

A Socio-Cultural Analysis of Romanian News from the 18th Century to Digital Era

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64

Abstract

When Marshall McLuhan wrote in his 1964 book Understanding the Media: The Extensions of Man that 'the medium is the message', the Canadian communication theorist described the role that the new technologies of the time – radio and television – played in shaping social interactions, communication, and the media itself. For decades, scholars have researched how radio and television have influenced news content. However, in the early 2000s their attention shifted towards another medium: the digital environment. From blogs to digital media outlets or social media platforms – and more recently, artificial intelligence – the role of the digital environment as 'the medium' that shapes information has become the focus of contemporary inquiry in both the social sciences and communication research. In this paper, we conduct a socio-cultural analysis of Romanian news coverage from a reader's perspective, investigating news discourse as the convergence of cultural trends, societal shifts, and economic and technological developments. This inquiry is grounded on the premise that a diachronic examination of news coverage can reveal how media discourse has evolved over years, reflecting underlying socio-cultural dynamics as well as economic and technological transformations. To explore this, the study analyses a corpus of news articles published in Adevărul, one of Romania's oldest newspapers.

Keywords: news, media discourse, medium is the message, digital journalism, Romanian media, news value, news content.

INTRODUCTION

From the invention of the Gutenberg press to the advent of radio, television, and, most recently, the internet, each technological innovation has significantly influenced the format and content of news. The purpose of the hereby article is to examine the written news content of one of Romania's oldest newspapers, *Adevărul* [*The Truth*], focusing on the changes in content, language, and format that took place as it transitioned from print to digital.

Starting from the corpus assembled as part of our ongoing doctoral research—*The Rhetoric of Ambiguity in Romanian News: An Analysis from the Reader's Perspective*—at the Doctoral School of Linguistic and Literary Studies, Babeş-Bolyai University, which includes news articles published in January over a 20-year period (2000–2020) in both the print and digital editions of *Adevărul*, 50 news items were selected for qualitative analysis in relation to the theoretical concepts addressed in this paper.

Adevărul was identified as the target newspaper for the corpus, as it meets the following criteria relevant to our analysis: it has a historical presence on the Romanian media market; it is a mainstream media outlet with national coverage; it has been recognized as a quality newspaper throughout the post-Decembrist

period; and it was available in both print and digital formats until 2020, the end of my research timeframe.

By *news*, we understand media discourse as defined by Van Dijk, specifically ‘news articles in the narrow sense, that is, news discourse about past political, social, or cultural events’ (Van Dijk, 1988: 5). Following the Dutch scholar’s approach, news is understood as ‘structures in relation to their context of production and understanding,’ which function ‘in the expression of underlying knowledge, beliefs, attitudes or ideologies, or as results of specific constraints of newsmaking’ (Van Dijk, 1988: 5).

A HISTORICAL VIEW ON ROMANIAN NEWSPAPERS

The history of Romanian newspapers begins in the late 18th century – specifically, in 1790 – with the printing of the first regular publication, a French-language newspaper produced in Iași, which ultimately published only seven editions in total (Petcu, 2012). A few decades later, the first newspapers in Romanian emerged. *Curierul Rumânesc* (launched in April 1829 in Bucharest), *Albina Românească* (first published in June 1829 in Iași), and *Gazeta de Transilvania* (March 1838 in Brașov) collectively marked ‘the dawn of Romanian media’ (Antip, 1964; Râpeanu, 2008). In the subsequent decades, although the number of publications increased, economic constraints prevented editors from maintaining a regular printing schedule. Consequently, most periodicals did not have fixed issue dates and were printed irregularly, varying from one to three times a week.

The early history of the newspaper *Adevărul* is closely linked to Alexandru Beldiman, who founded it in Iași in December 1871 (Râpeanu, 2008; Petcu, 2012). Because of its strongly anti-monarchist discourse, the paper was shut down after only a few issues, and Beldiman was sentenced to three months in prison for offenses

against King Carol I (Petcu, 2012). In 1881, *Adevărul* resumed publication in Bucharest, maintaining its anti-monarchy stance as illustrated on its title page through a quote from Vasile Alecsandri – ‘Beware, my Romanian brother, of foreign nails in your home’ (Petcu, 2012: 17, my translation) – which alluded to the royal family that ruled Romania at the time, the Hohenzollerns.

In the first decade of the 20th century, Romanian newspapers flourished, as evidenced by official records of the time: in 1912 *Adevărul* was printed in 30,000 copies and distributed alongside seven free magazines (Antip, 1964: 92), which helped make it one of the most widely read Romanian newspapers between the two world wars (Teodorașcu, 2020). Its success ended abruptly in 1937, when both *Adevărul* and *Dimineața*, another newspaper from the same publishing house, were banned by the Goga-Cuza government as media censorship intensified (Antip, 1964: 92). After the Second World War, *Adevărul* was printed again for a few years – ‘competing for audience’ (Gross, 2015: 34) with *Scânteia* [*The Spark*], the main newspaper supporting the Communist Party – only to be banned again in 1951, and revived only after the 1989 Romanian Revolution.

ROMANIAN NEWS DISCOURSE. VARIATIONS AND INFLUENCES

Discussing the early stages of the Romanian media discourse, Peter Gross wrote that 19th century media reflected ‘social-political turmoil and the nationalistic aspirations’ (Gross, 1996: 3) and described it as ‘highly subjective, polemical and partisan’ towards political and economic interests (Gross, 1996: 6). On account of this participatory stance, Romanian newspapers were frequently threatened by the various political regimes they opposed. ‘The reality of 1930s and 1940s, up to the end of World War II, was that the press became harried, timid, highly censored or muzzled altogether’ (Gross, 1996: 7). Researchers

have noted that Romanian journalists were not content merely to present the news but also expressed ‘a clear attitude’ (my translation) (Râpeanu, 2008: 37) towards current events, seeking to identify their causes ‘in the social, economic and moral climate’ (Râpeanu, 2008: 37) of the country. The end of World War II brought the Communist era in Romania, with all media becoming ‘centralized under state-party control’ (Gross, 1996: 10). The media discourse shifted from one of fierce polemic to one subordinate to the regime.

In an investigation of Romanian media before and during Communism, Victor Botez described the role of Communist-era media as being established by the Communist Party and aimed at ‘pushing Romania ever closer to Communism’ (Botez, 1987: 12, my translation).

The party tightly controlled both media output and the interactions between journalists and the country’s leaders:

At the rare press conference held by Romania’s supreme leaders, the questions to be asked by the journalists selected to attend were provided to them by the Press Section of the Central Committee of the Communist Party. (Gross, 1996: 14)

By the end of the seventies, with the 11th Party Congress, official censorship was abolished. However, it was replaced with ‘institutionalization of censorship at the micro level of the individual newspaper’ (Gross, 1996: 17).

The multilayered censorship altered not only the language of the media, but also photos or documents in order ‘to suit the images desired by the leadership’ (Gross, 1996: 19), therefore ‘truth was that which served Ceaușescu and his regime’ (Gross, 1996: 19). Writing about his personal experience as a journalist under Ceaușescu’s regime, Paul Schweiger mentioned that reading *Scântea* and *Scântea Tineretului* was mandatory in order to know the ‘party’s direction’,

emphasizing how people lived between two worlds – the real one and the one depicted by the media and official communications (Schweiger, 2010: 225). This practice heavily influenced Romanian public discourse, as ‘it normalized and naturalized the double standards of discourse versus action’ (Petre, 2012: 32).

The language used by the Romanian media of the time is known as ‘wooden language’ – a type of discourse ‘often seen as lacking credibility, superficial or implying some intention of concealment’ (Cătău-Vereș, 2023: 79). Primarily used by totalitarian regimes to reinforce power, ‘wooden language refers to stereotypical expressions created on the spot’ (Slama-Cazacu, 2010: 317) or clichés composed of real words with twisted meanings that are overused to signal support for the regime. In fact, ‘numerous clichés were learned by heart, in order “not to make mistakes”’ (Slama-Cazacu, 2010: 318, my translation). ‘Romanian journalists could not and did not develop an approach and style separate from the one imposed upon them by the communist regime’ (Gross: 1996, 27).

December 1989 marked the fall of Communism in Romania, an event that also significantly impacted media channels. The first thing most media outlets rushed to change was their name, whereas their format or editorial teams remained largely the same.

Scântea, the official newspaper of the Romanian Communist Party, appeared on the morning of December 22nd in its regular format; however,

by 6 pm, that day, only a few hours after the Ceausescu flew out of Bucharest, the new, one page newspaper, hit the streets. It was now called, *Scântea Poporului* (*The People’s Spark*). (Gross, 1996: 40)

This edition contained no news, but rather a selection of international reactions to Romania’s

events (Gross, 1996: 40). Several days later, the newspaper changed its name again to *Adevărul*.

ROMANIAN MEDIA IN THE NINETIES

Raluca Petre described the new titles of Romanian media from the beginning of the nineties as ‘shaped by the mindsets of actors who were driven by two sets of beliefs’ (Petre 2012: 107). One belief focused on a powerful type of mass communication, ‘derived from the domesticated Soviet model’ (Petre 2012: 107), while the other emphasized the media’s link with politics, manifesting ‘either as “organ of” or as totally against the one in power, the “anti” position’ (Petre 2012: 107). As pointed out by scholars, most Romanian journalists preferred the polemical approach (Coman, 2003: 73).

In terms of writing techniques, ‘the “wooden” quality nurtured by the Communist system’ (Gross, 1996: 40) remained a central feature of post-Communist media, which was intent on criticizing everyone, a

philosophy which was to carry Romanian journalism away from reporting towards subjective, polemical, argumentative presentation of selected happenings, ideas, sources and their words. (Gross, 1996: 42)

At the beginning of 1996, Romania had approximately two to three times as many publications as in 1989 (Gross, 1999: 101). During these early post-Revolution years – often ‘regarded as “the romantic period” of the media’ (Petre, 2012: 117) – a significant number of journalists were hired by new media outlets despite having no journalistic training or education, and these newly-minted professionals ‘because of their lack of formal training, were quick to embrace the argument of their talent’ (Petre, 2012: 117). During the first two years of the decade, from 1990 to 1992, Romanian print media reached the height of its growth (in terms of

number of publications and printing volumes); however, this peak was immediately followed by a sharp decline: ‘after 1992 some weekly publications disappeared altogether, and others turned into tabloids’ (Coman, 2003: 78, my translation).

In his analysis of Romanian post-Communist media, Mihai Coman identified several specific traits that defined the media during the early post-Revolution years: it served as proof of freedom of speech. It was popular and public-oriented, as well as heterogenic, mimetic in terms of identity, and open to employing a young workforce with limited experience. It tended to avoid public responsibilities; it struggled with a lack of credibility; and it embraced the tabloid approach (Coman, 2003: 69). Each of these traits has influenced Romanian media discourse. However, in terms of transition to digital journalism, the three core characteristics that had a significant impact were heterogeneity, the mimetic nature, and the tabloid tendencies.

In print media, in the same publication, the vision and style of news media meets the vision and style of the tabloid, and elements of opinion journalism (even propaganda) are combined with features of unbiased news reporting. (Coman, 2003: 68, my translation)

The scholar emphasized that the tabloid approach infiltrating the media was not a ‘Romanian exception’, but a stage in a historical process observed in other countries as well (Coman, 2003: 68).

DIGITAL TRANSITION OF ROMANIAN MEDIA

The digital transition of Romanian media began in the nineties with *Evenimentul zilei*, the first Romanian tabloid and the first print newspaper to establish an online presence. This newspaper, which influenced Romanian media by

promoting soft news (Coman, 2003), launched its website in 1996 (Ulmanu, 2011, in Sălcudean, 2015: 60). The migration to online formats unfolded in several stages, beginning in 2000 with the launch of *revistapresei.ro* – known today as *Hotnews.ro* – the first exclusively online newspaper (Bader & Sîrb, 2021: 22). In the initial stage, although most of the print media also maintained a website, the content was identical across both formats – ‘the same titles, the same photos, endless chunks of text’ (Sălcudean, 2015: 64, my translation). Another significant milestone in the digital migration of Romanian media occurred between 2008 and 2010. Simona Bader and Corina Sîrb have identified two main drivers for this transition: the economic crisis of 2008–2010 and shifts in media consumer behavior (Bader & Sîrb, 2021: 23). Between 2010 and 2011, several national print newspaper editions closed – *Gardianul* (6th of January 2010), *Ziua* (7th of January), *Gândul* (April 2011). Following a brief online presence, both *Ziua* and *Gardianul* eventually shut down their digital editions (Bader & Sîrb, 2021: 23).

The impact of economic crises on the Romanian media was also highlighted in the report *Mapping Digital Media: Romania*, published in 2010 by the Open Society Foundations:

Romania was hit very hard by the economic crisis of 2008–2009, which slowed the remarkable growth of Romania’s television, print and online sectors over the previous decade, especially in 2001–2004. (Open Society Foundations, 2010: 6)

METHODOLOGY

The present article aims to illustrate how socio-economic factors and the transition to digital platforms have impacted the Romanian news writing style. The analysis takes into consideration the following characteristics of the Romanian

media, which we believe influence the framing of Romanian news writing style: the absence of a standardized stylebook at the national level or of individual stylebooks recognized by Romanian media outlets, and the evolving identification of publications as either quality or tabloid outlets over time.

Given that the existing literature primarily focuses on comparative approaches across different Romanian media outlets, I considered that maintaining a focus on a single newspaper would help avoid variations specific to differing writing styles among publications and offer a more focused perspective that complements existing comparative analyses. This study explores how writing styles in hard news articles change when moving from print to digital platforms.

We selected *Adevărul* as the target outlet for our qualitative analysis, as it has been consistently identified as a quality newspaper over the years. Therefore, any observations regarding variations in writing style are likely to be more representative. The corpus used in this article consists of 50 news articles published in *Adevărul*, available in both print and digital editions. The texts were first identified in the print editions, as part of my doctoral research, based on the following criteria: the article had to be of small dimensions (no more than 2,500 characters), address a topic specific to hard news (politics, economics, or current events), and be published in the January editions during the 2000–2020 timeframe. Out of the 200 news articles identified in print, I was able to locate 50 in the digital archive, having identified at least one item per year, with the earliest digital version published in 2002.

DIGITAL TRANSITION OF NEWS ARTICLES IN ADEVĂRUL

Using the corpus of media content compiled for this article, I have identified two key moments that illustrate the digital transition of news articles

in *Adevărul*. Within the first decade of the study period – that is, 2000 to 2010 – news articles were initially published in the print edition and subsequently uploaded to the website later that same day, as evidenced by the publication dates included on the website. For example, the article *Trei hoți de benzină – găsiți morți într-un bazin, la Arpechim Pitești* [Three gasoline thieves – found dead in a tank at Arpechim Pitești], was published in print on January 3rd, 2002, and then uploaded online that same day at 9 pm. A similar pattern occurs with another article, dated January 4th, 2006 – *H5N1 rezistă la tratament* [H5N1 has developed treatment resistance] – which appeared in print and online on the same day, with the online version published at 9 pm. This practice – publishing news first in print and then online by the end of the day – continued until 2010. As far as the format was concerned, the only notable difference between the two versions was that the online text duplicated its first two lines without using any distinctive marks or proper punctuation, while the remainder of the article was presented as a single paragraph. To illustrate, below are the contents of the piece dated January 4th, 2006. Both the print and digital versions of the text bear the same title.

The print version of the news article read as follows:

În Vietnam au apărut două cazuri fatale de infecție cu virusul H5N1, asociate cu rezistența virusului la Tamiflu. Aceste cazuri, chiar dacă nu reprezintă o surpriză pentru specialiști, au întărit ideea că virusul își poate dezvolta rezistența în timp, chiar și în fața dozelor crescute de medicație. Din fericire, pentru prima oară în ultimii 20 de ani, gripa umană a ocolit Europa în luna decembrie, neînregistrându-se nici un caz de gripă pe continent.
[Vietnam has experienced two fatalities attributed to the H5N1 virus, which is believed to have developed resistance to

Tamiflu. While these cases came as no surprise to experts, they did reinforce the notion that the virus could develop resistance over time – even when subjected to large doses of medication. Fortunately, for the first time in the past 20 years, human influenza did not reach Europe in December, as no cases were recorded on the continent.] (my translation)

Unlike the print version, the online text also includes a leading paragraph – separated from the main text by a blank line – that merely replicates the first two lines, ending abruptly without attempting to convey any meaning or add value:

În Vietnam au apărut două cazuri fatale de infecție cu virusul H5N1, asociate cu rezistența virusului la Tamiflu. Aceste cazuri, chiar dacă nu reprezintă o surpriză pentru specialiști, au întărit
[Vietnam has experienced two fatalities attributed to the H5N1 virus, which is believed to have developed resistance to Tamiflu. While these cases came as no surprise to experts, they did reinforce]. (my translation)

This formatting pattern is consistent across all the texts from the 2000-2010 decade included in our analysis, which suggests that, at that time, publishing news online was merely an extension of the print edition, and that editors showed little interest in optimizing the digital display.

During the subsequent decade – from 2010 to 2020 – differences between the print and online versions became more pronounced. As publication priorities shifted towards the digital realm, news began being published online a day before appearing in print. In most of the cases examined in our analysis, the online versions were longer, richer in information, and formatted to break the text into shorter paragraphs – an approach well suited to the digital environment. The differences

between the two versions became gradually more significant – what had started as slight formatting variations evolved into major differences in both titles and content by the end of that decade.

An example that clearly illustrates what news looked like during the first stage of the transition is the article titled,

Şefii companiilor de stat, din nou cu ‘salarii nesimţite’ [The heads of state-owned companies granted again ‘scandalous pay checks’] (my translation),

which was published online on January 5th, 2011, at 10 pm, and appeared in the print edition dated January 6th, with the same title and word count. Compared to news from the previous period, the online version is divided into two paragraphs, and the duplication of the first two lines has been eliminated.

Three years later, a news article published online on January 7th, 2014, at 11 am, and in the print edition the following day, reveals significant differences between the digital and print versions. The digital version, titled

Erdogan decapitează poliţia turcă. 350 de poliţişti, concediaţi după scandalul de corupţie în care sunt implicaţi mai mulţi foşti miniştri [Erdogan slashes Turkish police. 350 policemen dismissed after corruption scandal involving several former ministers] (my translation),

consists of 12 paragraphs and 418 words. In contrast, the print edition features the title *Erdogan decapitează poliţia [Erdogan slashes police]* (my translation), accompanied by a text of 42 words. Along the same lines, a news article published online on the 20th of January 2015, titled

A promis Guvernul că nu va creşte nicio taxă în 2015? Experţii şi analiştii BCR cred altceva [Has the Government promised not

to increase any taxes in 2015? BCR experts and analysts beg to differ] (my translation)

contains 445 words. The print edition of *Adevărul*, dated January 21st, 2015, presents the same information under the title, *BCR: Unele impozite ar putea creşte în 2015 [BCR: Some taxes might increase in 2015]* (my translation), with a significantly shorter text of 96 words.

The hereby analysis of the selected media content revealed that the increased focus on the digital environment that was central to the second decade led to a decline in the amount of news published in the print edition. By the end of that period, in 2020, print editions had come to include only a handful of news pieces, instead giving ample space to extensive articles featuring in-depth reporting and analyses. As print gradually gave way to digital, news articles as a journalistic genre followed suit, shifting from print to digital through a process of migration that was completed by 2020. This transition from print to digital not only marked the disappearance of news from print editions but also led to significant modifications in the content of journalistic texts. Although no major changes were observed in the topics covered by news items from *Adevărul* over the 20-year period analyzed, the digital environment introduced substantial transformations in writing style, which had a notable impact on the overall content.

CONTENT TRANSFORMATION. FROM TABLOID NEWS TO EMOTION- DRIVEN ENGAGEMENT

The process of tabloidization has been thoroughly documented as a feature of Romanian news, influenced by socio-cultural historical shifts. Another contributing factor, the report *Mapping Digital Media: Romania* notes, was the country's economic struggles, because of which 'investment in good-quality news and debate programs has fallen over the past five years'

(Open Society Foundations, 2010: 6). Furthermore, the shift towards tabloidization was not unique to Romania but reflected a broader international trend. Research in communication and media studies has shown that news outlets follow similar trends even in countries with stronger democratic media, a shift brought about by the transition to digital content. Although the increase in tabloidization is specific to Romanian media, including within the quality press, international comparative assessments suggest that tabloidization is a broader effect of the digital environment.

In an assessment of British media and the impact of the internet on journalism, James Curran and Jean Seaton showed that between 1970 and 1980 the competition between the publications generated ‘a number of well-publicised newspaper excesses’ (Curran & Seaton, 2010: 96) and that ‘the same competitive dynamic prevailed in the 2000s, and produced predictable results’ (Curran & Seaton, 2010: 96). They further identified that ‘the tabloid approach led to ever more inventive ways of arousing indignation’ (Curran & Seaton, 2010: 96), noting that fear and anger became primary means of engaging the British public. The same emotion-driven engagement was observed in Romanian digital news in an analysis of online news from 2018 and 2019 carried out by Simona Bader and Corina Sîrb. According to the conclusion of their research, ‘Romanian digital media relies more on a rhetoric of fear, conflict and panic’ (Bader & Sîrb, 2021: 72, my translation). The two scholars emphasized that the rhetoric of Romanian media was more conflict-oriented than ever before, regardless of the topic presented or the publication addressing it (Bader & Sîrb, 2021: 72). Along the same lines, Dolors Palau-Sampio offers an analysis of ‘press metamorphosis in the digital context’ centered on *El País* – a major Spanish newspaper – in which she argues that the transition to the online shows ‘commitment to tabloidization, with anecdotal,

lifestyle or curiosity content, while so-called hard news is absent’ (Palau-Sampio, 2016: 63).

Consistent with this focus on eliciting the reader’s emotional engagement, the examples included in the research corpus show a tendency to emphasize negative information, often presented so as to produce a stronger impact, across a wide range of topics that include crime, institutional and governmental inefficiencies, and negative economic news.

To illustrate this point, two news items that were published both in print and online can be considered here. The first article – published January 8th, 2007 – appeared in print under the title *Primii infractori români, extrădați după integrare* [First Romanian criminals expelled after EU accession] (my translation), whereas the online headline read *Ordonanța ‘Mailat’ își dovedește ineficiența* [‘Mailat’ Decree proves inefficient] (my translation).¹ The second example – a social-news story exposing public-system deficiencies – ran online on January 23rd, 2018, as *O nouă ‘modă’: ferestrele de termopan în spatele cărora se află un zid* [‘Trend alert’: double-pane windows installed in front of walls] (my translation), and in print the following day (January 24th), under the more sedate title, *O nouă metodă: termopan în fața ferestrelor zidite* [New method emerges: double-pane glass for windows with a wall behind] (my translation). These examples chart the progression of tabloidization: the online version’s use of ‘trend’ instead of the print version’s ‘method’ leverages emotional engagement, underscoring the increasingly heavy-handed reliance on sensational rhetoric over time.

¹ *Mailat* refers to Romulus Mailat, a Romanian citizen who was sentenced to life imprisonment in Italy in 2009 for the rape and murder of an Italian citizen. The case received widespread media coverage in both Italy and Romania, prompting public debate on issues related to immigration and the media’s influence on public perception.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

As demonstrated by the qualitative analysis of the content in our selected news corpus, the findings support existing theoretical propositions, illustrating how the shift toward digital media has contributed to the increasing tabloidization of Romanian journalism – a genre that has historically not been strictly factual. This trend aligns with broader international developments in online journalism. The study indicates a noticeable departure from fact-based reporting, with a growing emphasis on eliciting emotional engagement from readers. Consequently, traditional news and informative journalism, as defined in scholarly literature, appear to be losing ground, while the media environment is becoming increasingly social and less focused on delivering factual information. Given the current challenges faced by the media in maintaining public attention, future research would benefit from a broader diachronic analysis of journalistic texts. Such an investigation could help determine whether—and in what ways—writing techniques influence the evolving relationship between the media and its audience.

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