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DOCTORAL THESIS

Between sensationalism and moral panic.

Media frames analysis on romaniatv.net news

Summary

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Introduction

The study on the *analysis of the media frames in romaniatv.net news* presents conclusions regarding the construction of the headlines, the reference universe (actors, entities and places mentioned in the articles) and implicitly elements associated with the agenda setting, frequencies, coverage of the electoral campaign, respectively the language particularities identified in the headlines and the body of the news published in the period 2020-2024, in three sections of interest of romaniatv.net: *Justice, Politics and Society*.

The literature reviewed in the first part of this paper covers concepts and theories relevant to the research topic, including: informational values, infotainment, political and sensationalism, the expression of emotion in informative texts, storytelling and typologies of journalistic headlines. Also, framing theory, agenda setting theory and moral panic theory have significant roles in this research context. Last but not least, we have clarified concepts related to media frame analysis (content analysis, NLP and NER).

In the chapter dedicated to the research design we have presented the methodology used, starting from the data collection as well as the sampling modality, respectively the final corpus (n=72730 articles) and the subsamples used in the different phases of the analysis (S1, S2, S3, S4). The mixed, semi-automated methodology, based on the use of computational linguistics (NLP) and named entity recognition (NER) tools, in order to extract data on the linguistic features of the news, and the parameters on the basis of which the representational universe romaniatv.net (actors, entities, places) is built, allowed the identification of a series of landmarks on how moral panic is constructed, informational values are used and framing theory effects are produced.

The methodology, involving on the one hand qualitative and quantitative analysis of the headlines and qualitative analysis of the November 2024 headlines, *Politics* section, and on the other hand, qualitative and quantitative analysis of the news text and case study, allowed to draw relevant conclusions about how framing and agenda setting processes take place.

The research findings make a significant contribution to the field of media and communication sciences in general, placing the research among those that offer a

linguistic and semantic perspective on a relevant part of the Romanian media landscape, in this case delimited by Romania TV / romaniatv.net.

Chapter I. The specifics of the media message

The first chapter of the thesis explores in detail the specific nature of media messages, starting from news values and highlighting the significant contributions of theorists such as Galtung and Ruge, who laid the foundations of this field by identifying the factors that determine the relevance of an event and its potential to become news. The model they proposed, which includes factors such as frequency, intensity, and clarity, remains a key reference in the study of news values, although it has been subject to criticism and revisions over time. In this context, the journalist's role is to be a gatekeeper. News selection is also influenced by cultural, social, and political factors, which are explained in this chapter. Various approaches to the concept of gatekeeping are analyzed, from traditional perspectives to contemporary ones that consider ideological and economic influences on the filtering mechanisms of information.

This chapter also addresses the issue of sensationalism and infotainment, treated as distinct yet interconnected phenomena that shape how news is presented and perceived by the public. Furthermore, as shown in this chapter, politainment can trivialize serious political discourse by presenting aspects such as politicians' personal lives as matters of public interest. These topics sometimes intertwine with genuinely important and relevant issues for democracy and society.

Another key aspect of media messaging is the practice of storytelling in informative texts. Narratives can facilitate the public's understanding and retention of information. Drawing inspiration from Proppian structures and from scholarly literature that emphasizes the role of storytelling in journalism, the chapter elaborates on classical narrative structures and the role of emotions in capturing and maintaining public attention. It also discusses the risks associated with the excessive use of emotions and stereotypes in news content. The use of specific character types, such as: heroes, villains, victims, supporting characters, etc., helps to create a context that is easier for readers to understand, as they recognize familiar interpretive patterns.

Emotional appeal is a frequently used strategy, especially in a media environment where messages compete for the increasingly limited attention of the public. The recurrent use of fear and other negative emotions in media messages can ultimately have political consequences (Koschut, 2020). These emotions can influence the electorate, their decisions, or exert certain pressures. Emotionality in media messages is often evident in the headlines of journalistic materials. The headline serves as a crucial element in capturing the audience's attention, offering an overview of the topic developed in the body of the article. When headlines appeal to the reader's curiosity, anger, panic, or negative feelings, they fall into the category of clickbait. García-Orosa et al. (2017) argue that clickbait has become a true phenomenon, beyond being just a media concept.

Thus, all the elements of media messaging analyzed in this chapter contribute to a better understanding of news values and the ways in which media texts are constructed in contemporary society.

Chapter II. The construction of reality through media messages

In this chapter, we explored how mass media contributes to the construction of reality through media messages, focusing on agenda-setting theory and framing theory. We analyzed how the media not only reflects reality but also shapes it by selecting and presenting certain topics, thereby influencing public perceptions of their importance.

Agenda-setting theory, initially formulated by McCombs and Shaw, argues that the media has the power to shape the public agenda by influencing the audience's priorities. The three levels of the theory, which are: issue salience transfer, attribute salience transfer, and Network Agenda Setting, explore the connections between topics and issues in the public's mind. The concept of agenda melding, clarified in this chapter, refers to how individuals form their own agendas by combining media agendas with personal experiences and preferences.

Framing theory, closely related to agenda-setting, focuses on how topics are perceived and interpreted by the public, establishing interpretive frames through which

people tend to understand mediated reality. In this chapter, we discussed both generic and specific frames, as well as the use of political and metaphorical frames to simplify and clarify political messages. Additionally, we highlighted the risks associated with excessive simplification of political information, including public opinion polarization, context omission, and manipulation of beliefs. Not least, the use of fear-based frames in the media exploits existing societal anxieties to influence the public and convey a sense of insecurity. The studies cited have shown that these interpretive frames can generate unnecessary fear and distort reality, emphasizing the significant role of the media in shaping public discourse.

Chapter III. Media narratives: moral panic and conspiracy theories

The concept of moral panic, its media representations, and the way mass media contributes to its construction, shaping social perceptions and behaviors, are discussed in this chapter. The theory of moral panic, initially formulated by Stanley Cohen, introduced the concepts of folk devils and the amplification of deviance, which are clarified here. Moral panic is defined as a disproportionate reaction to certain behaviors or events, which are portrayed by the media in an exaggerated and alarmist manner (Cohen, 1972). This phenomenon contributes to the establishment of society's moral boundaries and reinforces the cohesion of majority groups by stigmatizing minorities or deviant groups. Examples of media representations of moral panic in various contexts include Brexit, the refugee crisis, and the Covid-19 pandemic. These cases illustrate how the media can amplify fears and social anxieties, transforming real issues into perceived crises that demand political, social, or governmental intervention.

Closely related to this are conspiracy theories, approached as a complex social and cultural phenomenon that offers alternative explanations for events or situations, based on the premise of secret groups and hidden influences (Douglas et al., 2019). The impact of conspiracy theories on public perceptions and social behaviors is intensified by the speed of sharing via the internet and social media.

Chapter IV. Analysis of media frames

All the research methods detailed in this fourth chapter of the thesis represent tools that facilitate the analysis, understanding, and interpretation of large data sets, as well as the extraction of relevant conclusions in a significantly shorter amount of time. These methods almost completely minimize human error, thereby eliminating the risk of result interference or biased interpretation. In Chapter IV, various methods and techniques used for analyzing media frames were discussed, emphasizing their importance in communication and media studies. Three main aspects were addressed: content analysis, computational linguistics (NLP), and named entity recognition (NER), all relevant to the present research.

Content analysis is a traditional method essential for classifying and evaluating key themes in media texts. It provides a solid foundation for understanding both explicit and implicit messages, contributing to a deeper interpretation of content. Recent studies have highlighted the need to adapt this methodology to the specific environment, particularly in the context of online news, where thematic diversity and presentation formats are significantly different from traditional media.

Computational linguistics (NLP) is an advanced technique that uses algorithms and computational models to process and analyze natural language. It enables the extraction of meaningful information from texts and the identification of linguistic structures, thus facilitating detailed analysis of media content. Studies have shown that integrating NLP with traditional qualitative methods offer optimal results, reducing analysis time and increasing the accuracy of findings.

Named Entity Recognition (NER) is an NLP technique that identifies and classifies entities mentioned in texts, such as names of people, places, and organizations (Li et al., 2020). It facilitates detailed analysis of media content and the identification of essential elements within messages. Recent studies have emphasized the importance of NER resources and the wide range of functions they can fulfill in research.

In conclusion, the research methods detailed in this chapter are essential tools for analyzing, understanding, and interpreting large data sets in the field of media studies.

Chapter V. Romania TV and romaniatv.net news

Both the news television channel and its affiliated website record significant audience figures and stand out from the competition. At least in the case of the television station, it has been at the top of its niche rankings since 2017, as shown by the studies and reports cited in this chapter. The history of România TV has gone through two main phases: the first, under the leadership of Sebastian Ghiță (from its founding until 2015), and the second under the leadership of Catrinel Maria Gheorghe (from 2015 to the present). From its inception, România TV has been marked by scandals, sanctions, and warnings from the National Audiovisual Council (CNA), yet it has remained the audience leader in its niche.

In this chapter, we analyzed the evolution and impact of the România TV brand, explored its complex history, the core values that define its identity, and the key moments that significantly influenced its trajectory. România TV, initially launched as part of the Realitatea Media SA group, went through various stages of development and legal disputes, culminating in its separation from Realitatea TV and the formation of a distinct news channel. During its early years, România TV was frequently associated with the Social Democratic Party (PSD) and was criticized for political bias, sensationalist reporting, and information manipulation. In the second phase, under the leadership of Catrinel Maria Gheorghe, România TV maintained a similar editorial style and continued to face criticism for its lack of impartiality and political influences. The channel has been repeatedly sanctioned by the CNA for various violations of the Audiovisual Code, including the broadcast of defamatory and unbalanced content, and breaches of impartiality standards. Nevertheless, the principles and values outlined in România TV's editorial code emphasize the importance of balance, impartiality, and truthfulness in the information it disseminates.

Regarding its audience, we found that both the television station and its website have a significant audience, making it the most-watched news-focused TV channel in Romania. The audience of România TV and romaniatv.net is predominantly older, female, and spans all social categories, with a concentration in the upper to middle classes. As for the news website romaniatv.net, which is an integral part of the România TV media brand, and based on the presentation developed throughout the chapter, we can conclude that the news published on the site provides a particularly interesting

starting point for the present analysis. The publication, involved in numerous controversies over the years, many of which resulted in sanctions, fines, and lawsuits, continues to rank among the top six most-read news websites in Romania in 2024 (Digital News Report, 2024). This fact presents a strong argument supporting the choice and relevance of this research topic.

Chapter VI. Analysis of media frames in romaniatv.net news

A first conclusion of the data analysis refers to the efficiency of the sampling and the application of the proposed mixed methodology, which combines quantitative and qualitative analysis of the sub-sample of headlines (S1), with content, linguistic, and framing analysis of the sub-sample that includes the body text (S2) of news articles from the *Justice*, *Politics*, and *Society* sections of the online publication romaniatv.net, during the period January 1, 2020 to December 31, 2024. This is complemented by a case study that explores how the topic of the presidential elections in the last quarter of 2024 (October - December) was covered in the media. The data corpus is sufficiently extensive to allow for the extraction of relevant conclusions about the way romaniatv.net constructs its headlines and the linguistic particularities of the news published on the site.

The results described earlier provide answers to each research question:

RQ1: *How is the reference universe of romaniatv.net defined (the most visible actors, institutions, and locations in the news published on the site) for each of the three analyzed sections (Justice, Politics, and Society)?*

RQ2a: *What are the main headline typologies identified?*

RQ2b: *What frames are used by romaniatv.net in the headlines of each covered domain: Politics, Justice, Society?*

RQ3: *What is the lexical specificity of the news published by romaniatv.net?*

RQ4: *How were the presidential elections of the last quarter of 2024 (October - December) represented?*

To answer **the first research question**, regarding the construction of the reference universe, specifically, the main actors, entities, and locations mentioned, this

information was extracted from the headline sub-samples (S1) for each of the three sections, using *Google Pinpoint*, as described in the methodology. For the *Justice* category, the ten most frequently mentioned actors in news published on romaniatv.net between 2020 and 2024 are: Elena Udrea, Klaus Iohannis, Liviu Nicolae Dragnea, Gheorghe Dincă, Vlad Pascu, Laura Codruța Kövesi, Traian Băsescu, Florian Coldea, Sorin Oprescu, Cristian Popescu Piedone, and Cătălin Cherecheș. These are politicians and individuals involved in high-profile criminal cases, frequently mentioned in relation to the developments of those cases. Elena Udrea leads the ranking with 168 mentions.

Headlines in this section most often refer to the National Anticorruption Directorate (DNA), mentioned in 483 cases, and the Constitutional Court of Romania (CCR), mentioned in 154 cases, followed by the Social Democratic Party (PSD), with 76 mentions. Regarding the locations where the action in the headlines is placed, Romania (263 mentions), Bucharest (207 mentions), and the headquarters of the High Court of Cassation and Justice (141 mentions) top the list.

In the *Politics* section of romaniatv.net, during the analyzed period, political figures from the National Liberal Party (PNL) dominate, followed by those from the Social Democratic Party (PSD). There is only one representative from Forța Dreptei and AUR, and one former USR leader. More specifically, PSD leader Marcel Ciolacu stands out with 2,934 mentions in headlines, followed by President Klaus Iohannis, who appears in 2,216 headlines from the sub-sample (S1. *Politics*). Among the most visible figures are Florin Cîțu, Ludovic Orban, Nicolae Ciucă, and Gabriela Vrânceanu Firea, followed by Nicușor Dan, George Simion, Victor Ponta, and Rareș Bogdan.

In line with the previously identified political actors is the frequency list of entities for the *Politics* section of romaniatv.net. The two ruling parties in recent years clearly dominate the top of mentions. Thus, the Social Democratic Party (PSD - 3,202 headlines) and the National Liberal Party (PNL - 2,676 headlines) occupy the top positions. These are followed by the Save Romania Union (USR), mentioned in 1,087 cases, and the 2020 USR-PLUS Alliance, with 444 mentions. The Constitutional Court of Romania is mentioned in 353 headlines. Similar to other news categories, Romania and Bucharest are the most frequently mentioned locations, specifically, 2,529 headlines mention the country's name, and another 1,028 refer to the capital.

To provide a comprehensive answer to the first research question, we conclude by discussing the key actors representing the *Society* section during the analyzed period. Seven out of the ten actors included in the statistics are politicians, while the remaining three are: the Secretary of State and Head of the Department for Emergency Situations, Raed Arafat, Teodosie, Archbishop of Tomis and România TV journalist Victor Ciutacu. Beyond the *Justice* and *Politics* sections, this *Society* category arguably best synthesizes the universe of romaniatv.net, as well as Romanian society as seen through the media lens of the publication. In the same vein, we note the findings regarding entities. The analysis shows that the most relevant institution is the Romanian Orthodox Church, which appears in 1,815 of the romaniatv.net headlines, followed, somewhat paradoxically, by the national lottery game Loto 6/49, with 379 mentions. The top three entities also include the Lidl supermarket chain, mentioned in 316 cases.

Based on this first part of the research, several observations can be made regarding the main news values identified in the romaniatv.net headlines. The messages conveyed in the headlines are frequently loaded with negativity and, implicitly, appeal to emotion. These headlines attract attention, shock, and provoke, ultimately contributing to the formation of public opinion. News values carry ideological weight and can function in ways that reinforce other ideologies or ideological beliefs (Bednarek & Caple, 2014).

Journalists are aware that media narratives and storytelling in informative texts have the powerful ability to elicit not only cognitive but also emotional responses from audiences. Through storytelling, complex topics are simplified and become easier to follow, as they rely on elements already familiar to the general public and embedded in popular culture, such as stories (Bird & Dardenne, 2004). The fairy tale characters proposed by Propp (1958) remain highly relevant in today's media context. From the analyzed headlines, it appears that the system's victims are Elena Udrea and Liviu Dragnea, although in Udrea's case, the portrayal is not consistent. Most often, she is victimized through associations with her roles as mother and wife, forced to be away from her family: "*Adrian Alexandrov was able to visit Elena Udrea: 'What she wants most is to hold her child in her arms. I publicly ask the Ombudsman to intervene'*" (Stan, April 15, 2022). In this context, her husband is portrayed as a supporting character (Propp, 1958). However, in other contexts, the use of verbs such as *escaped* or *fled* in

phrases like: *might escape (criminal charges), fled (the country), trying to escape (arrest in Bulgaria), or completely escapes* suggests a sense of guilt.

In the case of the victim: Liviu Dragnea, the former PSD leader, the portrayal is consistent. His rights are systematically violated, and he is constantly subjected to abuse, both by the justice system and prison administrators: *“Dragnea accuses that his rights were violated. Serious accusations against the prison administration”* (Tudor, January 18, 2020). When court decisions are in his favor, the outcome is presented as a true victory of good over evil: *“Liviu Dragnea achieved a huge victory in court. The Court of Appeal accepted the relocation of his trial”* (Stan, June 14, 2021).

In the view of romaniatv.net, the villains are Florian Coldea and Laura Codruța Kövesi, representatives of the so-called *deep state*, portrayed as systematically destroying Romania’s justice system and constantly threatening the well-being and safety of Romanian citizens. Examples include headlines such as *“Laura Kövesi investigates all of Romania at the European Public Prosecutor’s Office: ‘We already have three investigations targeting PNRR funds’”* (Stan, May 9, 2023), and *“BREAKING NEWS: Recordings that blow up Coldea’s criminal network! €600,000, the bribe demanded by the former SRI general and his accomplices to corrupt magistrates. Who are the prosecutors ready to carry out his orders”* (Stan, April 22, 2024).

The role of the justice-seeker is attributed to Victor Ciutacu, a journalist at romaniatv.net and the voice of both the television station and the media brand as a whole. His opinions are consulted in relation to major societal events, and his remarks are considered inherently correct and truthful, without exception: *“The CNA rejected by majority vote the suspension of România TV’s broadcast, but fined the station. Victor Ciutacu: ‘100,000 lei just for asking questions’”* (Stan, April 27, 2023).

The romaniatv.net universe contains elements of infotainment, politainment, and sensationalism, which are evident even in the headlines. Narratives about the food George Simion keeps in his fridge, the influencers Marcel Ciolacu follows, the reason Raed Arafat is not married, or Gabriela Firea’s new haircut are just a few striking examples of topics designed to attract attention by appealing to public interest. Here we also observe classic elements of stereotyping, where each individual is associated with

a set of traits that define them (the terms of the stereotype), and any novelty about them is marked by a deviation from these predefined labels (Hartley, 1982/1999).

Returning to the analysis of romaniatv.net headlines, a graph was generated to better represent the results, allowing for the simultaneous study of the monthly evolution of news volume between 2020 and 2024 for the *Justice* section (n=4531), as well as for *Politics* and *Society*. The *Society* section is the most represented in this sample, even in terms of monthly distribution. Increases in article frequency are closely linked to societal events.

The sub-sample including headlines from the *Politics* category (S4), published on romaniatv.net between November 1 to 30, 2024 (n=614), served as the starting point for answering **Research Question 2a**. A recurring journalistic practice was observed: the use of quotes in headlines. The quote-type headline category includes 380 cases, distributed as follows: 321 headlines containing quoted phrases or words, 44 exclamatory quote headlines, and 15 interrogative quote headlines. Additionally, 21 headlines are interrogative, while 14 are exclamatory. Moreover, 28% of the headlines in the analyzed sub-sample (S4) contain clickbait elements.

By interpreting the main co-occurrences extracted using *Tropes v8.2* from the three headline sub-samples (S1), a series of framing categories were defined and developed in this chapter of the thesis. This analysis answers **Research Question 2b**, with the key finding being that fear-based and political frames dominate.

Furthermore, the structural particularities of the headlines, dramatic expressions, terms from the lexical field of death, and war-related vocabulary, graphically emphasized through capitalization, contribute to shaping conclusions about the lexical specificity of the news, addressing **Research Question 3**. All these lexical and semantic elements contribute to the construction and amplification of moral panic. Any negative event in society is portrayed as a disaster, a catastrophe, or a hopeless situation (Cohen, 1972).

Finally, the case study on media coverage of the presidential elections at the end of 2024 provides clear answers to **the final research question**. In its representation of the electoral campaign, romaniatv.net focused on candidates from traditional parties, perceived as more important. The preferences are evident: Marcel Ciolacu (PSD) and George Simion (AUR) are portrayed as the main favorites, supported by polls published

by romaniatv.net (which consistently confirm these views), while the major losers, according to the publication, are Elena Lasconi (USR), Nicolae Ciucă (PNL), and Mircea Geoană (independent).

The mixed research methodology applied to specific sub-samples proved effective, allowing for the extraction of results that not only answer the initial research questions but also accurately contextualize the entire universe of romaniatv.net.

Chapter VII: Conclusions

Chapter VII summarizes the main findings of the research, offering a clear picture of how the media brand România TV/romaniatv.net constructs and delivers messages to the public. The choice to analyze the online version was motivated by the accessibility of its digital archive, unlike televised content, which could not be reviewed retrospectively. The study focused on three main categories available on the website: *Justice*, *Politics*, and *Society*, analyzing the frequency of news articles, the most visible actors and institutions, headline typologies, interpretive frames, lexical specificity, and the representation of the 2024 presidential elections.

By applying mixed methods such as computational linguistic analysis (NLP) and named entity recognition (NER), combined with manual interpretation, the research succeeded in offering a complex perspective on media content. These tools enabled the identification of recurring editorial practices and political influences shaping the media discourse. The case study on the 2024 presidential elections adds relevance and timeliness, especially in the context of uncertainty surrounding the first round and the surprising rise of candidate Călin Georgescu.

In the first part of the research, the focus was on how media messages are constructed, with an emphasis on headlines published over the past five years. News values such as intensity, significance, and surprise, as theorized by Galtung and Ruge, are evident in the analyzed content. However, references to political and international elites, personification, and negativity dominate. It is amplified through the use of war-related, death-related, and emotionally charged vocabulary, often graphically emphasized with capital letters. Headlines are crafted to capture the reader's attention by appealing to shock, fear, or outrage.

Infotainment, politainment, and sensationalism are central elements in romaniatv.net's discourse. Journalists blend political topics with personal details from candidates' lives, turning information into media spectacle. A relevant example is the headline about the contents of George Simion's refrigerator, illustrating the mix of politics and private life. Clickbait headlines are frequently used, with terms like *exclusive*, *secret*, or *revolutionary*, designed to spark curiosity and drive traffic.

Media characters are constructed to fit into a narrative framework, each embodying classic stereotypes. Elena Udrea is portrayed as a heroic mother, a victim of the system, or a fugitive, depending on the context. Florian Coldea and Laura Codruța Kövesi are the eternal villains, symbols of corruption, while Gabriela Firea is the hero-victim, constantly sabotaged by a corrupt system. His Eminence Teodosie plays the role of the jester, portrayed both ironically and appreciatively depending on the situation, while Victor Ciutacu is the justice-seeker, the opinion leader who comments on current events.

Framing theory and agenda-setting theory are essential for understanding how romaniatv.net prioritizes topics. The most frequently mentioned entities in the *Society* category, such as the Orthodox Church, Loto 6/49, and Lidl, reflect the interests of the target audience. The selection of these themes, even when contradictory (e.g., spirituality vs. luck), indicates an editorial strategy aimed at attracting attention and satisfying public curiosity. Fear-based frames are omnipresent, appealing to concerns about crime, accidents, corruption, and social instability.

The media discourse is marked by a series of invented terms specific to romaniatv.net, such as *reziștii*, *soroșiștii*, *Coldea's octopus*, or *the gravedigger of justice*. These terms contribute to the creation of an alternative reality in which certain figures and institutions are demonized while others are idealized. The representation of presidential candidates reflects editorial preferences: Ciolacu and Simion are portrayed favorably, as men of the people, while Lasconi, Ciucă, and Geoană are criticized.

Moral panic is another recurring element. It is suggested through the identification of demonized figures in society. Headlines are constructed to evoke negative emotions, using terms like *SCANDALOUS*, *HALLUCINATORY*, *HORROR IMAGES*, *TERROR*, or *SHOCKING CRIME*. War-related vocabulary is used not only

in geopolitical contexts but also to describe everyday events, contributing to the excessive dramatization of reality.

In conclusion, the research provides a deep understanding of how romaniatv.net constructs media messages, relying on emotion and sensationalism, with elements of moral panic. The extensive corpus of over 72,000 articles, divided into categories and sub-samples, enabled the extraction of relevant data about the publication's reference universe. Future research perspectives include expanding the analysis to other sections, conducting a visual analysis of images and TV graphics, and potentially collaborating with experts in mass psychology to contextualize the findings.