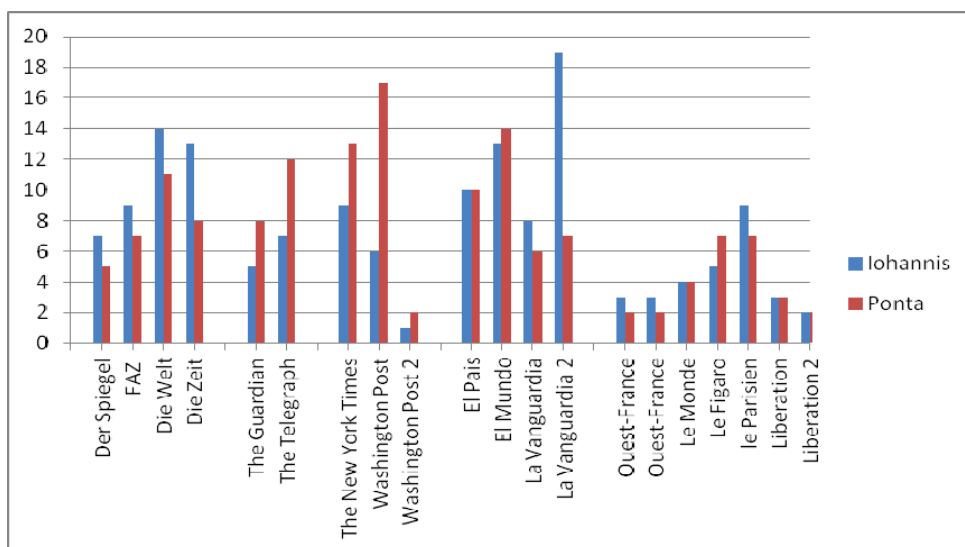


Chart 1: The names' frequency

As the chart shows, the German media mentioned the name⁸ of the German ethnic Klaus Iohannis more frequently than the one of Victor Ponta. For the French and Spanish media, data shows a balance. The only exception is the opinion piece from *La Vanguardia* (November 17, 2014) wrote by a Catalan author - Josep Miquel Viñals - living in Timișoara, Romania: *Klaus*

⁸ *Der Spiegel*, *Die Welt* and *Die Zeit* used the German spelling of the name - Johannis, not the official one, Iohannis.

Iohannis, otro alemán a la cabeza de Rumanía [engl. Klaus Iohannis, the other German leading Romania]. The title is referring to King Michael of Hohenzollern and the portrait is using a historical and social perspective to explain what helped Iohannis to become of the new president: being German and Lutheran, which makes him twice *serious*⁹.

German origins of Iohannis

Frequency-wise, the article published on the *Ouest-France* website (5) is behind the one in *La Vanguardia* (9), the media outlet that prominently used the fact that Klaus Iohannis belongs to the German minority. A possible explanation is that both websites belong to the category of prestigious regional newspapers appearing in regions displaying a strong sense of nationalism: Brittany and Normandy (in France) and Catalonia (in Spain). Next are three German media, which used the emotional proximity (ethnic German) as newsworthy value.

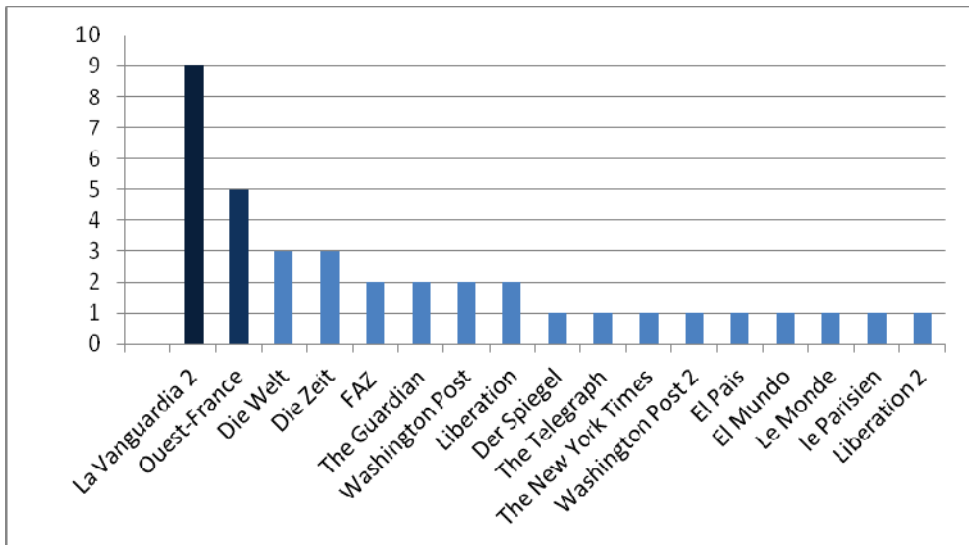


Chart 2: Frequency of German origin mentions

⁹ „Las aparentes debilidades de Iohannis han sido sus puntos fuertes: ser alemán le confiere, de entrada, un importante plus de seriedad, que por otro lado ha demostrado en los años previos. Ser luterano refuerza la idea anterior. Se ha ganado además gran parte de los votos de las minorías del país, quienes lo ven como un presidente que realmente los representará a todos.”

It is worthy of interest to analyze how the international media referred to the German origins of the newly elected Romanian president. All the 20 articles that have been analyzed pointed out one way or another that Klaus Iohannis is of German descent. Most of the references (14) were mentioning that he belongs to the *German minority* from Romania. British and US articles used the *ethnic German* syntagm (9) and most of the German media mentioned Iohannis as a *Romanian German* (*germ.* Rumäniendeutscher) or as a *Transylvanian Saxon* (*germ.* Siebenbürger Sachse). In two French articles, the new president is referred to as the *German of Transylvania* (*fr.* l'Allemand de Transylvanie). The more frequently is Klaus Iohannis portrayed as German Romanian, the clearer is the frame which embeds positive stereotypes associated with the Germans (seriousness, rules and organization, punctuality, things well done¹⁰). In some of the articles, these traits partially try to explain why Iohannis was preferred by Romanians.

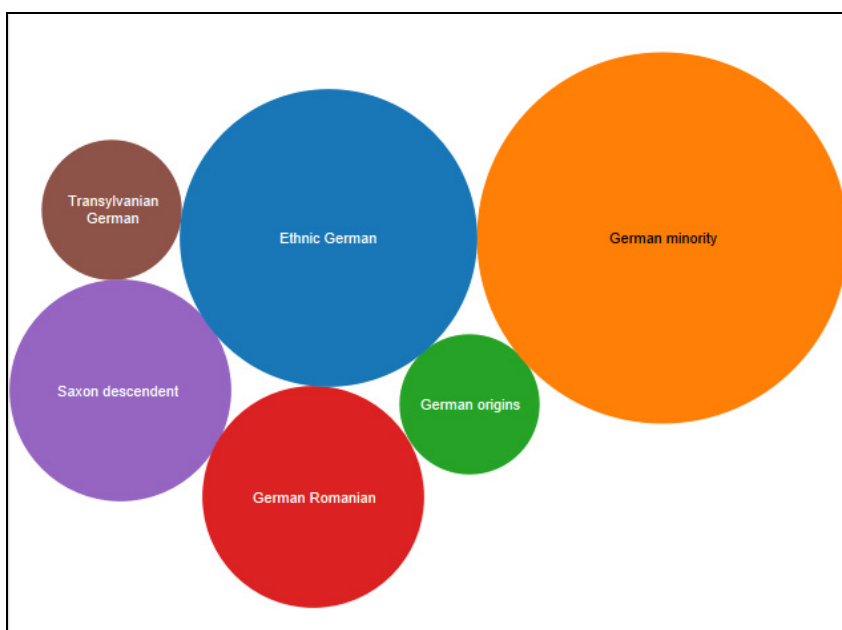


Chart 3: Semantic fields referring to the German origins of Klaus Iohannis

¹⁰ Iohannis' campaign slogan was *Romania of Things well done*.

Former leaders

After the fall of communism in 1989, the main frame used for Romania was the association with the former dictator Nicolae Ceaușescu. Twenty-five years later, three of the 20 articles still mention Ceaușescu, who remained a strong reference even though three other presidents led Romania during the next quarter of century. King Michael of Romania is mentioned two times, mainly because he is also a German (member of the House of Hohenzollern), as the newly elected president. The most visible leader was president Traian Băsescu (10) because he was to step down after 10 years his second term in office.

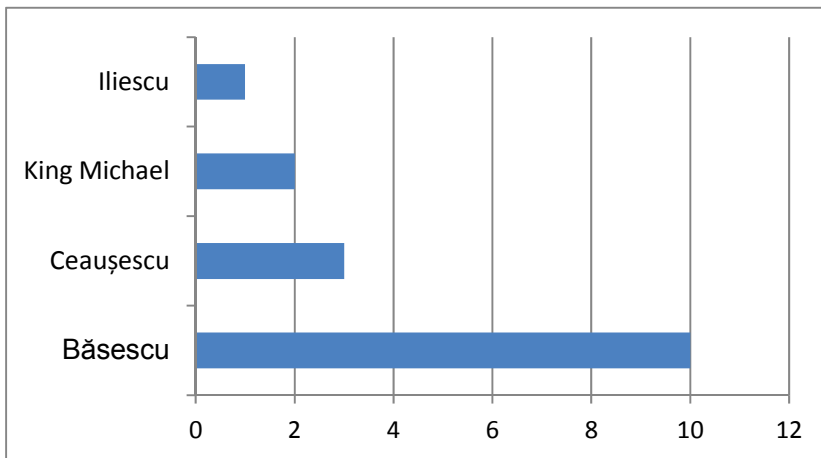


Chart 4: Romanian leaders

Corruption and justice

Romania's fight against corruption (bribery, influence peddling, abuse of office, tax evasion) was one of the central points of electoral campaign of Monica Macovei (former Minister of Justice between 2004 and 2007, credited with implementing the justice reforms required for Romania to become a member state of the European Union). The same anti-corruption theme was embraced by Klaus Iohannis, too. Four thirds of the articles (15) mentioned the corruption phenomenon when talking about Romanian weaknesses, but only

nine of them correlated it with the institutions meant to fight against corruption: justice system in general and DNA (en. *National Anticorruption Directorate*). The article where the corruption frame was identified most clearly was published by *El Mundo* (corruption - 6 times and anti-corruption fight - 3 times).

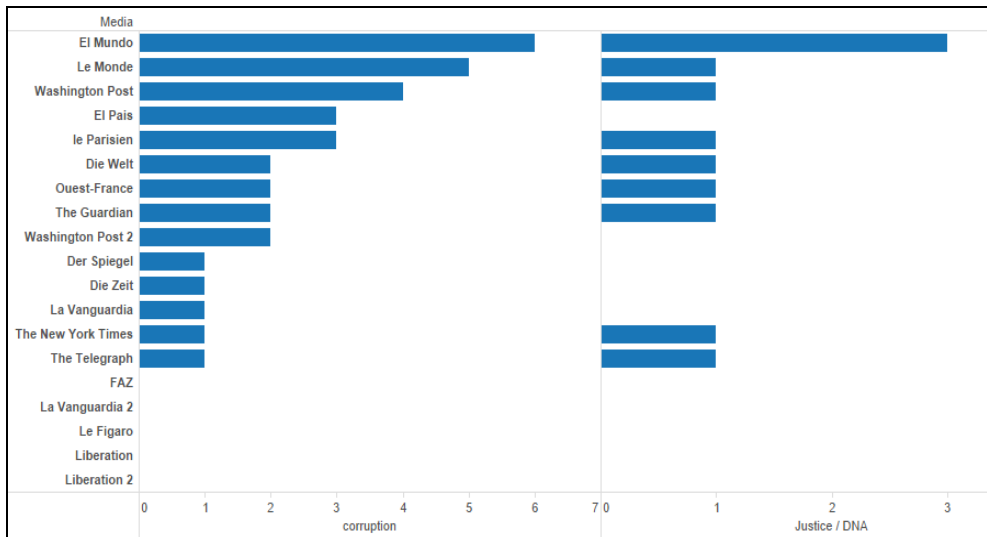


Chart 5: Corruption vs. justice

Protests for diaspora

Protests could not be ignored by journalists, because they hold a strong news value which implies conflict. During the first round of elections, the scarcity and the malfunctioning of the voting stations in cities across Western Europe prevented a number of Romanians from diaspora from voting. Romanian government officials publicly assured that the problem would be solved and the incidents would not happen again during the runoff election. But the contrary was proved from the very early hours of the day, when images with long queues invaded the Facebook and the Romanian electronic media. This situation resulted in a double mobilization within the country: undecided citizens who went to vote and protesters prepared to challenge the elections at the end of the day. But when the exit polls showed Iohannis as potential winner, the masses gathered to protest

started to celebrate. Fourteen articles from the sample wrote about *protests*. Among them, five articles published in UK, US and Spanish media emphasized their role. Excepting the *New York Times*, the four media outlets report from countries where Romanian diaspora was of interest for the media.

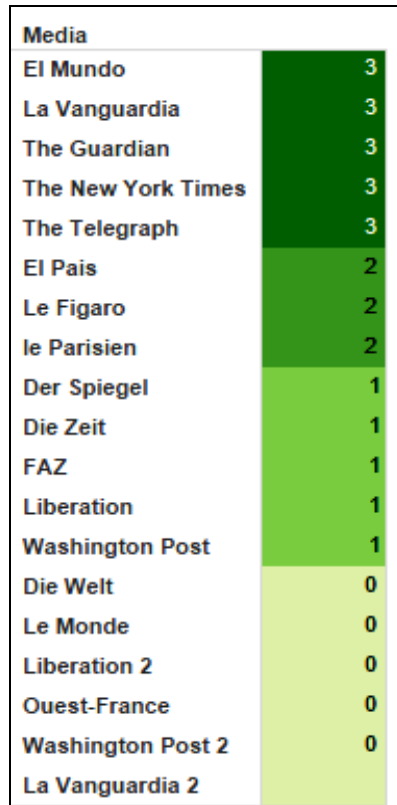


Chart 6: Protests

According to official data¹¹, more than 720 thousands Romanians were living in Spain, being the most important minority, fact which is not ignored by Spanish media. This is why *El Mundo* talked both about Romanian protests (3) and diaspora (2).

¹¹ Instituto Nacional de Estadística: *Population Figures at 1 July 2014*.

In the UK media there has been a lot of public interest in Romanian migration¹², due to the end of transitional employment restrictions on 1 January 2014. When reporting on the Romanian presidential elections, *The Guardian* (3 times) and *The Telegraph* (5 times) mentioned the following words, with slight different nuances: *diaspora*¹³, *Romanians living overseas* and *expats*¹⁴.

Conclusion

The most important media outlets from Europe and US showed various degrees of interest for the Romanian elections and the surprise winner. Some of them preferred to emphasize the role of Victor Ponta, as far more information was available on the Prime Minister than on the low profile German Mayor of Sibiu. Nonetheless, Klaus Iohannis borrowed in the media reports the positive *traits of the Germans*, used as explanatory tools for the vote. Other frame used by the media refers to the *former Romanian leaders*, among which the second place is occupied by the dictator Ceaușescu. A very strong pair of concepts constitutes another frame for defining Romania: *corruption* and *justice*. At last, but not at least, *Romanian diaspora* and *protests* in the major cities of the country make up another strong frame for the 2014 presidential elections.

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¹² By the end of 2013 Ukip's Nigel Farage and others predictions that 5,000 Romanians and Bulgarians would arrive weekly for several years were emphasized by several media, first triggering a vague panic which later evolved into irony.

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PRESIDENTIAL DEBATES IN ROMANIA - FORMATS AND VISUAL APPROACH

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ABSTRACT. This paper analyzes the evolution of TV coverage of presidential campaigns in Romania, concentrating on formats, visual approaches and turning points of the televised final debates between candidates in the second round. These final debates (except for 2000 when it did not take place, as Ion Iliescu refused to face Corneliu Vadim Tudor), had a major influence, along with well chosen moves or historic blunders, on the outcome of the presidential elections in Romania. The paper focuses on the fact that many of the decisions taken by political leaders are today tributary to the way media will comment on them. Relation between media and politics is, undoubtedly, an important factor in understanding the stakes of contemporary democracy. In the long run, television turns presidential elections into a talent show, with all its elements: Settings, story, suspense, show, characters, surprise moves and, more than the multi-million shows, a big and real stake for the viewer. The analysis was made on video recordings of final presidential debates in 1990, 1992, 1996, 2004, 2009 and 2014. For the elections of 1990, 1992, 1996 and 2004 recordings available in archives were studied. For 2009 and 2014, the author personally recorded the debates.

Key words: Presidential elections, campaign, candidates, debate, media, politics, television, visual approach.

Televised Presidential Debates after 1989

The presidential elections in 1990 presented only three candidates, very different from each other: Ion Iliescu (FSN), Ion Rațiu (PNT-CD) and Radu Câmpeanu (PNL). The first post-communist televised presidential debate was marked by Ion Rațiu's vision on democracy: "I shall struggle to

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my last drop of blood for your right to disagree with me.” In 1996 the final battle was fought by Ion Iliescu and Emil Constantinescu. For the former, the televised debate turned into a handicap. Answering Emil Constantinescu’s question: “Do you believe in God, Mr. Iliescu?” Ion Iliescu avoided a straightforward answer, explaining a lot but expressing very little. In 2004 Traian Băsescu triumphed in the final debate over Adrian Năstase. Traian Băsescu referred to Romanians’ curse of having to choose between two ex-communists. The 2009 debate between Mircea Geoană and Traian Băsescu was decisive for the PSD candidate’s failure. The decisive topic: Mircea Geoană’s nightly visit to Sorin Ovidiu Vântu’s place. In 2014 there were two live debates, on Realitatea TV and B1 TV, for which the campaign staffs had agreed upon.

Visual Approach

The first presidential debate in Romania occurred exactly 30 years after the first debate on TV ever (Nixon-Kennedy 1960) but it proved to be slower and clumsier than that. The candidates were seated in big armchairs: Radu Câmpeanu (PNL), Ion Iliescu (FSN) and Ion Rațiu (PNȚ), facing the three hosts: Răzvan Theodorescu, Emanuel Valeriu and Victor Ionescu.



Fig. 1

The circular set had been built in a huge production facility of the Romanian Television. Behind the candidates the national colours were projected by coloured lights on a white canvas background. (Fig. 1) Candidates sat on massive armchairs beside chest tall tables which almost obscured them. On these tables there were big green water bottles and glasses, much too present in medium shots of the candidates. Candidates were separated by palmtrees, that were always present in TVR sets at the time. Candidates' armchairs were placed on a circular podium about 50 cm. High, covered with a scarlet carpet, probably trying to send out the idea of a tribune. The set has a strong communist look, suggesting an interrogation rather than a free debate.



Fig. 2

Candidates were shot in long, almost extreme long shots (all three, Fig. 2) and individual medium shots (Fig. 3, 4, 5).



Fig. 3



Fig. 4



Fig. 5

The three hosts were also seated on heavy armchairs, behind a massive semi-ring shaped table, on which there were microphones and trays with water bottles and glasses. Moderators were always shown in group shots, probably because of the insufficient number of cameras in the studio. (Fig. 6)



Fig. 6

The 1996 final debate was the first broadcasted by a private station, Antena 1, as a proof of the important gain of audience driven away from TVR. The debate was organized by Antena 1, Libertatea and Jurnalul Național. Transmission started with the opponents walking smiling on a hallway and then posing for the press cameras (Fig. 7 - 9).



Fig. 7



Fig. 8



Fig. 9

It was the first time when the public entered the backstage of the debate. From now on, the public will see and enjoy the moments that precede the “real” debate, preparing for the final alongside with the candidates, increasing the tension and getting a feeling of participating to the debate, of “being there”.

The Băsescu-Geoană debate of 2009 started in a much improved version. Candidates Mircea Geoană and Traian Băsescu arrived at the Palace of Parliament. The building itself imposes a much stronger impression than the cramped studio of Antena 1 in Băneasa, Bucharest. The setup matches a grand spectacle. Candidates enter accompanied by admirers and supporters. (Fig. 10, Fig. 11)



Fig. 10



Fig. 11



Fig. 12

Traian Băsescu is rather restrained, surrounded by family and close collaborators. Mircea Geoană comes in an almost triumphant march at the arm of his wife, followed by party leaders, while the crowd of supporters cry in rhythm "Freedom, Freedom!". (Fig. 12). Mircea Geoană enters the hall with his wife, followed closely by Crin Antonescu, Klaus Iohannis, Liviu Dragnea and Victor Ponta. Mircea Geoană and Traian Băsescu meet halfway, they greet and shake hands, then greet the opponents' staff. (Fig. 13, Fig. 14)



Fig. 13



Fig. 14

Each candidate is accompanied by roughly 50 supporters, seated in two distinct areas, forming a rectangle behind their candidate's desk. Among Geoană's supporters stand out Victor Ponta, Klaus Iohannis, Cozmin Gușă, Mircea Dinescu, Viorel Hrebenciuc, Ioan Rus, Ilie Năstase, Mircea Diaconu, Dorel Vișan, Acad. Eugen Simion, Radu Mazăre, Mihai Leu, Mircea Ionescu Quintus, Dan Nica. In Traian Băsescu's team there are, among others, Maria. Elena and Ioana Băsescu, Emil Boc, Monica Macovei, Vasile Blaga, Gheorghe Flutur, Petre Miluț, Cristian Boureanu, Daniel Funeriu, Ioan Crăciunescu, Neculai Onțanu. Obviously, cameras are hunting for celebrities.

It is remarkable how televisions saw the importance of the groups of supporters, which add to the legitimacy of the candidates by their own value. In 1996, each candidate was accompanied by four supporters (even though they agreed on three), crammed in a corner, lacking space or proper lighting. Ion Iliescu came with Teodor Meleșcanu, Ioan Mircea Pașcu, Corina Crețu and Paul Dobrescu (Fig. 15). Emil Constantinescu was accompanied by Zoe Petre, Mona Muscă, Ion Caramitru and Cătălin Harnagea (Fig. 16).



Fig. 15



Fig. 16

Băsescu and Geoană are then prepared for the debate, they have their microphones put on in sight, cameras insist on these technical details, suggesting that nothing will be hidden. The TV technicians are elegantly dressed in tie and jacket, in the grave, but open note, of the entire atmosphere. (Fig. 17)



Fig. 17



Fig. 18

There is a major improvement (Fig. 18) from the debate of 1996, when Antena 1 attempted a similar effect with considerably less performant equipment. (Fig. 19) The set was placed in studio A of Antena 1. Small, simple organized, the set had about 10 by 7 meters. The studio only had four video cameras. The background consists in a blue canvas with two tricolour strips. In the background there are also four rectangles covered in canvas half purple and half blue. Candidates accompanied by the host, journalist Octavian Andronic, enter the studio and prepare for the confrontation (Fig. 20).



Fig. 19



Fig. 20

The advantage of the set in the Palace of Parliament is overwhelming. Except for some lights, the set is the hall itself. There is a huge elegant carpet on the floor. Candidates' desks are placed very close to each other, as requested by the organizer – The Institute for Public Policies. Host Robert Turcescu appreciated that the debate will have a ping-pong feeling with short, lively answers and dialogues. The dimension of the hall allowed for two cranes to be installed, so crane shots will be intensively used (Fig. 21, 22), capturing the emotion of the moment, alternating with close-up shots from mobile cameras, dynamically directing well chosen shots, creating an interesting view for the audience. Supporting personalities are rendered high importance, being very present in the shots, consisting the very background for the candidates.



Fig. 21



Fig. 22

Here is the evolution of placing candidates on the set and relationship with the moderator: 1990 TVR (Fig. 23), 1996 Antena 1 (Fig. 24), 2004 TVR (Fig. 25), 2009 Realitatea TV (Fig. 26), 2014 Realitatea TV (Fig. 27), 2014 B1TV (Fig. 28).



Fig. 23



Fig. 24



Fig. 25



Fig. 26



Fig. 27



Fig. 28

When candidates were in dialogue, the medium shot split screen technique has always been used starting from 1996, as follows: 1996 Antena 1 (Fig. 29), 2004 TVR (Fig. 30), 2009 Realitatea TV (Fig. 31), 2014 Realitatea TV (Fig. 32), 2014 B1TV (Fig. 33).



Fig. 29



Fig. 30



Fig. 31



Fig. 32



Fig. 33

Thus, from a visual standpoint, the only final debate which was really and thoroughly prepared, which succeeded in depicting the grandeur of the moment was the 2009 debate. The Palace of Parliament proved to be an inspired

choice, allowing for a set according to the message, using wide crane shots alternating with tight shots, even close-up reaction shots of supporters. This was made possible by placing the groups of supporters in sight, turning supporters into characters of the show, using them as visual support for the topics in debate (family, economy, government, anti-corruption) thus obtaining a very good dynamic of directing. Some visual special moments were prepared, such as mutual gifts and swearing on the Bible, which were meant to freshen up the interest of the viewer. Obviously, this was achieved with the contribution of a professional production team.

The other debates were visually treated as common talk shows, thus failing to create a special feeling in the audience, in accordance with the importance of the political moment. The performance of news channels in 2014, limited by their own studios and equipment reduced the visual impact, turning the debates into video-radio, with lot of camera mistakes. In other words, with one exception (2009), the power of visuals was underestimated, if not ignored.

Debates Formats

The format of a live televised debate must be extremely well planned, considering the unpredictability of live TV, the difficulty of meeting the time frames and neverending replicas of the candidates. In the absence of a competent and experienced moderator, the show will surely turn into chaos, as it happened in many of the debates. Some did not even have a clear format, the debate going on randomly. Generally their format was derived from a classic talk show format, with only a few slight adjustments. We can easily see format and visual similitudes between the Nixon-Kennedy debate of 1960 and the debates set up by Romanian news channels in 2014.

The first post communist debate on the 17th of May 1990 did not have a clear format. The debate was extremely slow, candidates and moderators being extremely condescending with each other. Moderators only intervened to give the floor to a candidate or another. The debate treated generalities and principles, which was understandable if we consider that Romanian society was taking the first steps into democracy. During the campaign, Ion Rațiu addressed the crowds: "When you vote on the 20th of May, vote for democracy, so Romania joins the path of Western civilisation once again!"

In the opening of the 1996 debate, Alessandra Stoicescu, in a voice over comment, said: "For one hour, together with Mr. Octavian Andronic, they will discuss and debate problems and proposals to save Romania from the crisis in which it is today."

The moderator does not announce the program, only that he is going to skip the candidates' bios. The one hour debate lasted for 90 minutes. In the end, the moderator announced that a lot of topics were not discussed. Timing was completely ignored, so two minute answers came to last three times as much. The moderator simply lost control of the debate.

The only debate that stuck to the format agreed upon with the staffs of the candidates was the 2009 debate, largely due to the experience and determination of Robert Turcescu, who took care to compensate time frames.

The 2014 campaign comes with two unprepared debates, without a previously prepared format, and the outcome was far from what we could call professionalism.

The Realitatea TV debate, only confirmed a few hours before, did not practically have a format, as Klaus Iohannis remarked: "Except for the generic invitation to a 90 minute debate, I was not given any details. I presume you have a plan, I don't know how much we will speak." Under these circumstances, the show turned into a neverending array of mutual offenses. Slightly better organized (and conducted), the 2014 B1TV debate failed to bring up any other topics than justice, which allowed candidates to attack each other on the topic of their corrupt supporters.

Generally, all debates included statements in which candidates should motivate their candidacy (with the 2009 version - Why wouldn't you vote for your opponent?), debates on topics, mutual questions, final statements and, by case, questions from journalists or surprise moments (2009).

In conclusion, the format of a debate must be a clear and feasible one, completing the aim of the debate. If the aim is to objectively inform the citizen about the candidates' programs and persons, then the format should be attractive and dynamic in order to maintain the attention of the viewer to the end. It must be clearly defined, to comprise all the elements that were agreed upon with the campaign staffs and efficiently run through each and all of them. Keeping the viewers alert in order to get them informed is the business of television professionals, not the candidates' or their staffs'. This is where all the opportunities provided by visuals come into action, the importance of which seems to be underestimated by news TV stations.

Turning Points

There are a few historic moments in the Romanian presidential debates which are generally considered responsible for the outcome of the elections. We enlist these “silver bullet” moments as sociologists call them:

1996 – Do you believe in God, Mr. Iliescu?

The first such moment was recorded in 1996, when opponents had to ask each other a question. Then, Emil Constantinescu asked the theatrically timed, prepared question: “Do you believe in God, Mr. Iliescu?” (Fig. 34) Ion Iliescu answered: “Men of the cloth themselves evolve in touch with science. Intolerance is of no benefit to anybody. Believe and do not investigate, for instance, is a concept left aside by the clergy as well.”



Fig. 34

2004 –Two ex-communists

The final debate in 2004 brings along a well planned moment, a political move won by Traian Băsescu by Adrian Năstase’s lack of reaction. That silver bullet is remembered as “two ex-communists” (Fig. 35):



Fig. 35

Băsescu – “I was talking to my staff at the beginning of the campaign: What a curse on this people to be finally having to choose between two ex-communists: Adrian Năstase and Traian Băsescu.” On December 10th 2004, the 7 PM exit poll showed a perfect equality of votes. Traian Băsescu then says another historic line, live on all Romanian televisions: “At 9 PM I will lead by 52 to 48. Adrian, you don’t imagine how small you are becoming!”

2009 –Mircea Geoană’s nightly visit at Sorin Ovidiu Vântu’s place

The moment of maximum tension of the 2009 debate, probably of all presidential debates in Romania was, undoubtedly, the moment of mutual questions. This is the “silver bullet” moment that made Traian Băsescu President for a second term, on December 3rd 2009, at 8.33 PM.

Băsescu – “A question from a former debate which included Crin Antonescu referred to the fact that I was not able to get intouch with you, then I learned that you couldn’t answer the phone, as you were visiting Mr. Vântu at the time. You said you have never visited Mr. Vântu and so on. A few days later Mr. Vântu declared on his own TV station that he invited you several times in the Danube Delta. I am now expecting your appologies for lying in a presidential debate. Don’t apologize to me, but to the Romanian people.”

Geoană – “I don’t like Mr. Vântu as it seems you don’t like him any more.”

Băsescu – “You didn’t like him last night as well?” (Fig. 36)



Fig. 36

From that moment on, Mr. Băsescu launched himself on a furious attack, forcing his opponent to admit he had visited Sorin Ovidiu Vântu the night before. The debate ends:

Băsescu - "He calls you and you comply. I come to the conclusion that..."

Geoană - "I come to the conclusion that you are desperate in this campaign."

Băsescu - "No. Relax. It is not me who is desperate."

2014 -...between real men, let's reject the law regarding amnesty and pardon

On a smaller scale though, the 2014 debate has its silver bullet. Klaus Iohannis provoked Victor Ponta, "as between real men", to urgently summon Parliament in order to reject the law regarding amnesty and pardon: "Mr. Ponta, between real men, let us summon the Parliament tomorrow and close this shameful chapter of the Law of amnesty and pardon once and for all!" Asked by the moderator if he agrees or not with the law, Klaus Iohannis explained: "I am fully against this law. I do not believe Romania needs such a law. PNL also voted against the first time PSD brought it up. I will be the president of Romania and I will not pass this law". Iohannis said that if Ponta won the elections, "the next day after the law regarding amnesty and pardon is passed, all corrupt people will be back in society".

Visuals really matter

Final televised debates constitute a factor of influence, especially on the undecided zone. From the standpoint of television production, selected professional solutions have an overwhelming influence upon the quality of debates, in the sense of helping viewers make a voting decision. Beyond sociological aspects of presidential debates, the correct application of the science of television can influence viewer's decision, consciently or not. Fundamental values of journalism should be represented in election shows in the purest and most responsible form, in the context in which television contributes effectively and sometimes decisively to the construction of nation's future. Objectivity, responsibility, credibility, independence and good will, strengthened by the adequate, just, professional and responsible display of the visual message determined by creative usage of framings, camera angles, lights, video graphics, the rhythm of directing, swiftness in thinking and decision, ingenuity in designing and manufacturing sets, preparing movements on the set, are expected to produce an attractive TV show, yet credible and serious, in the interest of the citizen, in this case we are actually speaking of national interest.

If media theoreticians agree that television is a mixture of journalism and showbiz (Postman, 2006), then a quality show prepared by visual journalists (producers, moderators, directors, camera operators, even set designers, as long as all creatively contribute to the journalistic process of informing the public), responsible professionals, working on a professionally elaborated format that is attractive, easy to watch, follow and understand, it is sure to generate a mature opinion in the mind of an informed, conscient and responsible citizen.

This paper proves that Romanian news TV stations, which have almost entirely accaparated the political debate space, are diverted from their primary informative role not only by rushing for profit (sales through ratings) but also by assuming the toxic role of influence factor. More than that, the lack of interest shown for the professional visual approach means the abandon of the power of the primary element of television – the visual image.

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