



# Central European Journal of Communication

Scientific Journal of the Polish Communication Association

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## Table of Contents

- 192** *Editors' Introduction*  
Márton Demeter  
and Agnieszka Stepińska
- 195** *Social Media News:  
A Comparative Analysis  
of the Journalistic Uses of Twitter*  
Rossella Rega
- 217** *War or Peace Journalism? Study  
of Media Coverage by Russian  
Media Outlets of the Trade War  
Between China and The Usa*  
Viktor Tuzov
- 237** *Media Exposure to Conspiracy  
vs. Anti-conspiracy Information.  
Effects on the Willingness  
to Accept a COVID-19 Vaccine*  
Raluca Buturoiu, Georgiana Udrea,  
Alexandru Cristian Dumitrache  
and Nicoleta Corbu
- 259** *Exploring Visual Culture  
of COVID-19 Memes: Russian  
and Chinese Perspectives*  
Olga V. Smirnova, Alexandre  
P. Lobodanov, Galina V. Denissova,  
Anna A. Gladkova, Olga V. Sapunova  
and Anastasia L. Svitich
- 287** *The Populist Dimension  
of Mediated Discourses About  
Corruption in Romania*  
Delia Cristina Balaban, Mihnea  
S. Stoica, Hanna Orsolya Vincze  
and Iulia Medveschi
- 305** *The Mass Media's Systemic  
Contribution to Political  
Transformation:  
The Coverage of the 1956 Uprising  
in Hungarian Print Media  
(June 1988–June 1989)*  
Indira Dupuis
- 321** *Adolescents on YouTube: Gender  
Differences Regarding the Videos  
They Upload and Watch*  
Rebeca Suárez-Álvarez,  
Antonio García-Jiménez  
and Manuel Montes-Vozmediano
- 343** *The Age of Algorithms*  
Interview with Lev Manovich
- 350** *Book Reviews*
- 364** *Events*

# Editors' Introduction

Despite its clear focus on the Central and Eastern European region, *Central European Journal of Communication* (CEJC) has been a very diverse journal not just in terms of the geographical composition of its authors, but also in terms of methodologies and topics. With this, the journal chose to follow the path of internationalization and inclusion, not the seclusion policy. Moreover, it presents itself as an international, not a local journal, while located at the CEE region. In the last ten years, CEJC published papers by authors from almost 30 different countries. There is a broad set of research methodologies, theories, and approaches represented in the journal. This present issue offers a clear impression of this diversity as it contains papers from three different world regions, including both Eastern and Western Europe and Asia.

The seven original articles published in CEJC 2021 Fall issue offers a vast variety of topics and a broad range of perspectives and angles. Moreover, there is a great diversity in countries where the authors of this issue live and work, e.g. Romania, Italy, Spain, Russia, Hungary, and Hong Kong. Although the spectrum of topics and perspectives presented in the issue is comprehensive, they all address important scholarly issues and phenomena related to political communication, journalism, and the role of traditional and online media in citizens' everyday life.

Rosella Rega from the University of Siena (Italy) investigates media organizations' strategies to adapt to the new media ecology in which Twitter is renewing traditional news-production routines. In her study on journalistic uses of Twitter she identifies two main strategies: a traditional approach aimed at one-way news dissemination and a journalistic model that recasts the relationship with the audience and uses Twitter as a community building tool. A comparative analysis of Twitter uses by newspapers in 31 countries revealed that the ability to manage the structural elements of the platform is widespread among media organizations. Concurrently, the relational strategy, i.e. the investment in community-building, although less widespread, is present in many countries and increases user involvement.

Journalism is also at the center of a study by Victor Tuzov (City University of Hong Kong). This study is devoted to analysing the Russian media coverage of the trade war between China and the USA based on content analysis and the implication of structural differences existing in the current Russian media system into war and peace journalism paradigms. In his paper, Tuzov provides empirical data and examines factors behind such differences between media

coverage. Findings his study revealed that the type of media influences the dominant media frame: while the federal and traditional media outlets refer mainly to peace journalism type, the commercial and especially the new media outlets lean more towards the war frame of journalism.

Raluca Buturoiu, Georgiana Udrea, Alexandru Cristian Dumitrache, and Nicoleta Corbu from the National University of Political Studies and Public Administration in Bucharest (Romania) examine how exposure to conspiracy narratives versus information that counter these narratives influence people's willingness to get vaccinated. The research showed that exposure to factual information related to COVID-19 vaccines meant to debunk conspiracy theories leads to a higher willingness to vaccinate. Also, Buturoiu and her colleagues' study revealed young, educated Romanians' perception of how different categories of 'others' are influenced by conspiracy theories on this topic, and, therefore, more prone to exhibit hesitancy towards COVID-19 vaccination.

The pandemic circumstances also inspired a study conducted by a team of Russian scholars from Lomonosov Moscow State University: Olga V. Smirnova, Alexandre P. Lobodanov, Galina V. Denissova, Anna A. Gladkova, Olga V. Sapunova, and Anastasia L. Svitich. Their paper explores COVID-19 related Internet memes and treats them as samples of creolized text in a study of how ethnic and cultural peculiarities of memes are perceived by representatives of two radically different cultural paradigms: the Russians and Chinese. The study showed that the social and culture-specific components mostly contribute to forming the opinion of the meme and its appreciation.

Delia Cristina Balaban, Mihnea S. Stoica, Iulia Medveschi, and Orsolya Hanna Vincze from the Babeş-Bolyai University Cluj-Napoca (Romania) investigates the populist elements of political discourses articulating the subject of "corruption" in the context of the attempts to change the anti-corruption legislation by the Romanian government in 2017–2018. Based on an extensive content analysis of traditional media and social media, authors were able to identify elements of populist political communication both in the content and the style of corruption-discourses and reflect the polarization of the Romanian media system.

In her paper, Indira Dupuis from the Free University Berlin (Germany) aims at contributing to the discussion of the role of the mass media system in political transformation. For this purpose, Dupuis examines Hungarian media coverage of the 1956 uprising between June 1956 and July 1959. The study results clearly show that Hungary's leading print media, *Népszabadság* and *Magyar Nemzet*, despite being still controlled by the government at that time, acted as professional mediators and had a systemic stabilizing effect on Hungarian society in this conflict.

Rebeca Suárez-Álvarez, Antonio García-Jiménez, Manuel Montes-Vozmediano from the Rey Juan Carlos University in Madrid (Spain) examines gender differences

regarding the videos adolescents upload and watch on YouTube. Although the study was conducted in the specific context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the findings provide a more general picture of the young generation's online media activities.

In this issue we also present an interview with Professor Lev Manovich, who recently published a book entitled *Cultural Analytics* (London: MIT Press Cambridge 2020). Launching a new book provided an opportunity to discuss with its author how the media have been changing since 2001 when Manovich published *The Language of New Media*; this book is now regarded as one of the most influential foundations for new media research.

We sincerely hope that our readers will find valuable and important insights in the published articles as they address questions directly related to profession as communication scholars and our everyday lives. We are in the middle of the global pandemic, and the last two years have revealed that communication plays a crucial role in emergency management. Besides communication scholars, different agents of the public sphere – from politicians to journalists – aim to find ways to understand and handle the changed circumstances, and, as the current issue of CEJC shows, in a complex society, solutions are always intersectional. Our authors show that many separate social phenomena from politics through media economy to vaccination campaigns are deeply interwoven, and the thread that connects them is nothing but communication.

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# Social Media News: A Comparative Analysis of the Journalistic Uses of Twitter

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**ABSTRACT:** The article investigates media organizations' strategies to adapt to the new media ecology in which Twitter is renewing traditional news-production routines. Two main strategies are identified: a traditional approach aimed at one-way news dissemination, and a journalistic model that recasts the relationship with the audience and uses Twitter as a community-building tool. It has been assumed that media outlets' endeavors to gain centrality in the information system are associated with their ability in using the appropriate communication tools of Twitter and the implementation of strategies based on interaction with users. Based on a comparative analysis of Twitter uses by newspapers in 31 countries, the study shows that the ability to manage the structural elements of the platform is widespread among media organizations. Concurrently, the relational strategy, i.e. the investment in community building, although less widespread, is present in many countries and leads to an increased level of user involvement.

**KEYWORDS:** Twitter, social media, digital journalism, news organizations, participatory journalism.

## INTRODUCTION

The rapid spread of social media among information professionals has modified traditional news-making production routines and practices, posing new challenges for mainstream media organizations. The latter have been forced by the shift of readers to social media sites to search for new business models and to identify editorial growth strategies allowing a more substantial use of new digital platforms. Research in this area has found that the introduction of such tools into the ordinary practices of news production may constitute a useful resource for attracting new audiences by offering a wide range of content and news. Twitter, a platform characterized by high journalistic suitability (Hermida, 2010), can be considered an important medium through which media organizations can spread and become more visible, thus reinforcing their brand. However,

the ability of such organizations to adapt to the new digital environment has not been rapid and easy everywhere. Indeed, their engagements with this new reality immediately highlighted the difficulty of defining and managing an effective strategy for a social media presence. In many cases this led to conservative reactions, such as choosing to cling as long as possible to traditional journalistic practices and preferring to “underuse” the microblog (Boyle & Zuegner, 2012; Herrera & Requejo, 2012). Evidence of this “underuse” is found in the choice of many news outlets to employ Twitter as an additional space for spreading their content in accordance with the one-way and self-referential communication model, which has a poor performance in terms of audience engagement (Ju et al., 2014; Messner et al., 2012). In other words, although Twitter offers unique interactive features, which allow for a two-way model of communication, the practical exploitation of these seems so far to be limited. Indeed, the use of Twitter as a tool for increasing audience participation and loyalty is a goal which media in many countries have yet to reach.

In light of this scenario of “partial” adoption of the medium, this study aims to identify the communication strategies which media organizations around the world have developed on Twitter, and to measure their impact on audience engagement. The study conducted comparative analysis of the uses of Twitter by media organizations in 31 countries (in North America and Europe, plus Australia). The article discusses the relationship between the communication strategy developed by news organizations on Twitter and user reactions (retweets, replies and likes). The basic idea is that a model which uses the microblog as a community-building tool will gain more grassroots appreciation (from users), thus increasing the visibility of the news outlet.

The following section presents a theoretical framework of the comparative studies on journalism and the use of Twitter by media outlets, followed by an explanation of the research design and methodology. The main results will then be highlighted and discussed, and some useful indications for further analysis will be suggested in the concluding remarks.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

The development of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) and the spread of social media among information professionals have transformed media organizations and redefined relations between citizens and media, raising new challenges for journalistic systems.

In this regard, studies that have updated the diffusion innovation theory in order to explain the adoption of social media by news organizations (Ekdale et al., 2015) distinguish between three interconnected waves of change: (i) technology



use, (ii) audience relationship, and (iii) professional culture. While the first wave is relatively simple, as the need to adapt journalistic practices to new platforms and the advantages of doing so are shared convictions, the second encounters strong resistance from journalists and media organizations. Indeed, it requires a reformulation of their relationship with audiences, who become both critics and partners in content production (von Nordheim et al., 2018). The third wave, which includes a reconfiguration of the professional culture of news organizations and experimentation with new business models, is far from completion. The main challenge for news organizations is now the need to reinforce relationships with users.

New media with the technical aid of digital culture enables open participation, which requires openly diffused, rather than centrally controlled, content. However, this is an issue in which theoretical statements often depart from empirical evidence. For instance, the comparative analysis by Humprecht and Esser (2018) of 48 websites of news organizations in France, Italy, Germany, UK, USA and Switzerland shows that their investment in bottom-up participation promotion is currently very poor, despite their statements about the importance of participation. Crucially the same results are found in web-based outlets, which place a high value on participation in order to present an alternative to the mainstream media (Humprecht & Esser, 2018). Overall, although new opportunities for interaction have sometimes led to innovative forms of collaboration between journalists and audience communities (Hermida, 2012), tension has grown between the ethics of open participation and the sense of loss of control experienced by journalists (Lewis, 2012). When trained for a traditional newsroom culture, journalists tend to struggle to adopt one of open participation (Lewis & Westlund, 2015). This tension can also be found among social media and newsroom editors (Pak, 2019).

If we focus our attention on social media, the issue of user/reader involvement becomes central, and it is widely recognized that the online visibility of news organization content is highly dependent on audience activation (Christin, 2020). For example, news can quickly spread throughout a network “if many users (nodes) share (distribute) the item” (Welbers & Opgenhaffen, 2018, p. 3). Indeed, news users (Larsson, 2018) are constantly engaged in the information process, and involved in “gatewatching” activities (Bruns, 2015) and the co-production and dissemination of news (Hermida, 2010). The relevance of journalistic content is therefore determined by the magnitude of the flow and the degree of intensity of online discussion produced by the news content.

Twitter and Facebook in particular, whose affordances increase their resources for engagement and facilitate audience participation (Papacharissi, 2016), played a salient role in connecting news outlets with increasingly participatory online audiences (García-Perdomo et al., 2017), thus renewing journalistic news values

and practices. After the introduction of these platforms, the majority of news organizations created social media accounts and integrated them into their websites, “making them part of the news experience” (Al Rawi, 2017, p. 706). But the most important issue is how they use these tools. Acquiring a social media account is pointless if the benefits it offers are not fully exploited. In this regard, most studies examining news outlet social media accounts reveal the traditional pattern of the one-way distribution model (or broadcast model) (García-Perdomo et al. 2017; Malik & Pfeffer, 2016). This is a strategy that dominated the initial phase of social media adoption (Hermida, 2013) but still seems to prevail in many cases for the purpose of directing traffic to the news outlet’s own website (Lasorsa et al., 2012; Malik & Pfeffer, 2016). The predominance of the broadcast model and the lack of interactivity with audiences have also been highlighted by several studies looking at newspapers and national, regional and local television news organizations (Armstrong & Gao, 2010), local television (Greer & Ferguson, 2011), news agencies (Bloom et al., 2016), and global media organizations (Malik & Pfeffer, 2016). In short, the use of social media as an additional news distribution platform in accordance with a one-way communication model seems to be prevalent. However, given the huge amount of information available on social media, simply publishing news on Twitter is insufficient to compete successfully for the limited attention of users. The type of content published can make the difference (Pak, 2019), as can the use of specific features of social media platforms that allow interaction with users and increase their interest and reactions. Users can be active participants in the diffusion process because their engagement with news content (i.e. retweets, replies and favorites) makes it visible to their networks (Welbers & Opgenhaffen, 2018), thereby promoting its propagation throughout the web (Hermida et al., 2012).

Regarding the uses of Twitter by media organizations, the main goal of the valorization of participatory and relational aspects is not to create a proper conversation, as this is not an objective for media outlets. The aim is to use the microblog as a community tool to organize readers’ involvement in the editorial process (Hermida, 2013). This is an approach that presupposes a certain degree of familiarity with Twitter and with the use of its technical features for community building. Content posted online is not merely a copy of the online edition but is an ad-hoc version, which takes the specificity of the media environment into account (Rega, 2017). Following this strategy, the factors that enable media organizations to enhance their communication activities are the specific “structural features” of Twitter (hashtag, hyperlink and mention), and more importantly, the management of the “relational features” (retweets, replies and favorites) that makes it possible to express interest about the content published by users and to interact with them.

Skillfulness, i.e. the capacity to use the various features of the platform effectively, has become increasingly central after changes in the timeline construction algorithm<sup>1</sup>. This is now based on the relevance of sources and interactions generated by news in terms of received retweets, replies and favorites. The results of a comparative study by Engesser and Humprecht (2015), which analyzed 38 media organizations in five countries (France, Germany, Italy, UK and USA), are worth noting in this regard. They reveal a clear predominance of the quantitative approach (the quantity of published posts) over skillfulness (competence in using Twitter) and show that the two approaches are mutually exclusive. Comparative research carried out in the USA by Wang (2016) examined 20 television programs to determine the relationship between Twitter use and the level of program appreciation. Three specific metrics for comparing media outlet communication strategies were introduced, and an interaction-based strategy (involving a conversational use of Twitter based on retweets, replies, and tweets with mentions) emerged as the most effective way to increase program appreciation. This is an important confirmation of the crucial role that the interactional model plays for media outlets. Similarly, a study on the uses of Twitter by 28 Italian media organizations (Bracciale & Martella, 2016) concluded that although the broadcast use predominates, a dialogical strategy is more effective in terms of audience engagement.

When examining recent changes in the journalistic environment, a comparative analysis of different countries makes it possible to trace those common constants that traverse diverse contexts and to identify factors underlying the differences. In this regard, the text by Hallin and Mancini 'Comparing Media Systems' (2004), is an indispensable reference. The authors provided the basis for comparative research by analyzing interconnections between political systems in North America and Western Europe. Almost 17 years after its publication, many scholars have tried to readapt the models of journalism (Liberal, Democratic Corporatist and Polarized Pluralist) to transformations of contemporary societies and the need to review and update the analysis dimensions of media systems has been widely stressed (Brüggemann et al., 2014; Mattoni & Ceccobelli, 2018; Hallin & Mancini, 2017; Norris, 2009). Indeed, the study needs to be expanded beyond the original 18 countries, and indicators and analysis dimensions need to be updated to consider the transformations of the media ecosystem<sup>2</sup>. The theoretical framework of the study by Hallin and Mancini (2004) was based on a pre-digital context, whereas today's norms, actors and digital media logics

1 Twitter does not furnish details on its algorithms of timeline construction, but since February 2016 the visualization of tweet flows has been modified. It is based by default not on chronological order but on interaction factors.

2 The dimensions of analysis originally considered were political parallelism, media markets, journalistic professionalism and state intervention (Hallin & Mancini, 2004).

are intertwined giving a prominent role to non-institutional actors. In order to build on Hallin and Mancini's (2004) work and update their framework, this study was carried out on how media outlets are using Twitter to renew their news production practices and regain centrality in the information system.

## **HYPOTHESES AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

Twitter uses by media organizations have been linked to two main communication strategies: (i) a more traditional approach, aimed at one-way dissemination of news (Hermida, 2013), and (ii) a two-way communication approach, to reinforce participation and the sense of community among audiences (Meyer & Tang, 2015). Most studies agree that media organizations tend not to exploit social media to their full potential (Herrera & Requejo, 2012; Meyer & Tang, 2015) but limit themselves to using a broadcast communication model (Malik & Pfeffer, 2016). This scenario is comparable to the first stages of website use by news organizations, when paper format content was repeated online as "show-ware" (Singer, 2001). Regarding audience engagement, e.g., sharing behavior (retweets) or users' ratings (favorites/likes), adopting this model of Twitter use has proved ineffective because it is unable to stimulate either interest or reaction from users (Boyle & Zuegner, 2012; Greer & Ferguson, 2011; Ju et al., 2014). In other words, the regular publication of news content using a one-way approach is not enough to strengthen the visibility of the news organization in information flows. Efforts to boost listening activities and interaction with users are also needed in order to stimulate sharing and liking behavior. The valorization of participatory and relational features of the platform through the adoption of audience interaction-based strategies represents a key factor for media organizations. First, it fosters user ranking and sharing behavior, thus improving news media visibility (Wang, 2016), and secondly it increases loyalty to and trust in the brand, resulting in an increase in the number of readers (Welbers & Opgenhaffen, 2018).

For these reasons it has been assumed that when an interaction-based approach to Twitter use is predominant – characterized by an effective use of the relational features (retweets, replies and favorites) which encourages user interest and involvement – better results are achieved in terms of content engagement (retweets and favorites received). The news outlets with the highest levels of audience engagement are those that make targeted efforts in community-building practices (Meyer & Tang, 2015) and pay particular attention to content production and its publishing platform.

These latter considerations open the way for the following hypothesis:

- The interaction-based strategy of media outlets – characterized by dialogue and interaction with users (news outlet retweets, replies, and favorites<sup>3</sup>) – has a greater capacity for audience engagement (user retweets, replies, and favorites received) than the broadcast communication model (frequency-based strategy).

Based on this hypothesis, the study sets out to answer the following research questions:

- (RQ1) What communication strategies have been implemented by media organizations to manage their presence on Twitter?
- (RQ2) What effects do these strategies have on audiences in terms of engagement?

## RESEARCH STRATEGY, DATA, AND DESIGN

The study examines media organizations' Twitter accounts, identified on their websites, from 31 different countries (in Europe<sup>4</sup> and North America, plus Australia). The five media organizations with the highest circulation were selected from each country, based on a list from the World Association of Media Organizations and News Publishers (WAN-IFRA, 2017). The rationale for this choice was the assumption that these organizations would have the most modern outlook and be the most skilled and invested in ICT. In some countries, fewer than five media organizations were examined because none of the others had a Twitter account.

The study was conducted on both profiles and timelines<sup>5</sup> of 133 active accounts, namely those that published at least one post during the analysis period of 2 July 2017 to 2 August 2017 (Appendix 1). A total of 232,012 posts – tweets, retweets and replies – produced by the accounts were downloaded.

On the basis of previous findings (Bracciale & Martella, 2016; Engesser & Humprecht, 2015; Wang, 2016), media organizations' communication strategies on Twitter were operationalized through specific indicators regarding their activity on the platform. Each indicator (number of tweets, retweets etc.)

<sup>3</sup> The news outlet practices of retweeting, replying to and liking users' posts.

<sup>4</sup> Cyprus and Malta were excluded from the analysis because of their absence from the database (WAN-IFRA, 2017). In comparison with Hallin and Mancini's study (2004), other European countries and Australia were included in the analysis.

<sup>5</sup> The download of media outlets' timelines was conducted by the author using the Twitter REST API (<https://dev.twitter.com/rest/public>). Author would like to thank Roberta Bracciale for her assistance with data processing.

was normalized to create different indexes<sup>6</sup> able to identify variations on the strategies related to the use of the platform (Table 1). Because the variation of media organizations' tweeting strategies was skewed, a relative index based on the sample mean was created. This choice made it possible to quantify the patterns of each media organization by comparing it with the mean score of the organizations in each dimension.

**Table 1. Indexes of newspapers' communicative strategies**

n.	Index	Operational definition
1.	Tweet Index	Number of published tweets in relation to the sample average.
2.	Hashtag Index	Number of tweets with a #hashtag in relation to the sample average.
3.	Mention Index	Number of tweets with a @mention in relation to the sample average.
4.	Reply Index	Number of the account's replies in relation to the sample average.
5.	Retweet Index	Number of the account's retweets in relation to the sample average.
6.	Favorite Index	Number of the account's favorites in relation to the sample average.

Source: Author

In order to identify the communication strategies of the media organizations, the indexes of media organizations' tweeting habits were synthesized through a principal components analysis<sup>7</sup> (PCA) to reduce the number of variables. Factors extracted with the PCA were then set in relation to engagement indexes of Twitter users to verify which strategy implemented by media organizations was the most suitable for activating audiences. This was detected by using a Log-linear multiple regression model.

To enable the analysis to be carried out, engagement indicators of users' behavior were also normalized to create specific indexes that would consider variations in the effects produced by the adopted communication strategies. These engagement indexes were used as dependent variables (Table 2).

<sup>6</sup> Considering the power law distribution (skewed) characteristic of scale-invariant networks, it was considered preferable to normalize data using average ratios built on the registered average for each indicator in the sample. This procedure makes it possible to compare the media organizations' strategies, highlighting their habits in the uses of Twitter.

<sup>7</sup> PCA is a multivariate analysis technique used to summarize several analyzed cardinal variables in new dimensions, i.e. the principal components. The latter are mutually orthogonal, i.e. statistically independent, and express a linear combination of the starting variables. They reproduce the characteristics of the data set based on decreasing importance factors.

Table 2. Indexes of engagement of Twitter users

n.	Index	Operational definition
1.	Sharing Index	Number of received retweets in relation to the sample average.
2.	Ranking Index	Number of received favorites in relation to the sample average.

Source: Author

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The application of the PCA shows that the first two<sup>8</sup> factors are significant and can explain 52.1% of the total variance of differences among media organizations (Table 3). The first factor (31.8%) indicates the existence of a strategy strongly anchored to the relational dimension. This first component is, in fact, characterized by the presence of replies to other accounts (0.8), and retweets and favorites (0.7) produced by other users. These elements suggest a communication strategy that carefully monitors the conversational flow of the platform and actively intervenes in it. This first factor identifies the appropriation of Twitter and its potential for community building and can be called the “interaction” factor.

The second factor (20.3%) identifies the adoption of a more traditional communication model based on frequency of publication and use of platform features (#; @) which allow accounts to enter the communication flow or to attract users’ attention. The saturation produced by the tweeting and by the hashtagging index (0.8) is predominant in this component. However, the relational dimension of Twitter is still poorly used. Given these considerations, the second factor can be called the “exposure” of the media organization.

Regarding the first research question, the data show the presence of two main communication strategies among the media organizations analysed. On the one hand, there is a focus on public engagement through active participation in the life of the platform (interaction). In this case, Twitter is used to build relations with users aimed at listening and dialoguing (two-way communication). On the other, there is a strategy oriented to using the platform by maintaining a presence through the constant production of posts, including useful mentions and hashtags that enhance the media organizations’ visibility (one-way communication).

<sup>8</sup> The selection of the components for the analysis was based on the combination of various criteria: the Kaiser criteria (eigenvalue > 1); scree-test and cost-benefit analysis.

**Table 3. Matrix of components of media organizations’ communicative strategies**

	Components	
	1 (Interaction)	2 (Exposure)
Tweet Index	.250	.755
Hashtag Index	-.092	.762
Mention Index	.084	.546
Reply Index	.777	.121
Retweet Index	.681	.174
Favourite Index	.697	-.055

Source: Author.. Rotation method: Varimax with Kaiser normalization

The intersection of factors yields a typification of communication strategies based on the combination of factorial scores of the interaction and exposure components. Four different ideal types emerge: quadrant I, “networked”; quadrant II, “self-promoter”; quadrant III, “listless”; and quadrant IV, “connective” (Figure 1).

The positioning of the analyzed media organizations along the two factorial axes – based on their recorded average scores for the two factors of exposure (ordinate) and interaction (abscissa) – yields further insights.

The “networked” group (high exposure and high interaction) consists of those media organizations in which professionalization in the use of Twitter is mature and consolidated. This is the situation in many media outlets in Spain (El Mundo, MARCA, El Pais, AS), France (Le Figaro, Le Monde), Ireland (The Irish Times), United States (USA Today), United Kingdom (The Daily Mirror and the Sun) and the Netherlands (Volkskrant), followed by other media organizations in the first quadrant<sup>9</sup> (including Corriere della Sera, La Stampa and La Repubblica). High scores for both factors show that investment in community building (interaction) proceeds in conjunction with the capacity to manage elements related to the technical features of the microblog (exposure). Indeed, efforts to interact with users require overall skillfulness in recourse to Twitter by media outlets, which is reflected in the appropriate use of structural and relational elements. Regarding the three stages of the adoption of digital technologies mentioned above (Ekdale et al., 2015), in this case it seems that two waves of change were fulfilled: the first, which is related to technical appropriation, and the second, which concerns the redefinition of the relationship with audiences, considering them as partners to be engaged in the journalistic processes (von Nordheim et al., 2018). Moreover, the good performance of these media organizations seems to be in line with the levels of use of Twitter for news found in these countries,

<sup>9</sup> In order to make Figure 1 clearer, these and other labels (of news outlets) have been hidden.



and particularly in Spain, France, USA, UK and Ireland (Newman et al., 2017). At the same time, the decision to invest in social media as a journalistic tool may be taken by media organizations from countries whose professional cultures and journalistic traditions differ widely (e.g., Spanish polarized pluralism and American liberalism – see: Hallin & Mancini, 2004).

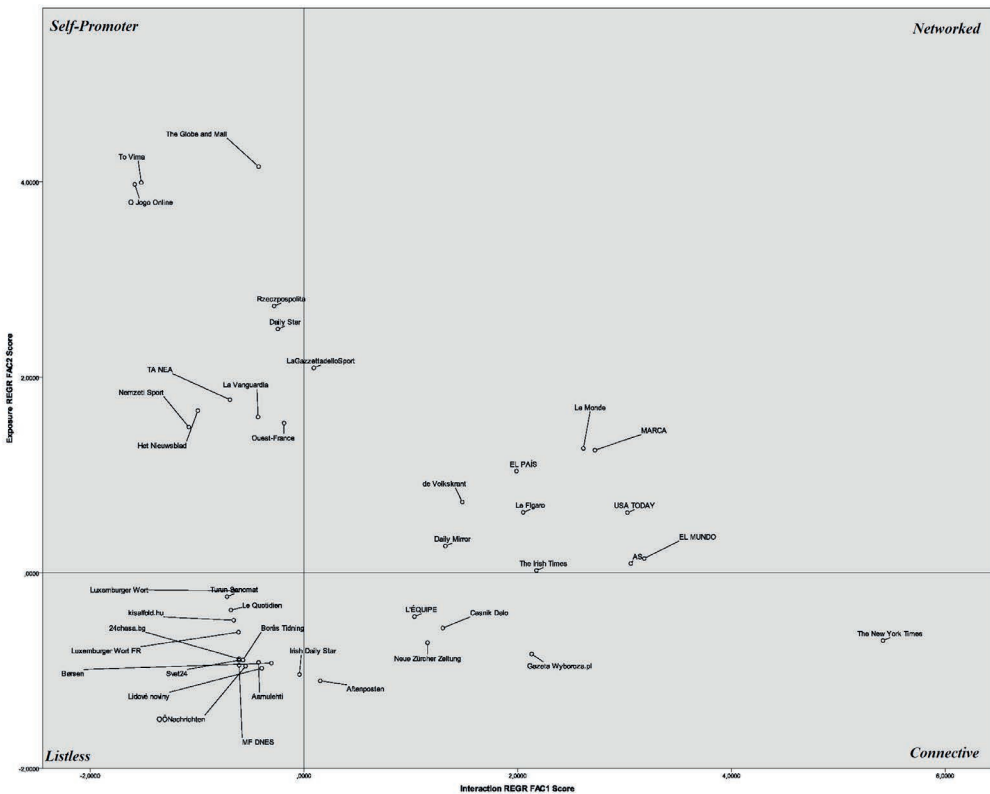
The “self-promoter” group (high exposure and low interaction) comprises those media organizations in which a one-way communication model prevails, along with a well-defined investment in exposure (frequency of publication and use of hashtags and mentions). In this case, the media organizations that stand out are the Canadian *The Globe and Mail*, the Portuguese *O Jogo Online*, and some media outlets in Greece (*To Vima*, *TA NEA*), Poland (*Rzeczpospolita*), UK (*Daily Star*) and Hungary (*Nemzeti Sport*). Even if in these cases the use of a strategy that takes advantage of the relational potential of the platform is not evident, the frequency of post publication and the habit of using suitable Twitter communication tools suggest a strategy that invests in the promotion and visibility of one’s own information content. In this group, the appropriation of Twitter by news organizations seems to be only partially complete: the technological adoption of this instrument (first wave) must be followed by a change in the relationship with social media users (second wave), which develops the capacity to involve and retain them through community building initiatives.

The “listless” group (low exposure and low interaction) comprises several media outlets from countries such as Luxembourg (*Luxemburger Wort*, *Luxemburger Wort FR*, *Le Quotidien*), Austria (*OÖNachrichten*), Hungary (*kisalfold.hu*), Czech Republic (*Blesk Zprávy*, *Deník.cz*, *Lidové noviny*, *MF DNES*), Bulgaria (*24chasa.bg*), Finland (*Aamulehti*, *Turun Sanomat*), Slovenia (*Primorske novice*, *Svet24*), and Estonia (*Eesti Päevaleht*, *Pärnu Postimees*). In these countries the journalistic appropriation of Twitter, and even the use of basic communication elements, seem to be provisional. Not only is the communication model prevalently one-way, there also seems to be a lack of publication activity and management of platform features. In other words, the adoption of Twitter seems still to be relatively unstructured, which is reflected by the fact that media organizations use their accounts mainly in an extemporaneous and casual manner. This group contains many organizations from Eastern European countries (Czech Republic, Bulgaria, Estonia and Slovenia), in which major political instability has had a negative impact on society, compromising the development of independent media and the stabilization of values and adequate professional cultures (Mancini, 2015).

Lastly, the “connective” group (low exposure and high interaction) is characterized by high investment in interaction and construction of a dialogical relation with readers, and low use of a self-promotion strategy. In this case, empirical evidence is scant because the relational approach to Twitter is rarely

disassociated from recourse to elements related to its features. In this quadrant are several Swiss media outlets (Neue Zürcher Zeitung, Südostschweiz and Tages-Anzeiger), and other media organizations such as Casnik Delo (Slovenia), Gazeta Wyborcza.pl (Poland), LA.lv (Latvia) and L'EQUIPE (France). The presence of the New York Times in this group (see Appendix 1) can be explained by its offline levels of authoritativeness, which ensure that its content is highly visible regardless of the absence of the structural elements that enhance the communication strategy (for example, it used only one hashtag during the analysis period). This finding is consistent with the results of the study by Engesser and Humprecht (2015), which shows that even though the New York Times maintains consistent publication activity on the platform, it does not resort to the inclusion, in tweets, of elements concerning the discursive structure of social media that are useful for strengthening the visibility of information content.

Figure 1. Media organizations' strategies on Twitter (projection of the most representative for each dimension by factors).



Source: Author

The aim of the second research question was to understand the effects and impact of the communication strategies of news outlets on user activation. A log-linear logistic regression<sup>10</sup> model was used to verify the effects of these strategies on the number of retweets and favorites received by the news outlets (Table 4).

The model applied to retweets explained 63% of the communication strategy variance of media organizations, and it showed that the adoption of an approach based on interaction results in a fivefold (390%) increase in the probability of receiving a retweet, whereas with the use of an exposure-based approach this probability is 3.5 times (250%) greater. A confirmation of the second hypothesis of this study is found in the fact that a strategy aimed at creating a dialogical relationship with users is more likely to involve them and to foster engagement behavior useful for increasing media organizations' visibility.

Similar results emerge from the regression carried out on the favorites, which explains 61% of the variance. The probability of receiving favorites is nearly five times greater in the case of interaction and nearly four times greater for exposure. However, in the latter case, it should be considered that the probability of receiving favorites could be explained by the presence of mentions on posts, as mentioned users may express their participation by liking the post.

Table 4. Factors predicting received retweet and favorite index

Predictor	Retweet Index		Favourite Index	
	Estimate $\beta$	$e^{\beta}$	Estimate $\beta$	$e^{\beta}$
Intercept	-2.951***	0.052	-2.9387***	0.052
Interaction Factor 1	1.592***	4.914	1.6070***	4.987
Exposure Factor 2	1.270***	3.563	1.3568***	3.883
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.632		0.610	
P	< 0		< 0	
N	127		133	

Significant codes: 0 '\*\*\*' 0.001 '\*\*' 0.01 '\*' 0.05 '.' 0.1 ' ' 1. Source: Author

<sup>10</sup> The multiple regression model was built using favorites and retweets as dependent variables, while the independent variables were the two PCA factors. Retweet variables were logarithmically transformed because distribution was skewed and there were several outliers because of the intrinsic characteristics of the scale invariant networks. The final log-linear regression model was:  $\log(Y_i) = \alpha + \beta X_i + \epsilon_i$ . To understand the effects, each predictor was transformed based on the formula  $e^{\beta}$ .

## CONCLUSIONS

This study has demonstrated that, about fifteen years after the emergence of Twitter, appropriation levels of the platform by media organizations varies from one country to another. Furthermore, it emphasizes some important differences compared to the past, related to the two main communication strategies in use. On the one hand, there is a media organization's capacity to manage the appropriate communication features and structural elements of the platform. This is related to its technical structure and distinctive affordances, which are aimed at increasing the visibility of posted content. On the other hand, there is the media organization's effort to manage the dialogical elements of Twitter, with the intention of strengthening the participation and 'sense of community' of its audiences. The first approach can be considered characteristic of the first phase of technological appropriation of the microblog. The large number of media organizations in the self-promoter group suggests a partial conclusion of this phase and a normalization process of the presence of the platform in everyday editorial activities. By contrast, the challenge today seems to be concentrated on the second approach, which aims to increase interaction with users.

This renewed focus opens the way to the second wave of changes, characterized by a use of Twitter which emphasizes the involvement of readers in journalistic processes (von Nordheim et al., 2018). A news organization, from this perspective, would become a sort of informative flow hub, interacting with users as an online conversation mediator, and fostering loyalty within the community (Holton et al., 2016).

Investment by media organizations in building an interactive process with audiences seems to be the rule in many Western European countries – such as Spain, UK, France and Ireland – and the USA. An exceptional position is represented by media organizations in the United States and Spain, particularly those that have been on Twitter longer (The New York Times, AS, El Mundo, Usa Today and Marca). These cases represent contexts in which traditional print journalism has been superseded, and in which social media have reinforced their role as important tools to drive on-site traffic, off-site reach and digital subscriptions (Cornia et al., 2018). From this perspective, Twitter is an optimal tool for news organizations that use it not only for organizing reader participation in editorial processes, but also “as a way to promote consumer loyalty, which can be monetized” (Revers, 2014, p. 17). Amid the crisis of the editorial market, professional and economic interests, namely public involvement and consumer loyalty, are mutually reinforced (Krebs & Lischka, 2019). Studies on this subject have clearly shown that the transition from “journalism as a product” to “journalism as a process”, based on the valorization of bottom-up contributions, has

a positive effect on both media organizations' centrality in information flows and business models (Moore & Hatcher, 2018).

However, this shift of perspective is, in many cases, far from complete. This is especially true in the case of media organizations in Eastern European countries, characterized by volatile political systems which negatively influence the media context. This prevents the establishment of consolidated professional practices (Mancini, 2015). In this framework, numerous media outlets, despite having opened a Twitter account, have not adopted a communication strategy that uses the platform to its full potential.

Overall, the analysis enables the study to highlight some novel features, such as the new awareness among information professionals of the importance of using the microblog, and of taking advantage of its social media potential to reinforce public engagement. Furthermore, the effects of this strategy on readers leave no room for uncertainties and confirm, in line with previous studies (Wang, 2016), that an approach oriented to listening and interacting with users significantly increases audience engagement. The logistic regressions demonstrate the success of the strategy aimed at interacting with audiences and activating participatory behavior in followers (e.g., increase of users' sharing and ranking of content posted by the media outlet). This increases the capacity of the media organization to gain centrality in online discussion networks. Thus, investment in interaction and community building is an essential component of media outlets' presence on Twitter.

Moreover, these results, in line with previous comparative studies, show that globalization and commercial and digital trends lead to hybridization among media systems (Mellado et al., 2017). This may explain why countries characterized by different journalistic traditions and professional cultures shared similar uses of Twitter (e.g., Spain, France, UK, USA and Ireland in the "networked" group).

Finally, while it is true that it is difficult to compare media organizations with so many differences, it must be underlined that this study is only a first step. Further investigation should be oriented on broadening the analysis to other contexts, and introducing other elements, such as the extent of media market development, the degree of state intervention and the level of journalistic professionalism, in order to identify their roles in determining different adoption modalities of the microblog.

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## APPENDIX 1 – AVERAGE INTERACTION AND EXPOSURE FACTORS BY MEDIA ORGANIZATIONS ON TWITTER

Media outlet	Nation	Online	Followers	Followings	Interaction FAC1	Exposure FAC2
Sydney Morning Herald	Australia	2008	690149	722	-0.23479	0.31456
The Daily Telegraph	Australia	2007	169575	14305	0.04317	0.2137
Herald Sun	Australia	2009	291078	34820	0.98748	-0.35305
KURIER	Austria	2009	80973	2012	0.02614	0.29596
Kleine Zeitung	Austria	2008	34663	642	-0.53166	-0.59366
Tiroler Tageszeitung	Austria	2009	4649	17	-0.57698	-0.60577
Kronen Zeitung	Austria	2011	26346	36	-0.31231	-0.70671
OÖNachrichten	Austria	2009	3031	211	-0.54589	-0.95544
Het Nieuwsblad	Belgium	2007	76599	1227	-0.99279	1.65864
Sudpresse	Belgium	2009	56975	1662	-0.33998	-0.18772
De Standaard	Belgium	2009	289129	626	-0.50923	-0.19745
HBvL	Belgium	2008	35140	18	-0.58395	-0.75164



Media outlet	Nation	Online	Followers	Followings	Interaction FAC1	Exposure FAC2
Dnevnik (The Daily)	Bulgaria	2009	126346	498	-0.55442	-0.66753
Trud.bg	Bulgaria	2009	8771	99	-0.58763	-0.72
24chasa.bg	Bulgaria	2009	11155	193	-0.60562	-0.87971
The Globe and Mail	Canada	2007	1619504	551	-0.42419	4.15662
Journal de Montréal	Canada	2009	193113	1348	-0.58277	0.64408
National Post	Canada	2008	747105	11865	-0.17439	0.39556
Toronto Star	Canada	2008	829568	500	0.9212	-0.27879
La Presse	Canada	2007	659730	201	-0.56099	-0.4886
24sata	Croatia	2009	154017	1873	-0.40942	0.06158
Vecernji list	Croatia	2009	148642	590	-0.48625	-0.50024
NOVI LIST	Croatia	2009	82900	1292	-0.53553	-0.76516
Jutarnji List	Croatia	2015	10865	738	-0.58662	-0.84759
Hospodářské noviny	Czech Republic	2009	178800	315	-0.11111	-0.6051
Blesk Zprávy	Czech Republic	2015	1539	146	-0.48167	-0.64054
Deník.cz	Czech Republic	2009	1408	85	-0.46528	-0.79059
MF DNES	Czech Republic	2009	29635	76	-0.60612	-0.94534
Lidové noviny	Czech Republic	2014	3059	488	-0.39438	-0.97645
BT	Denmark	2010	9307	542	-0.43883	0.04689
Jyllands-Posten	Denmark	2009	25793	555	-0.28026	-0.10158
Politiken	Denmark	2008	195746	213	-0.47224	-0.66323
Berlingske	Denmark	2008	117674	460	-0.36252	-0.67321
Børsen	Denmark	2009	12095	5	-0.30428	-0.92481
Äripäeva uudised	Estonia	2009	3517	37	-0.57159	-0.56055
Õhtuleht	Estonia	2009	292	13	-0.58412	-0.66294
Pärnu Postimees	Estonia	2009	1011	11	-0.58963	-0.72532
Eesti Päevaleht	Estonia	2010	2873	64	-0.59605	-0.78732
Postimees	Estonia	2008	4380	13	-0.59732	-0.79964
Turun Sanomat	Finland	2010	13264	91	-0.71914	-0.24415
Ilta-Sanomat	Finland	2009	226683	102	-0.54991	-0.46352
Helsingin Sanomat	Finland	2009	241826	2287	-0.41862	-0.59143
Ilta-Sanomat	Finland	2009	72383	813	-0.38095	-0.81479
Aamulehti	Finland	2009	67449	108	-0.42455	-0.91601
Ouest-France	France	2009	508402	4155	-0.18574	1.5321
Le Monde	France	2009	7354906	449	2.61495	1.27395
Le Figaro	France	2007	2734979	519	2.05144	0.61912
Sud Ouest	France	2009	401438	1743	0.80064	-0.35049
L'ÉQUIPE	France	2009	4655567	1752	1.03448	-0.44815

Media outlet	Nation	Online	Followers	Followings	Interaction FAC1	Exposure FAC2
Süddeutsche Zeitung	Germany	2010	1352741	406	0.13352	0.43129
HAZ	Germany	2008	75811	133	-0.25065	0.38424
BILD	Germany	2007	1648609	526	0.00697	-0.13322
Augsburger Allgemeine	Germany	2009	21296	1045	-0.3433	-0.32206
Rheinische Post	Germany	2008	194214	1317	0.67004	-0.67157
To Vima	Greece	2010	168252	57	-1.52176	3.99211
TA NEA	Greece	2009	129823	219	-0.69256	1.77194
Kathimerini	Greece	2010	297850	350	-0.52591	0.51471
Nemzeti Sport	Hungary	2009	9147	28	-1.07663	1.49047
Blikk Hu	Hungary	2010	3818	101	-0.50663	0.05033
kisalfold.hu	Hungary	2009	821	44	-0.65697	-0.48516
Irish Sun	Ireland	2012	10860	291	-0.31728	1.20018
Independent.ie	Ireland	2009	404251	254	-0.07734	0.82252
The Irish Times	Ireland	2008	367581	139	2.17522	0.02402
The Irish Daily Mail	Ireland	2015	3570	140	-0.4894	-0.76394
Irish Daily Star	Ireland	2012	9698	224	-0.04191	-1.04074
La Gazzetta dello Sport	Italy	2009	1671650	271	0.09267	2.09656
la Repubblica	Italy	2009	2721785	264	-0.06266	1.44121
La Stampa	Italy	2009	954577	353	0.61434	0.98585
Corriere della Sera	Italy	2011	1961127	290	0.55642	0.38382
IlSole24ORE	Italy	2011	1250175	481	-0.39823	-0.24468
Sport Ekspress (rus)	Latvia	2010	253348	284	0.07528	0.57966
nra.lv	Latvia	2009	13084	6667	-0.45227	0.07952
Diena	Latvia	2009	68299	8671	-0.50474	-0.18126
Dienas Bizness	Latvia	2009	17453	40	-0.59463	-0.59502
LA.lv	Latvia	2009	14242	10703	0.77609	-0.86933
Lrytas.lt	Lithuania	2011	4509	10	-0.55512	-0.39862
Kaunodiena.lt	Lithuania	2012	418	15	-0.58218	-0.6447
lzinios.lt	Lithuania	2011	485	312	-0.59855	-0.7953
Tageblatt	Luxembourg	2010	7752	610	-0.54767	-0.09574
Luxemburger Wort	Luxembourg	2009	14986	788	-0.66219	-0.18452
Le Quotidien	Luxembourg	2010	3740	187	-0.68313	-0.38115
Lëtzebuenger Journal	Luxembourg	2010	5039	458	-0.44178	-0.59485
Luxemburger Wort FR	Luxembourg	2011	11384	1106	-0.61235	-0.60798
de Volkskrant	Netherlands	2007	697298	1520	1.48187	0.72414
De Telegraaf	Netherlands	2007	537492	189	0.026	0.28775
NRC	Netherlands	2007	544273	263	0.04569	0.07169

Media outlet	Nation	Online	Followers	Followings	Interaction FAC1	Exposure FAC2
AD.nl	Netherlands	2010	316006	1015	0.78549	-0.27321
Dagblad Metro	Netherlands	2009	43658	67	0.66887	-0.86379
Bergens Tidende	Norway	2008	42676	4401	-0.45165	-0.49072
DN.no	Norway	2008	54492	68	-0.33954	-0.82168
Aftenposten	Norway	2008	116833	2835	0.1527	-1.10571
Rzeczpospolita	Poland	2010	155398	313	-0.2789	2.7306
FAKT24.PL	Poland	2009	22742	1688	-0.20137	0.0054
Super Express	Poland	2009	6564	795	-0.32617	-0.75911
Gazeta Wyborcza.pl	Poland	2009	742845	470	2.13132	-0.8308
O Jogo Online	Portugal	2008	134963	3405	-1.58317	3.97532
Diário Record	Portugal	2009	295424	1130	-0.02812	0.80246
Público	Portugal	2007	646100	113	-0.30929	0.50254
Correio da Manhã	Portugal	2010	342296	1202	-0.46414	0.48127
Jornal de Notícias	Portugal	2008	444101	12905	-0.48346	0.23599
Libertatea Online	Romania	2009	9406	153	-0.47254	0.45012
Plus JEDEN DEN	Slovakia	2013	2206	38	-0.56877	-0.65094
Új Szó	Slovakia	2009	843	24	-0.58669	-0.70165
Vecer	Slovenia	2007	16077	1629	-0.29403	0.01851
Slovenske Novice	Slovenia	2010	8243	821	-0.56106	-0.43713
Casnik Delo	Slovenia	2010	56239	515	1.29967	-0.565
Primorske novice	Slovenia	2014	2043	310	-0.4046	-0.61003
Svet24	Slovenia	2012	700	221	-0.60802	-0.89442
La Vanguardia	Spain	2009	827031	506	-0.42948	1.59469
MARCA	Spain	2008	4684491	1596	2.72265	1.25485
EL PAÍS	Spain	2007	6258065	768	1.98881	1.03874
EL MUNDO	Spain	2008	2865839	1333	3.18458	0.14689
AS	Spain	2007	2311561	1066	3.05803	0.09435
Dagens industri	Sweden	2011	54677	4835	-0.1674	-0.4176
Barometern	Sweden	2010	4219	35	-0.58629	-0.57859
Dagens Nyheter	Sweden	2012	201822	40736	-0.1722	-0.64005
Aftonbladet	Sweden	2009	105808	9557	-0.24776	-0.867
Borås Tidning	Sweden	2010	4340	316	-0.57007	-0.8916
Blick	Switzerland	2009	234837	948	-0.07515	-0.47994
Tages-Anzeiger	Switzerland	2010	160548	1119	0.9543	-0.56258
Südosstschweiz	Switzerland	2009	4165	630	-0.44977	-0.68368
bernerzeitung.ch	Switzerland	2009	10432	65	-0.59672	-0.70739
Neue Zürcher Zeitung	Switzerland	2008	363624	2447	1.15677	-0.71534
Daily Star	United Kingdom	2009	172823	3631	-0.24381	2.49463

Media outlet	Nation	Online	Followers	Followings	Interaction FAC1	Exposure FAC2
The Sun	United Kingdom	2009	1309825	386	0.58253	1.26581
The Telegraph	United Kingdom	2008	2203506	603	-0.53183	1.09073
Daily Mirror	United Kingdom	2008	929437	6284	1.32335	0.27442
Daily Mail Online	United Kingdom	2008	2035905	2404	0.43061	-0.06776
Wall Street Journal	USA	2007	14506315	1074	-0.11288	0.88067
USA TODAY	USA	2008	3399466	452	3.02717	0.6161
Los Angeles Times	USA	2008	2962344	10680	0.54921	0.11854
New York Post	USA	2008	1291320	12042	0.4422	-0.11406
The New York Times	USA	2007	38814352	887	5.41859	-0.69351

# War or Peace Journalism? Study of Media Coverage by Russian Media Outlets of the Trade War Between China and the USA

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**ABSTRACT:** In recent years, the trade war between China and USA became one of the most important crises not only in global economic relations, but also in the international political agenda. The trade war between the world's major powers also involved the core countries from differing regions, due to the significance of the trading streams between China and the USA. Therefore, Russia as one of the core countries was also affected by this trade war and attempted to develop own policy and economic relations towards the two sides. The current research is devoted to analysing the Russian media coverage of the trade war between China and USA based on content analysis and the implication of structural differences existing in the current Russian media system into war and peace journalism paradigms.

**KEYWORDS:** Trade War, Crisis communication, Media frames, Peace and war journalism, Russian media.

## INTRODUCTION

The trade war between USA and China became a significant point of the modern global community due to the political and economic importance not only segmentally for the two sides of the trade war, but also for all countries in the world, because of the overall economic, political and technological power of two countries. For this reason, the trade war became a part of the contemporary superpower confrontation as the USA is the only superpower in the world, which could dominate the global agenda.

In this case, core regional countries across the world struggle to demonstrate their interests and influence the global trade war on the supranational level. Russia claims to be a key player in the European region and even a global superpower

and is involved in the trade war as an observer with its own interests and formed political and economic attitudes towards the two sides (Trough, 2014).

In the context of journalism's war and peace frames, the research focused on the specifics of the current Russian media system that consists of two different types of media financing: federal and commercial. Consequently, Russia's media outlets are covering the trade war in ways dependent on their editorial policies, which closely connect with their source of income. Moreover, the media outlets have been divided according to their platforms: traditional or new media, which have been also implemented into research to analyze the war and peace frames in more comprehensive way.

The current research also sought to discover the Russian media's political orientation and attitude towards the two sides of the trade war. The results of the research are based on qualitative content analysis, which involves a coding process.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW & THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

### **FRAMING THEORY IN TERMS OF CONFLICT SITUATION**

Previous research on the framing theory in conflict situations claims that the production of foreign news by national outlets is usually influenced by the country's relations with foreign countries, state or editorial ideology, national foreign policy and economic relations. The importance of these factors has been unveiled during the coverage of political, but also economic relations between countries, especially in the competing regions. In one of those cases, the research highlighted the difference in the coverage of Korea and Japan in terms of their economic development and relations with the USA during the 1990s (Park, 2003). Despite the positive political and social relations between both countries, the USA's media have covered Japan with negative frames due to the ongoing economic disagreements, while depicting Korea's economic growth in positive terms because of the correlation with the USA's economic interests in the Asian region (Park, 2003).

This shows that the frames gain extra importance during the coverage of conflicts and crises. The frames become the way of covering conflict situations by shaping reality and its subsequent development related to the position of the media organization doing the coverage. In this way, the framing interacts with the conflicts in terms of discourse and development of the agenda. So, each point of conflict undergoes the process of identifying and explaining the events based on geopolitical and economic proximity and the historical background of the conflict and the involved countries (Ahmed et al., 2018).

## THE RUSSIAN MASS MEDIA BACKGROUND

Russia according to a global rating of media freedom (Freedom House, 2016), has 6.5 points out of 7 (7 is the lowest level of democratic progress). This rating refers to states with strong media limitations, which can affect the overall freedom of speech. In this case, most research considers the Russian media system as mainly dependent on state control, and thus classify Russian mass media into three categories: (i) fully and officially owned by the government, (ii) indirectly controlled by the government (through the media corporations owned by the pro-governmental companies, through the federal subsidies or even by promotion of private owners with financial support) and (iii) commercial media outlets with an almost independent position. However, the number of media outlets from the last category has declined due to the constant pressure that the state applies (Gehlbach & Sonin, 2014).

The information policy of Russian media companies varies according to the funding type. There are two main types of media companies in the Russian media system: government funded (henceforth federal) and commercial. The first type – federal – has a long tradition of media framing. Due to federal financial support, these media organizations create the calm and balanced content covering the domestic events and more emotionally unbalanced and arrogant content covering the international news. Moreover, in both cases, federal media focus selectively on events and personalities favorable for coverage, producing news corresponding to current political and economic policies of state leadership (Lozovskiy, 2011).

Analyzing the media framing process of Russian commercial media, it is clear that the media policy of such organizations is mainly based on economic efficiency and profits from advertising and issue sales. This type of mass media acts according to the principles of the free market economy, so the main purpose of Russian commercial media outlets is mostly bound up with attracting an audience and gaining more profits. Therefore, media framing is bound up with sensationalism and more uninhibited content, especially in case of domestic news coverage, however the coverage of international news events is still mainly correlated to the position of the government (Kravets, 2016). Despite this trend, the commercial new (digital) media are more inclined to cover overseas events with the use of news vectors, which can be distinct from or even oppose the official position of the government. That is the reason the analysis of media frames adopted by the types of media outlets became an important part of the theoretical framework (Kirshin, 2012).

The emergence and rapid growth of the new (digital) media outlets reflects the changes in the Russian media market and the correlation of new media development with the existence of traditional media companies (print media). The expansion of the new media in Russia's media system corresponds to the

global trend towards the digital. However, the historically based significance of print media as the only reliable source of information is more related to the government and its credibility among the readers (especially in the regional media market). This indicates the importance of this type of media during the process of media agenda analysis. Moreover, due to the less degree of control of the new media sphere and the strive to publish sensationalism, the disinformation and exaggeration of facts has become the negative specifics of the new media overall image. That is why it also affects the way of reporting performed by this type of outlet. Press events like the Arab Spring, the Crimea-Ukrainian crisis etc. have revealed the distinctive differences in the coverage of events by traditional and new media outlets. There is also the strive to achieve the negativistic pattern of media information and the ubiquitous violation of the ethical principles caused by digital media companies (Nazmetdinova & Lebedeva, 2018).

### **THE WAR AND PEACE JOURNALISM**

The theoretical framework of the research is based on the contemporary scientific literature about the war and peace journalism. This phenomenon existed from the beginning of journalistic activity and was as equally significant in the past as it is in the development of modern journalism, which is overcoming various political, economic and social challenges. Therefore, the coverage of conflicting issues implements the war and peace frames into the media content, which become a competing constituent of the articles (Coombs, 1999). In this case, war journalism is focused on propaganda, elites, and the dominant point of view of conflict and violence, so it is bound up more with emotional and visible effects of content. However, the peace journalism approach is focused more on the moral, social justice, social participation, values and points of view of different social and political groups (Galtung, 1998).

Pairs of opposing models developed by Galtung (1998) have been subsequently supported by detailed classification based on the polarization of concepts: people/elites, balanced/agitated, truth/propaganda, solutions/differences, convergence/prejudice. Therefore, when war journalism focuses on the differences of the two sides and shades them in black and white the probable ways of conflict resolution are covered with the implication of a violent background. Consequently, peaceful solutions are hidden and even neglected. On the other hand, peace journalism operates with approved and accurate information to de-escalate the crisis and show both the advantages and disadvantages of each side of the conflict. This strategy is aimed to reduce the gap between the conflicting sides (Galtung, 1998).

Therefore, the current research has implemented the following categories based on the type of research project. Due to the analysis of the trade war, the categories of ““Elite-oriented” and “people-oriented”, “Partisan” and “non-partisan”, “Dichotomizes good and bad, victims and villains” and “Avoid labeling



of good and bad guys” and “Balanced and agitated” (all the emotional level of the articles) are represented as the most effective and comprehensive way to analyze the trade war without military interventions. Thus, the criteria for category selection are based on the type of crisis, which is not related to open conflict with the implication of aggressive propaganda resources. That is why the chosen categories could classify the media texts in a more applicable and analytical way. In this vein, the classifications mentioned above can be more correlated with the economic orientation of a substantial number of articles identified during the data analysis (Nicolas-Gavilan, 2018).

### **THE POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC BACKGROUND OF TRADE WAR**

The trade war between China and USA was an issue with a prolonged background based on the factors of China’s economic growth and the striving for leadership in the sphere of new technologies. For this reason, the growing confrontation between the countries started at the beginning of the 2000s. The most significant point in this process was the intensification of China’s business activity in US and EU markets. This caused suspicions and concerns about how China’s economic growth had turned into the new danger for some of America’s business and political authorities (Financial Times, 2005). Analyzing this process, Western scholars have even used the term “yellow danger” or “yellow peril”, which refers to the period of the late 19th century when Western countries considered China as a competitor against the stability of overseas colonies in the Asian region (Zeng Ka, 2004).

According to the political and increasing economic confrontation between China and USA, Russia is a bystander that can also influence the mutual interrelations between the other two countries. Scholars emphasize that the Russian foreign policy position can be examined as being a close partner and political ally of China (Balakin, 2017). However, it has been also noted (Davydov, 2017) that the partnership between Russia and China has been influenced by a range of factors. These are primarily the underlying weakness of the economy as well as the shrinking horizons of the country’s foreign policy and military power. Of secondary importance are the ability of Russia’s authorities to fulfill independent policies based on values close to China’s foreign policy and the importance of Russia as a resource-based partner for that country. Last but not least are the ideological and historical backgrounds that underpin their relationship with each other, which would promote a pro-Chinese position among Russian officials. So, based on this analysis researchers have been trying to predict Russia’s position during the probable political or economic conflicts between China and the USA (Vinogradov, 2013).

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The formulated research questions (RQs) revolve around a ‘dominant frame’ of either war or peace journalism: (RQ1) Does the dominant frame of the trade war coverage differ between Russia’s state-owned media and its commercial counterpart? (RQ2) Does the dominant frame of the trade war coverage differ between the Russia’s traditional (print and analog broadcast media) and the new media (digital)? (RQ3) Does the dominant frame change during study period?

The research project aimed to discover the specifics of coverage of the trade war between China and the USA using framing theory to disclose the overall image of the tensions among Russia’s media, as well as the war and peace journalism paradigm to identify the dominant frames on the trade war coverage among the two types of media.

## METHODOLOGY

The research was conducted using framing theory by implementing the war and peace journalism paradigm, as well as the media image of USA and China constructed by Russia’s media outlets. Furthermore, the research time framework was restricted by the key chronological events: (1) the first period (pre-trade war): from Trump’s coming to power on January 20th, 2017 till the beginning of trade war’s active phase on January 22nd, 2018; (2) the second period (the active phase of the trade war): from the implementation of first trade tariffs (January 22nd, 2018) to the cessation of the study’s data collection (September 26th, 2019).

The research sample consisted of trade war related articles obtained from selected media outlets. The research focused on the content in Russia’s national newspapers in both printed and electronic versions, as well as the new media outlets (on the Internet). The newspapers and internet portals were selected according to their popularity among the audience as well as their media financing type (federal or commercial) and platform (traditional or new media). In order to avoid both bias and doubt in the research’s validity, one media outlet for each category was selected: *Rossiyskaya gazeta* is a federal funded traditional media outlet, *Ria Novosti* is a federal funded new media digital outlet, *Kommersant* is a commercial traditional media outlet and *Lenta.ru* is a commercial new media digital outlet.

*Rossiyskaya gazeta* is a daily newspaper providing coverage of government activities: federal laws, legislative acts and presidential orders. The newspaper officially portrays itself as the printed organ of the Government of Russia.

*Ria Novosti* is one of the most influential Russian news agencies with headquarters in Moscow. *Ria Novosti* covers all sides of political, economic and social

news from Russia and across the world. This analytical media outlet is an official source of information for the Russian President's Administration, the Government of Russia, the ministries and other federal institutions across the country.

*Kommersant* is one of the leading commercial daily newspapers in Russia and focuses on the coverage of domestic and international business, as well as political events. The newspaper is related to the liberal broadsheets with the main audience consisting of business and political elites, representatives of business enterprises, as well as the academic and cultural elites of Russia.

*Lenta.ru* is an online newspaper, which covers domestic and international news. It was one of the most quoted media outlets in Russia during the first decade of the 21st century. *Lenta.ru* achieved 5th place in the rankings of European online newspapers in 2013 (Comscore, 2013).

According to the background information about the selected media outlets, the sample adequately represents Russia's media landscape in terms of international news coverage and the Sino-American trade war analysis. The media selection matched the media ratings compiled by Medialogy, Russia's leading company in monitoring the Russian media field, which also has the largest news media database in the country. Medialogy ranked *Kommersant* and *Rossiyskaya gazeta* as the leading National Newspapers in 2017. At the same time, for the ratings in the Internet Resources of 2017, Medialogy awarded top ranking to *Lenta.ru* and *Ria Novosti* (Medialogy, 2017). The composite index used by the company to form the statistics has been based on the criteria of citation index, media importance and audience structure of each media outlet. Moreover, an additional factor for selecting the media outlets was the availability of public access to the articles' archives in order to subsequently identify the articles related to the trade war.

The procedures of the articles' selection and collection was done manually using the websites' built-in search tools to find content related to the trade war in the media websites archives. Due to the broad nature of the topic, the articles were predominantly in seven categories: "Politics", "In the world", "Economics", "Society", "Business" and "Finances", as well as "Russia", which also contained some of the articles related to the trade war (in terms of consequences for the Russian economy). Prior to the analysis of articles, the publications were scrutinized for keywords, such as "trade war" and "trade conflict", with the selection of content directly connected with the trade war between China and USA. The sample consists of 33 articles from the first period of research and 398 articles from the second period.

## CODING

### THE BASIC CODING CATEGORIES

The first part of coding process involved developing the schema of categories aimed at depicting the main trends of the trade war coverage in the Russian media landscape. It included following variables: (1) The name of the media outlet; (2) The financing type of media organization: federal, commercial; (3) The media platform: traditional, new media; (4) The date of publication; (5) The number of articles; (6) The type of content: political, economic, social; (7) The length of the articles; (8) The attitude to USA: positive, negative, neutral; (9) The attitude to China: positive, negative, neutral; (10) The keyword; (11) The keyword frequency.

Intercoder reliability was checked, tested and validated by a researcher familiar with the use of content analysis methodology. In this case, a Russian speaking master's student of Shanghai International Studies University was tasked with analyzing the content of 86 randomly selected articles using the same coding sheet. Prior to the testing, there was instruction on the research focus and theory. Consequently, two further rounds of training were conducted, each with 20 randomly selected articles, in order to clarify any points of disagreement and to increase agreement between coders. The 11 categories of analyses did not change.

The procedure for the intercoder reliability test was based on Cohen's kappa coefficient and conducted using SPSS statistics software. The analysis of content, accordingly to the selected categories, identified the insignificant differentiation in the results. In this vein, the test reflects a solid agreement between the two coders in following six specific categories: (i) *Attitude to China*,  $\kappa = .799$  (95% CI, .675 to .922),  $p < .001$ ; (ii) *Attitude to USA*,  $\kappa = .815$  (95% CI, .701 to .928),  $p < .001$ ; (iii) *Agitated/Balanced*,  $\kappa = .714$  (95% CI, .594 to .833),  $p < .001$ ; (iv) *Partisan/Non-partisan*,  $\kappa = .702$  (95% CI, .547 to .856),  $p < .001$ ; (v) *Elite-oriented/People-oriented*,  $\kappa = .784$  (95% CI, .650 to .917),  $p < .001$ ; (vi) *Dichotomizes good and bad, victims and villains/Avoid labeling of good and bad guys*,  $\kappa = .755$  (95% CI, .613 to .896),  $p < .001$ .

After the checking the aggregate of the sample, it became clear that the 11 main and 6 specific categories relating to the war and peace journalism could display the same tendencies identified during the main research process. Moreover, the reliability test approved the indicators for categorization of articles based on the Galtung's (1998) principles. Therefore, the current research methodology, as well as the coding sheet categorization are reliable and could be replicable for future studies.

## THE PEACE AND WAR CATEGORIZATION

The four binary categories of article content that are based on Galtung's (1998) approach were used to conduct the current research: *Elite-oriented* and *people-oriented* focus on elites and leaders or the general public as the main actors with the following descriptive indicators: the depiction of difficulties the general public experience during the trade war, the outcomes of the trade war on the everyday life in the affected geographical zone, and on the political and economic establishment of the country, as well as on celebrities. *Partisan* and *non-partisan* focus on content bias: supporting of one side of the conflict or neutral where the indicator is the presence of emotionally strong words describing one side of the trade war. *Dichotomizes good and bad, victims and villains* and *Avoid labeling good and bad actors* where a descriptive indicator indicates the culprits, victims and peacemakers of the trade war focusing on a description of the trade war's process without seeking possible resolutions. *Agitated* and *balanced* focus on the emotional level of the articles, with the results presented in numerical form, according to a scale of 1 (balanced) to 5 (agitated). An emotive specific indicator was also used. This involved identifying emotive words or phrases describing the trade war and marking a scale based on the quantity of emotive words: 1 – less than 5 words, 2 – from 5 to 10 words, 3 – from 11 to 15 words, 4 – from 16 up 25 words, and 5 – more than 25 words.

The attitude of each article was determined by the identification of lexical indicators in the text, which disclosed a specific set of attitudinal parameters – positive, negative and neutral – shown towards the research objects.

**FINDINGS**

The aggregate sample of articles (N=431) was split between the two data collection periods; 1st period (n=33) and 2nd period (n=398). Table 1 presents the most productive of the sample media by order of frequency of article publications.

**Table 1. Frequency of article production by the selected Russian media outlets concerning the Sino-American trade war during the two data collection periods.**

1st Data Collection Period	Media Outlet	Article Production (N=33)
20.01.2017 – 22.01.2018	<i>Rossiyskaya gazeta</i>	n=6
	<i>Ria Novosti</i>	n=12
	<i>Kommersant</i>	n=11
	<i>Lenta.ru</i>	n=4
2nd Data Collection Period	Media Outlet	Article Production (N=398)
22.01.2018 – 26.09.2019	<i>Rossiyskaya gazeta</i>	n=96
	<i>Ria Novosti</i>	n=100
	<i>Kommersant</i>	n=102
	<i>Lenta.ru</i>	n=100

Source: Author’s own research

**THE OVERALL TREND OF TRADE WAR NEWS REPORTING AMONG RUSSIAN MEDIA**

Due to the research time frame, the data analysis was split into two parts for better understanding of changes that occurred in the media coverage of the trade war during the pre-trade war period and its active phase. So, during the first period the federal media expressed the attitude towards the two sides of the trade war in a more neutral way than is prevalent for both countries. Compared to federal media, commercial media outlets have positioned themselves in a more agitated way, with a negative image dominant for the USA, and a neutral for China. In this case, the comparison between the traditional and new media depicted clear tendencies: the newspapers displayed a neutral attitude towards the two sides in the trade war. However, the new media covered the trade war in more biased way using war frames (Table 2).

**Table 2. Russian media's attitudes towards the Sino-American trade war's two sides. First period (20.01.2017-22.01.2018)**

	Federal (N=18) Rossiyskaya gazeta (n=6) Ria Novosti (n=12)		Commercial (N=15) Kommersant (n=11) Lenta.ru (n=4)		Traditional (N=17) Rossiyskaya gazeta (n=6) Kommersant (n=11)		New media (N=16) Ria Novosti (n=12) Lenta.ru (n=4)	
	USA	China	USA	China	USA	China	USA	China
Negative	6 (33.3%)	0	7 (46.6%)	4 (26.7%)	6 (35.3%)	2 (11.8%)	7 (43.75%)	2 (12.5%)
Neutral	12 (66.7%)	12 (66.7%)	4 (26.7%)	7 (46.6%)	9 (52.9%)	11 (64.7%)	7 (43.75%)	8 (50%)
Positive	0	6 (33.3%)	4 (26.7%)	4 (26.7%)	2 (11.8%)	4 (23.5%)	2 (12.5%)	6 (37.5%)

Source: Author's own research

In the second period (see Table 3), the main attitude of federal media remained neutral towards USA, and both neutral and positive towards China. The main attitude of the commercial media changed direction, but still looked similar: USA – neutral with the negative shades; China – predominantly positive. At the same time, the traditional media coverage of the trade war kept a similar tendency as during the active phase. However, the new media focus did change with the representation of USA becoming more negative compared to the pre-trade war period. This finding corresponds to the main trend of Russian media outlets that started to use aggressive rhetoric against the USA due to the intensification of the crisis and the negative background of the countries' relations.

**Table 3. Russian media's attitudes towards the Sino-American trade war's two sides. Second period (22.01.2018-26.09.2019)**

	Federal (N=196) Rossiyskaya gazeta (n=96) Ria Novosti (n=100)		Commercial (N=202) Kommersant (n=102) Lenta.ru (n=100)		Traditional (N=198) Rossiyskaya gazeta (n=96) Kommersant (n=102)		New media (N=200) Ria Novosti (n=100) Lenta.ru (n=100)	
	USA	China	USA	China	USA	China	USA	China
Negative	61 (31.2%)	1 (0.6%)	73 (36.1%)	52 (25.8%)	59 (29.8%)	12 (6.1%)	75 (37.5%)	41 (20.5%)
Neutral	123 (62.7%)	121 (61.7%)	88 (43.6%)	72 (35.6%)	122 (61.6%)	112 (56.5%)	89 (44.5%)	89 (44.5%)
Positive	12 (6.1%)	74 (37.7%)	41 (20.3%)	78 (38.6%)	17 (8.6%)	74 (37.4%)	36 (18%)	70 (35%)

Source: Author's own research.

In the context of content type (see Table 4), Russian media outlets focused more on the political and economic cases of the trade war. However, the economic analyses and reports became more popular during the second, active, research

period. The social content was more widespread among the commercial and new media articles, which focused less on the official events connected with state authorities. Later the media started to consider the conflict from the economic perspective and set aside the political orientation to depict the crisis in a more balanced way.

**Table 4. Russian media’s type of content concerning the Sino-American Trade War during the 1st period (20.01.2017-22.01.2018) and the 2nd period of research (22.01.2018-26.09.2019)**

	Federal (N=214) Rossiyskaya gazeta (n=102) Ria Novosti (n=112)		Commercial (N=217) Kommersant (n=113) Lenta.ru (n=104)		Traditional (N=215) Rossiyskaya gazeta (n=102) Kommersant (n=113)		New media (N=216) Ria Novosti (n=112) Lenta.ru (n=104)	
	First period (n=18)	Second period (n=196)	First period (n=15)	Second period (n=201)	First period (n=17)	Second period (n=198)	First period (n=16)	Second period (n=200)
Political	8 (44.4%)	92 (46.9%)	9 (60%)	63 (31.2%)	11 (64.7%)	73 (36.9%)	6 (37.6%)	82 (41%)
Economic	7 (38.9%)	95 (48.5%)	5 (33.3%)	111 (54.9%)	5 (29.4%)	115 (58.1%)	7 (43.7%)	91 (45.5%)
Social	3 (16.7%)	9 (4.6%)	1 (6.7%)	28 (13.9%)	1 (5.9%)	10 (5%)	3 (18.7%)	27 (13.5%)

Source: Author’s own research

The quantity of articles increased on a daily basis as a result of the intensification of the trade war. This in turn caused the quality and length of the articles decrease as evident in the replacing of the comprehensive analytical reports of the first period being replaced by short news articles describing each event during the active phase of trade war. Indeed, the length of the articles dropped by 34%. However, the biggest decrease of the articles’ length occurred among the commercial media outlets, which have intensified the frequency of articles, but reduced the number words at the same time by 49.9%, while the federal media have decreased the length of articles by 12.3% (see Table 5).



Table 5. Russian media’s change in length of articles (word counts) concerning the Sino-American trade war during the 1st period (20.01.2017-22.01.2018) and the 2nd period of research (22.01.2018-26.09.2019)

	Federal (N=214) Rossiyskaya gazeta (n=102) Ria Novosti (n=112)		Commercial (N=217) Kommersant (n=113) Lenta.ru (n=104)		Traditional (N=215) Rossiyskaya gazeta (n=102) Kommersant (n=113)		New media (N=216) Ria Novosti (n=112) Lenta.ru (n=104)	
	First period	Second period	First period	Second period	First period	Second period	First period	Second period
Average word count of articles	409.33	359.05	575.53	288.38	592.17	408.45	370.87	239.19

Source: Author’s own research

The media outlets did not change the topical focus of the articles from the first to the second period. The frequency of the keywords during the first period were: China (189), Trump (86), USA (84), Russia (44), War (23), Trade (20), Xi Jinping (9), Conflict (4) (see Picture 1). The word cloud shows the articles focused predominantly on international affairs and the political leaders and analyzed the state of affairs between the two sides. The position of USA president had more significance than any quotes from China’s leader, which was connected with the provocative image of Trump that was more attractive for the media outlets in both negative and positive ways.

Picture 1. Russian media’s word cloud concerning the Sino-American trade war during the 1st period of research (20.01.2017-22.01.2018)



Source: Author’s own research

During the active phase (the 2nd period) the focus of the articles remained similar and covered the trade war emphasizing the position of China, and the negative rhetoric connected to the war frames were used more frequently. The intensification of the war frames could be also traced considering some of the news articles headlines, such as “United States prepare the new attack in trade war with China” (Lenta.ru, 22.05.2019), “China found a new weapon in a trade war with the United States” (Lenta.ru, 14.05.2019), “Trump changed his mind again and attacked in the trade war with China” (Lenta.ru, 11.05.2019). The peaceful and non-conflictual frames such as “Economy” and “Trade” and the opinion of countries’ leaders “Trump” and “Xi Jinping” are less important in the overall media representation of trade war. The frequency of the keywords active phase were: China (987), War (656), United States (503), Russia (448), Trade (402), Trump (309), Conflict (251), Economy (220), Xi Jinping (55) (see Picture 2).

Picture 2. Russian media’s word cloud concerning the Sino-American trade war during the 2nd period of research (22.01.2018-26.09.2019)



Source: Author’s own research

The analysis of the basic framing categories showed the coverage of trade war became one of the most important on the economic agenda among Russian media outlets. The focus on the political nature of crisis, peculiar to the pre-war coverage, began decline and was replaced by the economic agenda. Thus, the predominant attitude towards the two sides remained neutral among all types of media with the focus on China and position of that nation’s authorities. Furthermore, with rising importance of the rising understanding of the trade conflict as the “economic war” between two superpowers and its significance for Russia as one of the core countries a second focus was how this crisis affected Russia’s business elites. It was during this period the number of articles increased corresponding

with a decline in the overall length of articles (see Table 4). Therefore, the relevance of trade war between China and USA increased for the Russia's economy and thus for Russia's media, which prompted further analysis.

### THE WAR AND PEACE FRAMES OF THE TRADE WAR COVERAGE

This part reflects the analysis of trade war's coverage using the four peace or conflict binaries (see Galtung's 1989 categories). The first binary refers to the partisan/non-partisan types of content, which showed the degree of bias in the articles and the supported the conflicting sides of the trade war. So, the vectors of coverage among most of the media outlets remained the same throughout the studied period. The federal media were more inclined to publish non-partisan content to present a neutral position in the articles, whereas the commercial media outlets had deeper links to the war frame and published partisan content. The same tendency is peculiar to both of the analysis periods of the trade war.

Comparing the traditional and new media, the former is more regulated by the government and focus on the federal position, which is why the content more non-partisan. However, the trend among the new media has changed over the time: non-bias peacemaking articles have become more partisan (bias) content, which is related to the war frame. This change could be connected with the specifics of new media companies, which are struggling to gain more viewers on their web pages and adopting the same principles of functioning as commercial media: sensationalism and exaggeration of facts (see Table 6).

**Table 6. Russian media's partisan and non-partisan content concerning the Sino-American trade war during the 1st period (20.01.2017-22.01.2018) and the 2nd period of Research (22.01.2018-26.09.2019)**

	Federal (N=214) Rossiyskaya gazeta (n=102) Ria Novosti (n=112)		Commercial (N=217) Kommersant (n=113) Lenta.ru (n=104)		Traditional (N=215) Rossiyskaya gazeta (n=102) Kommersant (n=113)		New media (N=216) Ria Novosti (n=112) Lenta.ru (n=104)	
	First period (n=18)	Second period (n=196)	First period (n=15)	Second period (n=202)	First period (n=17)	Second period (n=198)	First period (n=16)	Second period (n=200)
Partisan	6 (33.3%)	76 (38.7%)	8 (53.3%)	116 (57.4%)	7 (41.2%)	83 (41.9%)	7 (43.75%)	109 (54.5%)
Non-partisan	12 (66.7%)	120 (61.3%)	7 (46.7%)	86 (42.6%)	10 (58.8%)	115 (58.1%)	9 (56.25%)	91 (45.5%)

Source: Author's own research

In the context of "Elite-oriented and people-oriented content", most Russian media outlets focused only on the top-ranked personalities and did not cover the events in a comprehensive way affecting the life of common people. However, comparing the federal and commercial media outlets, the most extreme application

of elite-oriented content was identified among the federal mass media, which predominantly focused on individual personalities favorable to cover (Lozovskiy, 2011).

Therefore, it is important to notice that the obtained data set depicts the opposite tendency with the traditional mass media dominated by war frames and new media outlets – by peace frames of trade war coverage. One explanation is that historical importance of printed press as the source of national official news and political information focused on highly ranked personalities. So, with the growth of the importance of the conflict for the Russian political agenda, the coverage by traditional media outlets became even more elite-oriented during the active phase. At the same time, the commercial and new media predominantly followed the influence of the free market and commercial orientation of publishing content and focused on improving their ratings and popularity among readers. Thus, the content is related to the life of common people and provides different cases to depict the trade war. Moreover, the new media companies were less limited within the state policy towards the trade war and are the most balanced in this category by depicting different angles of the conflict especially during its active phase (see Table 7).

**Table 7. Russian media’s elite-oriented and people-oriented content concerning the Sino-American trade war during the 1st period (20.01.2017-22.01.2018) and the 2nd period of Research (22.01.2018-26.09.2019)**

	Federal (N=214) Rossiyskaya gazeta (n=102) Ria Novosti (n=112)		Commercial (N=217) Kommersant (n=113) Lenta.ru (n=104)		Traditional (N=215) Rossiyskaya gazeta (n=102) Kommersant (n=113)		New media (N=216) Ria Novosti (n=112) Lenta.ru (n=104)	
	First period (n=18)	Second period (n=196)	First period (n=15)	Second period (n=202)	First period (n=17)	Second period (n=198)	First period (n=16)	Second period (n=200)
Elite-oriented	14 (77.8%)	132 (67.4%)	6 (40%)	120 (59.4%)	10 (58.8%)	148 (74.8%)	10 (62.5%)	104 (52%)
People-oriented	4 (22.2%)	64 (32.6%)	9 (60%)	82 (40.6%)	7 (41.2%)	50 (25.2%)	6 (37.5%)	96 (48%)

Source: Author’s own research

According to the data analysis, the federal and traditional media outlets related to the more balanced and peacemaking kinds of mass media, however the commercial and new media outlets expressed their attitude to the issue in more aggressive and drastic ways. The main reason for this tendency relates to the specifics of Russia’s media market, which is more controlled in terms of federal and traditional media. Whereas the commercial and new media are freer to express their attitude as opposed to the federal position, which remained more neutral at the moment of data analysis. So, the commercial and new media

companies are less self-limiting themselves and express their attitude about the countries in more direct and sharp ways. That is why the commercial media outlets are most highly ranked in the context of agitated content (see Table 8).

**Table 8. Russian media's emotional level of content concerning the Sino-American trade war during the 1st period (20.01.2017-22.01.2018) and the 2nd period of Research (22.01.2018-26.09.2019)**

	Federal (N=214) Rossiyskaya gazeta (n=102) Ria Novosti (n=112)		Commercial (N=217) Kommersant (n=113) Lenta.ru (n=104)		Traditional (N=215) Rossiyskaya gazeta (n=102) Kommersant (n=113)		New media (N=216) Ria Novosti (n=112) Lenta.ru (n=104)	
	First period (n=18)	Second period (n=196)	First period (n=15)	Second period (n=202)	First period (n=17)	Second period (n=198)	First period (n=16)	Second period (n=200)
Average index	2.46	2.15	2.83	3.58	2.23	2.41	3.08	3.23

Source: Author's own research

Finally, the traditional and new media companies are more diverse in terms of content labeling, so the traditional media have changed from the labeling of the content towards a more balanced depiction of trade war. This could be explained by the change of the state policy on the trade war, which was more neutral towards both sides during the active phase. This was the reason the media began to cover the crisis in a more balanced way. The closer interrelations between the federal position and the traditional media have been researched by other scholars and are mentioned in the literature review (Lozovskiy, 2011). So they follow a neutral vector and avoid labeling the key objects in the text. However, the commercial media have their own editorial policies and label the content mostly according to their own vision, which can contain the labeling (see Table 9).

**Table 9. Russian media's dichotomization of good and bad and avoiding labeling in the content concerning the Sino-American trade war during the 1st period (20.01.2017-22.01.2018) and the 2nd period of research (22.01.2018-26.09.2019)**

	Federal (N=214) Rossiyskaya gazeta (n=102) Ria Novosti (n=112)		Commercial (N=217) Kommersant (n=113) Lenta.ru (n=104)		Traditional (N=215) Rossiyskaya gazeta (n=102) Kommersant (n=113)		New media (N=216) Ria Novosti (n=112) Lenta.ru (n=104)	
	First period (n=18)	Second period (n=196)	First period (n=15)	Second period (n=202)	First period (n=17)	Second period (n=198)	First period (n=16)	Second period (n=198)
Dichotomizes good and bad	7 (38.9%)	73 (37.2%)	10 (66.7%)	140 (69.3%)	9 (52.9%)	80 (40.4%)	8 (50%)	133 (67.2%)
Avoid labeling	11 (61.1%)	123 (62.8%)	5 (33.3%)	62 (30.7%)	8 (47.1%)	118 (59.6%)	8 (50%)	65 (32.8%)

Source: Author's own research

## CONCLUSIONS

Findings of the study revealed that the type of media influences the dominant media frame: the federal and traditional media outlets refer mostly to peace journalism type. Federal media are linked to state ownership through media conglomerates, which either the government or affiliated business companies own, so their activity is more correlated with the official position of the Russian political establishment. At the same time, media law frames the traditional media outlets, which are also in the context of loss-making printed media enterprises dependent on state funding. This is the reason these publications lean towards the peace frame. Furthermore, these types of media are less implicated in the use of sensationalism. They also adhere to the federal rhetoric which is dominated by idea of a balance between the financial superpowers (Index of Safety, 2013).

By contrast, the commercial and especially the new media outlets lean more towards the war frame of journalism. One of the reasons can be the financial factor represented by sensationalism combined with a more aggressive rhetoric to attract larger audiences. Both commercial and new media have relatively higher freedom to disclose a position in opposition to the government. However, the new media depict the most extreme opinions due to the simplified process of news delivery and less strict legislation concerning the establishment and subsequent functioning of a digital media company. For this reason, new media outlets can function as more independent companies as they rely on their individual resources (Syundyukov, 2014).

Did the study satisfactorily answer the three research question (RQs)? The answer to (RQ1), that is “Does the dominant frame of the trade war coverage differ between Russia’s state-owned media and its commercial counterpart?” lies in the analysis of federal and commercial media. The federal media outlets were more focused on the balanced position of the Russian state and presented less aggressive arguments and were, therefore, more related to the peace frame. By contrast, the commercial media presented both sides of the trade war and even expressed their points of view in a more agitated manner, so their content was more war journalism oriented.

The same trend is viable for answering (RQ2): “Does the dominant frame of the trade war coverage differ between the Russia’s traditional (print and broadcast media) and the new media (digital)?” The traditional media outlets covered both sides in a more neutral way although they used balanced analytics with the focus on the Russian place in the trade war. Thus, the main frame is related to peace journalism. By contrast, the new media companies presented new perspectives on the two superpowers, which often differed from the government’s position and even public opinion. In this way, new ‘digital’ media provided new vectors of the coverage of the trade war, in which aggressive war journalism dominated.

To answer RQ3: “Does the dominant frame change during study period?” It is necessary to identify the trends of coverage within two data collection periods. Over the period of almost two years from January 2017 to September 2019, the study found the image of China became more positive, while the attitude towards USA became more neutral (this was a switch from being negative) in the active phase of the conflict. The overall frame changed from the importance of the political agenda to that of the economic sphere. The content of the commercial and new media outlets became more aggressive in reinforcing the assertive rhetoric, while the federal media tended to cover the events with a more peace journalism frame. This shows that study has proven the war and peace journalism tendencies described in the literature review (Nazmetdinova & Lebedeva, 2018). The significance of trade war for Russian media agenda increased during the active (2nd) phase as manifest in the increased quantity of articles, which correlated with lower word counts in published articles.

Therefore, the data analysis has demonstrated the trend that Russia considers a trade war from position of observer with the strong influence of political and economic factors of relations with China and USA (Davydov, 2017). In this case, the federal media tended to provide a more neutral coverage of the events but demonstrated a positive attitude towards China and a negative one towards the USA.

The analysis of the headlines and the overall content also presented Russia as the core country pretending to be a superpower, which seeks benefits for its own economy and strives to have an impact on the conflicting sides. Due to Russia’s historical partnership with China, the attitude of the media remained either neutral or positive, which also correlated with the position of the Russian state and its attempts to strengthen Sino-Russian cooperation. Therefore, the Russian media agenda could be considered to be dominated by political and financial elites, which consider any trade war as an economic crisis that can negatively affect the Russian economy, which operates as part of the USA dominated free market. So, the significance for Russia of a trade war can only increase with the passage of time.

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# Media Exposure to Conspiracy vs. Anti-conspiracy Information. Effects on the Willingness to Accept a COVID-19 Vaccine

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**ABSTRACT:** The COVID-19 pandemic opened the doors for a corresponding “infodemic”, associated with various misleading narratives related to the SARS-CoV-2 virus. As the way to stop the pandemic was unveiled, misleading narratives switched from the disease itself to the vaccine. Nevertheless, a rather scarce corpus of literature has approached the effects of these narratives on the willingness to take a vaccine against COVID-19. This study investigates how exposure to conspiracy narratives versus information that counter these narratives influences people’s willingness to get vaccinated. Based on an experimental design, using a sample of Romanian students (N=301), this research shows that exposure to factual information related to COVID-19 vaccines meant to debunk conspiracy theories leads to higher willingness to vaccinate. Furthermore, this study shows that young, educated Romanians consider distant others to be more influenced by conspiracy theories on this topic, and, therefore, more prone to exhibit hesitancy towards COVID-19 vaccination.

**KEYWORDS:** vaccine hesitancy; media exposure; disinformation; conspiracy theories; counter-conspiracy narratives.

## INTRODUCTION

Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, the outbreak has been associated with a parallel “infodemic” (Bond, 2020), while the spread of fake narratives and conspiracy theories within various social media platforms has been compared with the intra-community transmission of the virus (Zarocostas, 2020). Multiple fake narratives, ranging from denying that the coronavirus exists to claims that its transmission is associated with the roll-out of 5G, have emerged online. Recently, the intensity of the general fake narratives addressing the virus fell back only to make room for the new “hit”: conspiracy theories towards the vaccine (EEAS Strategic Communications and Information Analysis Division, 2020).

Now that COVID-19 vaccines are available, herd immunity (which could be achieved through high vaccine acceptance rates) has become the primary objective for stopping this global crisis. However, while vaccine hesitancy and its causes have been previously researched (Burki, 2019; Conroy et al., 2009; Figueiredo et al., 2020; Loomba et al., 2021; MacDonald, 2015), research about the implications of conspiracy theories on individuals’ willingness to vaccinate against COVID-19 is rather scarce.

Measures, varying in aggressiveness, were taken by various local and international public administration institutions and social media platforms to tackle the spread of online conspiracy theories regarding the COVID-19 vaccine. Despite these efforts, fake narratives continue to be widely shared among internet users around the world (European Council, 2021).

This study aims to better understand the “information-related” factors that make people develop different vaccine acceptance levels. The importance of such an approach is that one main reason explaining vaccine-hesitant attitudes is linked to the high proliferation of conspiracy narratives, especially in the digital media ecosystem. In other terms, “the spread of false claims about the vaccines on social media is so troubling because it risks undermining public health efforts” (Bond, 2020), which means that, in a broader sense, the exposure to toxic and misleading narratives in the media erodes trust in COVID-19 vaccines, thus limiting the possibility of achieving herd immunity through vaccination.

Using an experimental design on a sample of 301 young Romanian citizens with the right to vote and higher education studies in progress, we found that exposure to factual information related to COVID-19 vaccines meant to debunk conspiracy theories leads to higher acceptance of self-vaccination. Moreover, our research also confirms that the Romanians in our sample consider distant others<sup>1</sup> to be more prone to accept or support conspiracy theories related to the COVID-19 vaccine, thus making them less willing to get a vaccine.

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1 ‘Distant others’ refers to people in general, whereas ‘close others’ refers to family and friends.

## THE FIGHT AGAINST THE COVID-19 “INFODEMIC”: A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF THE PRESENT CONTEXT

On the 11th of March 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) stated that the COVID-19 outbreak became a pandemic. With over 118.000 cases and 4291 deaths at that time, the coronavirus related outbreak was the first of its kind (World Health Organization, 2020a). There have since been 61.8 million cases, 1.4 million deaths worldwide (World Health Organization, 2020b) and on the 11th of December 2020, the COVID-19 vaccine, developed by the Pfizer/BioNTech pharmaceutical companies, was approved in the US by the US Food and Drug Administration (US Food and Drug Administration, 2020). Shortly after, on the 21st of December 2020, the European Commission issued a conditional marketing authorization for the same COVID-19 vaccine (European Commission, 2020b), following its positive evaluation by the European Medicines Agency (European Medicines Agency, 2020). Between the 27th and the 29th of December there occurred what is now known as the “EU Vaccination Days”, a public activation meant to create a buzz within all the EU member states around the first deliveries of the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine and the first vaccinated Europeans (European Commission, 2021b). At that time, COVID-19 vaccines produced by 5 other manufacturers were still either under development or evaluation by the European Medicines Agency (European Commission, 2021e).

Even though there seems to be a joint agreement among international health institutions regarding the fact that vaccination is the only way to escape the current public health crisis, for this strategy to work, the need for herd immunity arises. Thus, vaccine hesitancy can prove to become a serious challenge in the process of reaching a certain percentage regarding the population’s vaccination rate, especially in the context of an ever-changing online landscape.

Vaccine hesitancy has been defined as the “delay in acceptance or refusal of vaccination despite the availability of vaccination services” (MacDonald, 2015, p. 4161). Although complex and bound by context, varying across time, place and vaccines, vaccine hesitancy is influenced by factors such as complacency, convenience and confidence, according to MacDonald (2015). While evidence suggests that vaccine hesitancy rates worldwide have continuously changed and evolved since 2015 (Figueiredo et al., 2020), some studies advocate that online misinformation can become an engine for an increasing level of vaccine hesitancy (Loomba et al., 2021, p. 1). A low rate of vaccination can have multiple causes, such as worries about the effectiveness and safety of a vaccine (Conroy et al., 2009) or a general feeling of doubt regarding the topic; however, it seems that “misleading health information on social media might push vaccine hesitancy to the point of disaster” (Burki, 2019, p. e258).

The capacity to spread and distribute ideas and opinions forms the basis of our activity regarding social media; however, this can sometimes prove more “like a curse than a blessing” (Tate, 2019). While the spread of rumours and misleading facts have been previously compared with the transmission of viruses through contacts within host populations (Kucharski, 2016; Zarocostas, 2020), the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic dis – and misinformation has been associated with a parallel pandemic that boosts the former original one (Bond, 2020). Experts from the WHO have warned the population about an alleged “infodemic” (Zarocostas, 2020), meaning a high proliferation of false and misleading information. Since the start of the pandemic, various fake narratives regarding the coronavirus have spread around the world, varying from the association of the pandemic with the roll-out of 5G networks to claims that facemasks can cause hypoxia or hypercapnia or that the virus does not exist (European Commission, 2021f). Also, nowadays, it seems that the general fake narratives addressing COVID-19 have lost some ground in order to make room for the new vaccine-related disinformation (EEAS Strategic Communications and Information Analysis Division, 2020).

Given that the COVID-19 vaccine issue is now highly visible in both national and international media and politics, discussions and debates around the topic are taking place everywhere. They can be found in various contexts and all kinds of social media groups. Many questions regarding this vaccine, its efficiency, or counter effects arise; thus, it becomes evident that problematic content about vaccination does not circulate only in vaccine discussion dedicated groups, as was previously the case (Bond, 2020). Impacts of fake narratives surrounding the vaccine against COVID-19 can vary across the world, depending on their popularity or on the public administration’s efforts to tackle the situation. Therefore, while some claims, often fuelled by the pro-Kremlin media (EEAS Strategic Communications and Information Analysis Division, 2020), such as “the vaccine could turn people into monkeys” (O’Neill & Manveen, 2020), may have little to no effect, others might cause a different outcome. For example, according to a recent public opinion survey, 35.7% of Romanians agree that the COVID-19 pandemic was specifically created to inoculate people with a microchip through vaccination (INSCOP Research, 2021).

Nevertheless, disinformation with regards to the virus and the vaccine is not new. Public institutions are aware of it and have taken various more or less effective measures to combat the phenomenon. For example, in the context of the ever-increasing intensity of the COVID-19 fake narratives, on the 10th of June 2020, the European Commission and the High Representative of the European Union launched a joint communication (European Commission, 2020a) on tackling online disinformation, meant to reinforce the *Code of Practice on Disinformation*: a self-regulatory code of practice launched in 2018, designed

to drive transparency among the social media platforms that adhere to it, by constraining them to publish monthly reports related to the measures they took to stop the spread of disinformation (European Commission, 2021c). The *Code of Practice* is currently signed by TikTok, Twitter, Google, Microsoft, Facebook, and Mozilla (European Commission, 2021d).

Social media platforms are also taking measures to stop the proliferation of fake narratives regarding the COVID-19 vaccine. For example, starting from the 8th of February 2021, in accordance with the World Health Organization and other leading health institutions, Facebook is removing false claims regarding the coronavirus or its vaccine from its platforms, namely Facebook and Instagram, in an attempt to aggressively fight back against anti-vaxxers (Facebook, 2021). Similarly, Twitter labels or removes content that stresses false claims regarding an alleged global conspiracy behind the COVID-19 vaccine (Twitter, 2021).

## **CONSPIRACY THEORIES VERSUS FACTUAL INFORMATION: EFFECTS ON INDIVIDUALS' WILLINGNESS TO VACCINATE**

Problematic content regarding vaccination and the COVID-19 vaccine explicitly continue to linger on social media platforms. Such content might take various forms, from fabricated to manipulated content, from satire to propaganda. Nonetheless, for the purpose of this research particularly investigating the role of conspiracy theories, previously defined as narratives that associate mysterious groups of people with far-reaching events (Jolley & Douglas, 2017, p. 1), we further refer to this problematic content either in terms of disinformation or conspiracy theories and narratives. More specifically, disinformation and conspiracy theories “are attempts to explain the ultimate causes of significant social and political events and circumstances with claims of secret plots by two or more powerful actors” (Douglas et al., 2019, p. 4).

The potential of factual information in tackling conspiracy theories has been already studied in relation to various fake narratives on a wide range of topics. For example, Banas and Miller (2013) conducted an experiment based on the work put forward by Papageorgis and McGuire (1961). Their experiment refers to the inoculation theory which proved that exposure to factual information increases an individual's resistance to subsequent conspiracy theories. Other studies have also demonstrated that individuals have positive attitudes towards a vaccine when they have been previously exposed to vaccine related factual information (e.g., Loomba et al., 2021). However, when an individual is first exposed to an anti-vaccine conspiracy theory, the negative impact can be permanent (Jolley & Douglas, 2017; Uscinski et al., 2016). Similarly, Jolley and Douglas (2014) discovered a correlation between a high Measles, Mumps, Rubella

(MMR) vaccination hesitancy rate in UK and the vaccine's alleged connection with autism occurrence. Jolley and Douglas (2014) found individuals' attitudes towards vaccination were as a result in line with the type of information they were exposed to: exposure to anti-vaccine conspiracy supporting material correlated with a negative attitude towards vaccination. In the present context, recent studies have also proved that exposure to disinformation has caused a significant decline in people's intention to vaccinate against COVID-19 (Loomba et al., 2021; Romer & Jamieson, 2020; Roozenbeek et al., 2020). On the other hand, exposure to mainstream media information, specifically in the form of print news stories is associated with higher vaccination intentions in the USA (Romer & Jamieson, 2021).

Moreover, it seems that individuals who rely on social media platforms in order to get information on COVID-19-related topics are less likely to get a vaccine than those who rely on more traditional news sources (Bond, 2020). Besides, evidence from the early days of the COVID-19 outbreak in the US suggests that people who used online news stories as a source of information had more accurate opinions regarding protection from the disease. In contrast, the use of Facebook for the same reason was correlated with a higher rate of believing in fake narratives about the coronavirus and its alleged treatments (Jamieson & Albarracín, 2020). Moreover, according to a recent survey Gandhi (2021) found that more than 40% of Americans consider Facebook to be distrustful, while a high proportion (73%) agree that social media networks should fact-check all the available content on the platform. Thus, people's loss of trust in Facebook and in the content available on the platform could suggest that shared news on Facebook could have a lower impact than regular news. In Romania's case, this context is of utmost importance since Facebook, with over 12 million registered accounts, is the most widely used social media platform (NapoleonCat, 2021). Given this background, we hypothesize that:

- H1: Exposure to factual information about vaccination meant to debunk conspiracy theories and promote vaccination as a solution to the pandemic leads to higher acceptance of self-vaccination.
- H1a: Facebook shared factual information about vaccination meant to debunk conspiracy theories and promote vaccination as a pandemic solution is less effective than the content shared itself (online news story).

According to Loomba et al. (2021), it seems that individuals' willingness to vaccinate increases when the safety of close others is at stake, rather than when it comes to own health. However, when it comes to various forms of fake news (conspiracy theories included), few studies have concentrated on analyzing its third person effect (TPE) perception (for exceptions, see Corbu et al., 2020; Jang & Kim, 2018; Ștefăniță et al., 2018). Nevertheless, in Romania, people considered

their friends and family to be more influenced by fake news than themselves (Ștefăniță et al., 2018), thus having the perception that close others are more vulnerable to conspiracy theories. Therefore, in the context of the willingness of close others to vaccinate, we hypothesize that:

- H2: Exposure to factual information about vaccination meant to debunk conspiracy theories and promote vaccination as a solution to the pandemic leads to the perception that close others are less willing to get a vaccine. This might be the case, as people exposed to debunking information become arguably more aware of conspiracy theories and their misleading potential.
- H2a: Relative to the content, exposure to a Facebook shared story (either meant to debunk conspiracy theories or conspiracy-based) leads to the perception that close others have even lower levels of vaccine acceptance.

A similar argument supports perceptions about people in general. Recent evidence suggests that, at least in Romania, there is a solid TPE perception in own ability to detect fake news and that “this effect is stronger when people compare their fake news detection literacy to that of distant others than to that of close others” (Corbu et al., 2020, p. 165). Similarly, in the USA, studies have shown that the same outcome is relatable to political affiliation, in that both Democrats and Republicans considered each other’s to be more influenced by fake news than their in-group, and definitely more susceptible to become victims of conspiracy theories than themselves (Jang & Kim, 2018). Thus, in the context of the willingness of distant others to vaccinate, we assume that:

- H3: Exposure to factual information meant to debunk conspiracy theories around the virus and the vaccines leads to the perception that distant others are less willing to get a vaccine.
- H3a: Relative to the content shared itself, exposure to a Facebook shared story (either meant to debunk conspiracy theories or conspiracy-based) leads to the perception that people, generally, have lower levels of vaccine acceptance than in the case of information coming in the form of an online news story.

Lastly, in the context of own perception of self and others regarding the ability to detect fake news or an alleged immunization to the phenomenon, in Romania, a standard mental narrative could be identified: “I am aware that there are many fake news around, but it is surely them – my close friends and people in my network – who are mainly affected, as I am generally more aware” (Corbu et al., 2020, p. 176). This reasoning could also be adapted to individuals’ perception of conspiracy theories’ ability to alter judgment or opinions on the COVID-19 vaccine.

## METHODOLOGY

### EXPERIMENTAL DESIGN

To test the hypotheses, we set up a 2x2 between-subjects experiment, plus a control condition. The four experimental conditions are based on manipulated news stories, as follows: factual information about the virus and the vaccines meant to debunk conspiracy theories and promote vaccination as a solution to the pandemic vs. conspiracy-based information stating that the virus was manufactured in a lab and that vaccines could have serious dangerous effects such as autism and even death. People in the control condition did not receive any stimuli. These stories were also manipulated regarding the way they circulated in the public space – via online newspapers or via Facebook shared online news story. Thus, the four experimental conditions are: factual information about the virus and the vaccines meant to debunk conspiracy theories and promote vaccination as a solution to the pandemic posted via online newspapers (N=43); factual information about the virus and the vaccines meant to debunk conspiracy theories and promote vaccination as a solution to the pandemic shared via Facebook post (N=61); conspiracy-based information stating that the virus was manufactured in a lab and that vaccines could have serious dangerous effects such as autism and even death posted via online newspapers (N=62); conspiracy-based information stating that the virus was manufactured in a lab and that vaccines could have serious dangerous effects such as autism and even death shared via Facebook post (N=60), and control condition (N=75).

### SAMPLE

The experiment is based on a sample of 301 educated Romanian citizens with the right to vote, enrolled in a social sciences university in Romania. The mean age in the sample was 24.05 ( $SD=6.67$ ). The sample was skewed to some extent in the sense that women were overrepresented (79.7%). Data was collected during November 16 and December 3, 2020. At that time, no vaccine against COVID-19 had been authorized; on December 21 2020, the European Commission granted a conditional marketing authorization for the COVID-19 vaccine developed by BioNTech and Pfizer, making it the first COVID-19 vaccine authorized in the EU (European Commission, 2021a). 27 – 28 – 29 December 2020 were marked as the EU vaccination days; December 27, 2020 represented the day when the vaccination program was launched in EU27 (European Commission, 2021b).



## PROCEDURE

The questionnaire was created and distributed using Qualtrics Survey Software and comprised four parts: informed consent, a pre-test part consisting of demographics, moderators, and control variables, a random assignment to one of the four conditions (exposure to either conspiracy-based or anti-conspiracy news story shared via online newspapers or Facebook) plus control condition (no exposure), and a post-test part containing the dependent variables and the manipulation checks. Randomization was successful with regards to gender ( $F(4, 296)=.20, p=.94$ ), self-perceived religiosity ( $F(4, 296)=.117, p=.33$ ), frequency of going to the church ( $F(4, 296)=.52, p=.72$ ), and self-perceived incidence of fake news ( $F(4, 294)=.16, p=.96$ ). At the end of the survey, participants were debriefed and thanked.

## STIMULI

The stimuli were two types of posts: a news story posted via online newspapers vs. a news story shared on Facebook. The stories posted on the online newspaper's page had the same visual format, but the content followed either the anti-conspiracy or the conspiracy-based framing. The stories shared on Facebook were accompanied by high engagement metrics, in the form of comments (309), shares (21), and reactions (467), which were held constant across the two conditions involving Facebook news stories (see Appendix).

## MANIPULATION CHECKS

We used four manipulation check variables to test whether the stimuli were perceived as intended. People receiving an online news story answered significantly different to those receiving a Facebook shared news story regarding whether that particular story was shared on Facebook or not ( $F(1, 219)=18.92, p<.01$ ). At the same time, people receiving factual information about the virus and the vaccines meant to debunk conspiracy theories and promote vaccination as a solution to the pandemic answered significantly different to those receiving conspiracy-based information stating that the virus was manufactured in a lab and that vaccines could have serious dangerous effects such as autism and even death regarding the following items: 'The news story tackles vaccination as a solution to the pandemic' ( $F(1, 218)=37.68, p<.01$ ); 'The news story tackles the very serious effects of vaccination including autism' ( $F(1, 217)=210.22, p<.01$ ); 'The news story confirms the truth that the virus was manufactured in a lab' ( $F(1, 219)=121.93, p<.01$ ). People in the control group did not receive any news story.

## MEASURES

- *Acceptance of self-vaccination* was measured on a Likert scale from 1 (very unlikely) to 7 (very likely); respondents were asked whether they “would get a vaccine if one was available” ( $M=3.86$ ,  $SD=2.31$ ).
- *Perception regarding ‘close others’ willingness to get a vaccine* was measured on a Likert scale from 1 (very unlikely) to 7 (very likely); respondents were asked whether they think “their family and friends would get a vaccine if one was available” ( $M=3.82$ ,  $SD=1.94$ ).
- *Perception regarding ‘distant others’ willingness to get a vaccine* was measured on a Likert scale from 1 (very unlikely) to 7 (very likely); respondents were asked whether they think “people in general would get a vaccine if one was available” ( $M=3.78$ ,  $SD=1.57$ ).

## FINDINGS

We found significant effects of exposure to factual information posted via online newspapers on people’s self-vaccination acceptance. Specifically, compared to those who were not exposed to any news story (people in the control group), the exposure to factual information about vaccination meant to debunk conspiracy theories and promote vaccination as a solution to the pandemic leads to higher acceptance of self-vaccination (i.e., people are more prone to get vaccinated when exposed to such information) ( $b=.926$ ,  $SE=.46$ ,  $p<.05$ ). This holds true only for the information posted via online newspapers, therefore H1 was validated for this particular type of media content. To be more specific, our findings show that people develop higher levels of vaccine acceptance when exposed to factual, anti-conspiracy information from online news stories. However, relative to the news stories shared on Facebook, we found no significant effects regarding the greater effectiveness of the information posted via online newspapers, thus H1a was validated, in the sense that online news stories are the only type of content that could increase people’s willingness to get vaccinated, while the same information, via Facebook, is not powerful enough to elicit the same effect. This could be explained by the fact that people find information from social media less trustworthy than the information from other news sources (Jurkowitz & Mitchell, 2020). For descriptives, see Table 1.

In terms of effects of news exposure on people’s perception about the willingness of close others to get a vaccine, we found no statistically significant effects. Thus, H2 and H2a were invalidated.

On the other hand, we found significant effects of exposure (irrespective of the source) to both factual and conspiracy-based information on people’s perception towards others’ willingness to get a vaccine. Findings at this level show that

both the exposure to factual information about the virus and the vaccines meant to debunk conspiracy theories and promote vaccination as a solution to the pandemic and the exposure to conspiracy narratives (irrespective of the source) make people more aware of the misleading potential of conspiracy theories, thus leading to the perception that people in general are less willing to get a vaccine (in all the experimental conditions, the exposure to media information – irrespective of its form and source – led to the perception that other people are less willing to get a vaccine; all of them are significant at  $p < .1$ ).

**Table 1. Descriptives regarding the acceptance of self-vaccination, by experimental condition**

Experimental condition	Mean	N	Std. Deviation
Control	3.55	71	2.190
Factual information posted via online newspapers	4.48	40	2.276
Factual information shared on Facebook	3.97	60	2.292
Conspiracy-based information posted via online newspapers	3.69	59	2.416
Conspiracy-based information shared on Facebook	3.86	58	2.373
<b>Total</b>	<b>3.86</b>	<b>288</b>	<b>2.310</b>

Source: Authors

Specifically, the exposure to factual information about vaccination meant to debunk conspiracy theories and promote vaccination as a solution to the pandemic shared via Facebook ( $b = -.620$ ,  $SE = .28$ ,  $p < .05$ ) has almost the same impact as the exposure to conspiracy narratives posted via online newspapers ( $b = -.593$ ,  $SE = .28$ ,  $p < .05$ ), leading people to believe that distant others have lower levels of vaccine acceptance. Thus, H3 was validated and H3a was invalidated (for descriptives, see Table 2). The two types of content that had no significant effect are still marginally significant (for  $p < .1$ ), which makes us believe that, with stronger or repeated exposure to such information, people’s perception about other’s intention of vaccinating themselves could be influenced by any type of content concerning conspiracy theories, regardless of the medium, and the type of information (both conspiracy and factual information). This could be assimilated to a third person effect: by priming the conspiracy theory subject people become more aware of the issue of conspiracy beliefs that other might hold, and project onto them a lower willingness to vaccinated, when compared to the control group.

**Table 2. Descriptives regarding people’s perception about the others’ willingness to get a vaccine, by experimental condition**

Experimental condition	Mean	N	Std. Deviation
Control	4.20	69	1.481
Factual information posted via online newspaper	3.68	40	1.639
Factual information shared on Facebook	3.58	60	1.465
Conspiracy-based information posted via online newspapers	3.61	59	1.520
Conspiracy-based information shared on Facebook	3.72	58	1.715
<b>Total</b>	<b>3.78</b>	<b>286</b>	<b>1.566</b>

Source: Authors

A possible explanation is that media might function as awareness raising tools. Exposure to proper, factually based information has the potential to make people more aware of the dangers associated with various forms of problematic content, mainly in the context of the current pandemic. In other words, these findings shed light on the importance of the media themselves in the fight against wide-spread information pollution.

## DISCUSSION

Given the parallel “infodemic” (Bond, 2020; Zarocostas, 2020) surrounding the pandemic and its potential effects on people’s willingness to get vaccinated against COVID-19, our research aimed at better understanding the “information-related” factors that affect people’s intention to vaccinate in order to protect themselves and others. The findings we provide are illustrative for the young, educated Romanians’ attitudes and perspectives in times of severe health crisis, when public health communication efforts aimed at raising people’s awareness towards the benefits of large-scale vaccination were intense, but no vaccine was yet approved. The first COVID-19 vaccine authorization became effective in both the US and the EU ten days apart, at about one or two weeks after our data collection. In this context, we were eager to unveil if, relative to factual information, exposure to conspiracy-based information induced a decline in people’s intent to accept vaccination. Also, we wanted to acknowledge the potential link between the information sources that people use (online newspaper news versus Facebook post) and their levels of vaccine acceptance.

In line with recent studies (Loomba et al., 2021; Romer & Jamieson, 2020; Roozenbeek et al., 2020), our findings show that factually correct information intended to debunk conspiracy narratives and promote vaccination as a solution in eradicating the virus is associated with a rise in vaccination intent.

However, this holds true only for those people who were previously exposed to such information via online newspapers when compared with those in the control group who received no news story. In different words, people's exposure to factual information debunking conspiracy theories about vaccination posted via online newspapers has the potential to increase their willingness to accept a vaccine against COVID-19. Besides validating our first hypothesis for this particular type of content, this is an important result assessing what makes certain information content more likely to influence citizens' self-vaccination acceptance, which can be further used to design more effective public health communication strategies. Given that public health communication activities play an essential role in influencing people to achieve and promote protective, prosocial behaviour, it is important to understand that well documented narratives about vaccination that focus on real facts and accurate evidence from relevant experts may be the safest avenue to engage vaccine hesitant publics and achieve successful herd immunity.

Furthermore, our results showed no significant effect of the factual information about vaccination posted on Facebook on people's vaccination intent, which is in line with H1a in the sense that factual information is more effective in persuading people to vaccinate than Facebook post of the same content. Specifically, content meant to debunk conspiracy theories about vaccination and to promote large-scale inoculation as a solution to the pandemic is only effective as an online news story. When used as a Facebook post, the same content elicits no significant effect. One possible explanation could be that people trust much less the information received via social media (Gandhi, 2021; Jurkowitz & Mitchell, 2020), which does not influence their decision about vaccinating themselves any longer.

Regarding the exposure to factual information about vaccination meant to debunk conspiracy theories on people's perception about close others' willingness to receive a vaccine, we found no statistically significant effects. Similarly, our findings provided no important correlations to support our initial assumption that, relative to the content shared itself, exposure to a Facebook shared story (irrespective of its conspirative or anti-conspirative nature) fuel the perception that people's close others show an even lower intent to accept a COVID-19 vaccine. Thus, H2 and H2a were invalidated; this could be explained with reference to the main hypothesis supporting the TPE perception, in the sense that the magnitude of effects grows with social distance (Lee & Park, 2016), especially since hypotheses about distant others were validated in our study.

In this respect, our data show that people's perception towards distant others' vaccination intent is significantly influenced by their exposure (irrespective of the source) to both factual and conspiracy-based information. More specifically, we found that exposure to factual information shared on Facebook and conspiracy

information in the form of an online news story are both significant at  $p < .05$ , and exposure to conspiracy information shared on Facebook and factual online information are only significant at  $p < .1$ . The sample we used in this study is an educated one, which means that people are intrinsically less likely to believe conspiracy theories. Therefore, a possible explanation could be that by being exposed to both conspiracy narratives and grounded science-based messages (irrespective of their form and source) educated people become more informed and thus more reflective and aware of the misleading potential of conspiracy theories. By understanding more of the current context people will tend to reflect more, maybe turn less emotional about the pandemic or the vaccines. This may ultimately lead to increasing levels of vaccine acceptance in their own case and, at the same time, to the perception that other people will display lower levels of vaccine acceptance (by creating a sort of third person perception, that the others are not that well informed/ equipped to deal with this complicated situation). Our findings (validating H3) are in line with recent evidence that suggests a solid TPE among Romanians concerning their own ability to detect fake news or misleading information (Corbu et al., 2020; Ștefăniță et al., 2018). Naturally, this effect is always stronger when people compare their own capacities (whether is fake news detection literacy, general media influence, or vulnerability in front of conspiracies) to those of distant others.

## CONCLUSIONS

The next major step in fighting and containing SARS-CoV-2, the virus responsible for the worldwide pandemic is, undoubtedly, mass vaccination and immunization. Even though the widespread acceptance of a vaccine against COVID-19 in overcoming the current pandemic is essential, it is also a challenging public issue. As our findings show, this challenge may become even more accentuated in today's digital ecosystem populated by various forms of problematic content hindering factual data about the pandemic, the virus, and the vaccines containing it (Burki, 2019; Loomba et al., 2021). Equally, the spread of conspiracy theories regarding the vaccine (that fuel confusion and concerns) have the potential to seriously impede its high uptake among the public (O'Neill & Manveen, 2020).

In this context, the need for factual information in relation to vaccines' safety and effectiveness is of utmost importance. Based on our results and on previous research (Banas & Miller, 2013), we argue that, when confronted with factual information, people's resistance to subsequent conspiracy theories increases. Following the same line, there are studies showing that people may develop positive attitudes towards a vaccine if previously exposed to vaccine-related factual information. Yet, the opposite reasoning is also true, i.e., if first exposed to anti-vaccine conspiracy theories, the negative impact can be permanent (Jolley

& Douglas, 2017; Uscinski et al., 2016). Our study shows that, at least among young, educated people, exposure to conspiracy narratives only influence peoples' perceptions about others' willingness to take the vaccine, but not themselves. Vaccination communication efforts should, therefore, complement and endorse other immunization components. Policymakers and political leaders should place health communication interventions among their top priorities and benefit from reliable media coverage in order to improve people's access to authentic data, combat rumours that disseminate misleading and false information and contribute to the building of a functional health system.

In conclusion, an aspect beyond doubt is that people's willingness to accept a COVID-19 vaccine (whether for self or other's benefit) is not fixed or static. It is rather volatile, constantly evolving, and deeply shaped by current information and perceptions around the available vaccines, the risk of contracting the disease, the potential adverse events following immunization, the evolution of the epidemic, and many others alike. Still, as our study emphasizes, a rise in vaccination acceptance may be obtained by exposing people to factual information which may be helpful not only by increasing vaccination knowledge and awareness, but also by making people realize the misleading potential of conspiracy narratives and plots. Thus, an effective media communication of factually correct vaccine-related information remains crucial to limit conflicting claims about vaccination, prevent vaccine-sceptical attitudes to escalate, and help citizens understand more of the problematic times they are living in. Enhanced knowledge and familiarity with all these sensitive topics may ultimately make citizens becoming more inclined to adopt rules and promote a socially respectful behavior (i.e., take a vaccine and contribute to achieving community-level immunity).

## LIMITATIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH

We have to acknowledge that such results are significant only with reference to young, educated people. Thus, in a broader context, it becomes necessary to take into account the important role the media play in raising awareness of the dangers associated with conspiracy theories about the virus and the vaccines among educated people. We also acknowledge that as the sample was insufficiently diverse, we cannot generalize results at the level of an entire population. It might be the case that education, influencing people's beliefs about conspiracy narratives, play a key role in this type of effects. Additionally, results are bound to the Romanian context. We could not emphasize enough the need for future comparative research, investigating possible predictors of vaccine acceptance. Further studies could also explore the possible variables that might moderate these effects, specifically education and any beliefs (including belief in conspiracy theories about vaccines and vaccination).

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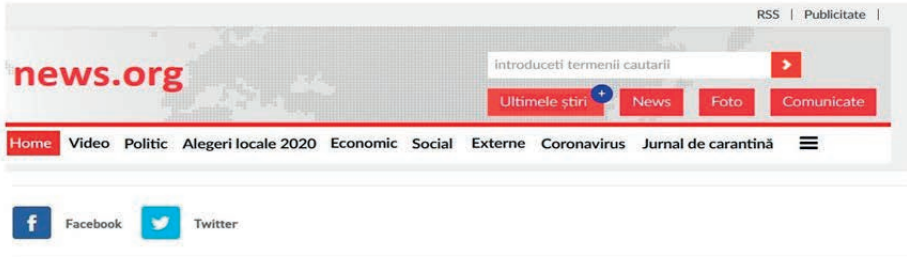


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## APPENDIX. EXPERIMENTAL CONDITIONS

### FACTUAL INFORMATION POSTED VIA ONLINE NEWSPAPERS (RO)



### Coronavirusul și pericolele nevaccinării

Recent, mai mulți experți virusologi, printre care reprezentanți ai Organizației Mondiale a Sănătății, s-au declarat uimiți de nebunia lumii în care trăim. Prin prisma propriilor experiențe, oamenii de știință au demontat ideea falsă că acest virus a fost creat în laborator, iar gestionarea pandemiei ar fi un experiment de manipulare la nivel mondial. Cel mai periculos, însă, este faptul că oamenii ar putea refuza să se vaccineze, știut fiind faptul că vaccinurile sunt singura soluție reală de a pune capăt pandemiei. „Medicamentele ar trebui să fie disponibile pentru toată lumea”, a declarat reprezentantul Organizației Mondiale a Sănătății...

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**FACTUAL INFORMATION POSTED VIA ONLINE NEWSPAPERS (EN)**

**Coronavirus and the dangers of non-vaccination**

Recently, several virology experts, including representatives of the World Health Organization, said they were amazed by the madness of the world we live in. In the light of their own experiences, scientists have debunked the false claims that this virus was manufactured in a lab and the pandemic management is a global manipulation experiment. However, the most dangerous thing is that people may refuse to get vaccinated, despite the fact that vaccines are the only real solution to end the pandemic. “Drugs should be available to everyone”, the representative of the World Health Organization said...

Read more...

**FACTUAL INFORMATION SHARED VIA FACEBOOK (RO)**



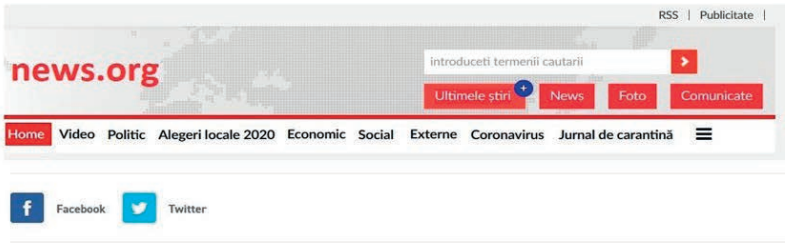
The image shows a Facebook post from Gabi Popescu, posted 10 hours ago. The post features a news article from 'news.org' with the title 'Coronavirusul și pericolele nevaccinării'. The article text, written in Romanian, discusses the surprise of scientists who have debunked the false claim that the coronavirus was manufactured in a lab. It states that the most dangerous aspect is people's refusal to get vaccinated, despite vaccines being the only real solution. The article also mentions that drugs should be available to everyone. The post has 467 reactions (likes, hearts, and emojis) and 309 comments and 21 shares. At the bottom of the post are buttons for 'Like', 'Comment', and 'Share'.

**FACTUAL INFORMATION SHARED VIA FACEBOOK (EN)**

**Coronavirus and the dangers of non-vaccination**

Recently, several virology experts, including representatives of the World Health Organization, said they were amazed by the madness of the world we live in. In the light of their own experiences, scientists have debunked the false claims that this virus was manufactured in a lab and the pandemic management is a global manipulation experiment. However, the most dangerous thing is that people may refuse to get vaccinated, despite the fact that vaccines are the only real solution to end the pandemic. “Drugs should be available to everyone”, the representative of the World Health Organization said...

CONSPIRACY-BASED INFORMATION POSTED VIA ONLINE NEWSPAPERS (RO)



**Așa zisul virus și pericolele vaccinării**

Recent, mai mulți experți virusologi, printre care Luc Montagnier, laureat Nobel, s-au declarat uimiți de nebunia lumii în care trăim. Prin prisma propriilor experiențe, oamenii de știință au constatat că acest virus a fost creat în laborator, iar gestionarea pandemiei este un experiment de manipulare la nivel mondial. Cel mai periculos, însă, este faptul că oamenii vor fi vaccinați în masă, știut fiind faptul că vaccinurile pot avea efecte adverse foarte grave, printre care autismul sau chiar moartea. „Medicamentele nu ar trebui săucidă”, a declarat Montagnier...

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CONSPIRACY-BASED INFORMATION POSTED VIA ONLINE NEWSPAPERS (EN)

**The so-called virus and the dangers of vaccination**

Recently, several virology experts, including Nobel Laureate Luc Montagnier, said they were amazed by the madness of the world we live in. In the light of their own experiences, scientists have found that this virus was manufactured in a lab and that the pandemic management is a global manipulation experiment. However, the most dangerous thing is that there will be a mass vaccination process, despite the fact that vaccines can have very serious side effects, including autism or even death. “Drugs shouldn’t kill”, Montagnier said...

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### CONSPIRACY-BASED INFORMATION SHARED VIA FACEBOOK (RO)



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#### Așa zisul virus și pericolele vaccinării

Recent, mai mulți experți virusologi, printre care Luc Montagnier, laureat Nobel, s-au declarat uimiți de nebunia lumii în care trăim. Prin prisma propriilor experiențe, oamenii de știință au constatat că acest virus a fost creat în laborator, iar gestionarea pandemiei este un experiment de manipulare la nivel mondial. Cel mai periculos, însă, este faptul că oamenii vor fi vaccinați în masă, știut fiind faptul că vaccinurile pot avea efecte adverse foarte grave, printre care autismul sau chiar moartea. „Medicamentele nu ar trebui să ucidă”, a declarat Montagnier...

👍❤️😬 467

309 Comments 21 Shares

👍 Like    💬 Comment    ➦ Share

### CONSPIRACY-BASED INFORMATION SHARED VIA FACEBOOK (EN)

#### The so-called virus and the dangers of vaccination

Recently, several virology experts, including Nobel Laureate Luc Montagnier, said they were amazed by the madness of the world we live in. In the light of their own experiences, scientists have found that this virus was manufactured in a lab and that the pandemic management is a global manipulation experiment. However, the most dangerous thing is that there will be a mass vaccination process, despite the fact that vaccines can have very serious side effects, including autism or even death. “Drugs shouldn’t kill”, Montagnier said...

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# Exploring Visual Culture of COVID-19 Memes: Russian and Chinese Perspectives

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**ABSTRACT:** The article explores COVID-19 related Internet memes and treats them as samples of creolized text in a study of the way ethnic and cultural peculiarities of memes are perceived by representatives of two radically different cultural paradigms: the Russians and Chinese. A survey is used as a method of the investigation. Russian and Chinese students, and visual arts experts evaluated Russian and Chinese COVID-19 memes according to several criteria concerning their content, verbal constituent element and visual characteristics. The study concluded that the social and culture-specific components mostly contribute to forming the opinion of the meme and its appreciation. Awareness of both the cultural background and the current social and nation-specific situation is required to decode a full amount of information contained in a meme. Equally important is the visual component in understanding the meme. Thus, the study contributes not only to studying event-specific memes but also broadens the scope of research on memes as a sample of visual culture.

**KEYWORDS:** Chinese, COVID-19; cultural paradigm; digital memes; visual language; Russian.

## INTRODUCTION

Information in today's media sphere is transmitted through a variety of verbal, visual, and auditory channels, using numerous codes, such as cultural, ideological, linguistic, semantic, stylistic, graphics, etc. In this context, the phenomenon of the Internet meme, which promptly responds to a newsworthy event and has a viral nature, reflects a wide variety of opportunities for multichannel communication (Blackmore, 1999; Brodie, 1996; Castaño, 2013; Chaoqun & Ziran, 2007; Shomova, 2018; Wiggins & Bowers, 2015). At the same time, the Internet meme carries verbal and visual codes of various etymologies and offers a unique opportunity to study the ethnocultural features of the contemporary media discourse.

## MEME AS A PART OF VISUAL CULTURE

The study fits in a broader theoretical paradigm of culture studies, along with visual culture and visual design studies. Following Kress and van Leeuwen (2020), we examine the ways in which images communicate meaning, keeping in mind that “visual language is not transparent and universally understood, but culturally specific” (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2020, p. 3). By comparing Internet memes in this study as examples of mediated images (Aiello & Parry, 2019), we focus on aspects of culture that are deemed to be represented in visual form. As earlier discussed by Shifman (2014a, 2014b), we believe that memes may serve as valuable keys for understanding broader dimensions of digital culture. Today, Internet memes represent a new genre of online communication, and an understanding of their production, dissemination, and implications in the real world enables an improved ability to navigate digital culture (Wiggins, 2019). In this paper, we show that the perception of memes as elements of visual communication differs between the two groups: Russians and Chinese. We argue that cultural specifics can affect the way people perceive and interpret the rapidly changing digitalized reality around them.

Here we also refer to the ‘meme culture’ that in recent years has attracted extensive exploration. In this vein, Iloh (2021, p. 3) positions memes as “units that reflect specific contexts and meanings discernable to some and less discernible to others”. Some people know, while others may not, the cultural meaning contained and reflected in memes. The inquiry into the cultural information contained in memes has the potential to explicate the ideas, values, repertoires, practices, and conditions that comprise culture (Iloh, 2021, p. 3). Aiello and Parry (2019) show that visual images can be central to understanding culture and its representations, along with peoples’ identities. Their study specifically explores ‘the role played by visual images in the shaping and maintaining of identities’ (Aiello



& Parry, 2019, p. 3). We expect this paper therefore to contribute to a broader academic discussion about the relationship between visual images, cultures and identities by exploring and in a way juxtaposing the perception of these two quite diverse ethnic and cultural groups – the Russians and Chinese.

Lastly, we rely in this study on current studies on data visualization, another research area that scholars have in recent years deeply explored. The latest book by Manovich (2020) draws linkages between data visualization, digital culture studies, data science and media studies and further develops concepts of ‘cultural software’ and ‘information aesthetics’ suggested in previous works (Manovich, 2017). Large scale projects by Manovich, as well the studies conducted on internet platforms such as Selfiecity, Phototrails and Visual Earth, show that a boundary between science and art is becoming increasingly blurred. Today, there is a clearly a need for new terms, methods and approaches for conceptualizing our rapidly changing digital media landscape, where new languages, forms and representations are constantly emerging and evolving. The study of Internet memes with their growing popularity and role in current visual communication process therefore fits this niche perfectly.

The present research applies the Cultural Discourse Studies (CDS) theoretical paradigm to Internet memes and treats them as samples of using visual culture. We follow Shi-xu (2016, p. 3) to argue that nowadays human discourse is being re-conceptualized as a multi-faceted but integrated communicative event, which manifests social interaction using linguistic and other symbolic means and mediums in historical and cultural relations. The focus of our research is the interrelationship between linguistic means (oral or written) and the contextual meaning implicitly encoded in acts of human communication illustrated by comparing and confronting groups of Russians and the Chinese. Though being one of crucial issues of CDS studies, the topic has remained insufficiently considered in academic literature, especially as regards non-Western contexts (Batibo, 2009), and thus it deserves extensive investigation.

The contrast of ‘meaning-in-language vs meaning-beyond-language’ introduced by Shi-xu (2009, p. 35) describes the way cultural differences contribute to and somewhat shape differences which take place in historical and cultural contexts. Therefore, the aspect to be investigated is a close connection between linguistic means and visual culture elements on the one hand and their context on the other, not a series of isolated images and representations. Cross-cultural studies based on several national contexts (e.g., Russian and Chinese) are considered to be one of the most demonstrative approaches to discuss the role context plays in language, discourse and communication studies. They are also a way to represent culture through various forms and genres of spoken and written texts (including memes, which are a new form of communication).

However, when it comes to the interplay between textual and visual forms and contexts, another major aspect needs to be emphasized. Cultural and CDS analyses require adopting a less West-centric approach, since ‘Eastern wisdoms in understanding the universe can also be mobilized for the paradigmatic reconstruction, for identity, creativity and authenticity’ (Shi-xu, 2009, p. 38). Therefore, having selected Russian and Chinese contexts for the current research we intended to shift academic focus to Eastern paradigms, including ‘Emerging States’ among others, as they are currently understudied (Vartanova & Gladkova, 2020; Vartanova et al., 2021).

A visual language is primarily considered by researchers as a complex semiotic structure; the components of this structure interact with each other depending on their functions and position in the general hierarchy of the system of signs. The visual language may be defined as a code system of signs which acquire the status of non-linear visual images in the process of communication, information and knowledge transfer, and other functions. The key function of the components of the visual language is to ensure correct perception of signs and convey the whole meaning of visual messages.

The visual language as a special system of signs has a dual nature: it is a combination of graphic and expressive principles driven by unique sign references. Implications are realized through both general principles of sign formation (formation of forms, composition, rhythm, cadence, and rhythmometry dynamics) and specific principles, such as color, light and shade relations. Implications are usually associated with reconstruction or transformation of the original image, i.e., about the reproduction, interpretation, compilation, and imitation of original signs (Lobodanov, 2013, pp. 135-178).

The impact of implications on sensitivities in the social and cultural perception depends on their producer and the method of sign exchange. The audience may have no special sign formation skills and therefore no sign behavior. In this case, sign exchange is unidirectional: it is directed from the producer of signs to the audience but not the other way around. Moreover, the property of “imagery” in the content of signs is not supplemented by mutual logical or conceptual interpretability, as is the case with signs of the verbal language. For this reason, sign communication in the visual language system is carried out with other characteristics of individual perception than in verbal communication. Here, the level of understanding is crucially dependent on worldview contexts.

In terms of linguistics, the meme is a text containing both verbal and visual components (Sorokin & Tarasov, 1990, p. 180). Dawkins suggests that a meme better captures the linkage between culture and memory (Dawkins, 1989, p. 192).

However, as Wiggins suggests

enthymeme better captures the essence of internet memes as a digital phenomenon marked not by imitation but by the capacity to propose or counter a discursive argument through visual and often also verbal interplay; the emphasis here is on those internet memes which inhere a critical component of society, politics, etc. Enthymeme conceptually designates the fundamental differences between meme and internet meme from an orthographic as well as an etymological standpoint (Wiggins, 2019, pp. 16-17).

The visual component of the meme involves illustrative (photo, drawn picture, infographics, animated cartoon image, reproduction, collage) and graphic (using font or decoration) design. Therefore, a meme is a complex convergence of linguistic, extralinguistic, and precedent knowledge (Kartashova & Akhmedzianova, 2019).

Verbal and visual components of a meme can correlate as follows: they can be interdependent, i.e., the image depends on the text, without which the meaning of the image is lost or can be incorrectly decoded by the recipient, or they can be independent, i.e., the verbal commentary performs a complementary function. To accurately analyze and perceive memes, the viewer needs some certain knowledge (presuppositions), including extralinguistic (social knowledge, knowledge of science, culture, and history), logical (the idea of natural relations between events), and linguistic presuppositions (knowledge of language reality, set expressions, and graphic means important for the perception of implicit information). Deciphering the visual codes of memes requires an understanding of graphics (features of color, background, size, shape, etc.) and historical and cultural knowledge (information about the depicted object, person, event, or phenomenon). However, even if the recipient does have the required knowledge, it is not a guarantee of successful perception: the perception of denotative information does not pose a problem for the recipient, as it is based on general knowledge, while the decoding of the connotative code, which contains the information based on associative bonds, requires additional background knowledge. The most important element of social and cultural communication is the image created through metaphors, semantics, associativity, and the principles of imaginative thinking. It seems necessary to take these specific features into account when studying Internet memes in the context of media discourse of such diametrically opposed cultures as Russian and Chinese (Davison, 2012; Shi-xu, 2014; Vartanova, 2019; Vartanova, Cherevko, Tolokonnikova & Dunas, 2019; Yunhui, 2010; Dunas & Vartanov, 2020).

Within this approach, it is beneficial to use a typology suggested by L. Shifman (2013) for the analysis of Internet memes, consisting of content (the idea and ideology a meme conveys), form (an aspect Shifman calls the “physical incarnation

of the message”, but which I will adjust to mean the memetic category of utility), and stance (which “depicts the ways in which addressers position themselves in relation to the text, the linguistic codes, the addressees, and other potential speakers”) (Shifman, 2013, p. 367).

Researchers in the field of psychology note that such a global challenge as the COVID-19 pandemic has increased the risks for mental health: some affected individuals have been reported to exhibit stress, anxiety, depressive symptoms, fear, denial, and anger (Kang et al., 2020; Pestova & Safonov, 2020). Semiotically, users employ the meme to convey dark humor representative of some aspect of modern society or a current event: “The boulder [*which killed the Pompeii Victim*, authors], with its lethal power, forces the victim, dead for over 2,000 years, to live again, memetically, only to be killed recursively in the force of the meme’s function (also) as a joke” (Wiggins, 2019, p. 18).

Indeed, the level of stress that people all over the world have experienced and still experience in these new circumstances is significant, which cannot but lead to serious consequences such as the impact impairing individuals’ immune systems (Tao, 2006), negative impacts on daily life and reduced well-being (Holbrook et al., 2005) and others. In particular, the researchers find it important to analyze the mental state of people from different age groups in such conditions, including students’ mental health (Jieling et al., 2014), as well as potentially aggravating students’ psychological distress during the COVID-19 outbreak (Xiao Zh. & Benxian Y., 2020).

To understand the role of media as a tool that individuals can use to manage the stresses caused by events such as the COVID-19 pandemic, recent research showing the aspects of the problem has been useful (Smirnova et al., 2020; Fang & Haochen, 2020; Xiao & Benxian, 2020).

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

The purpose of the study is to analyze and compare visual perceptions of Internet memes related to the COVID-19 pandemic by graphic arts experts, artists, arts and culture researchers, and young people (students) from Russia and China.

The study focuses on ethnocultural sensitivities in the visual perception of Internet memes related to the COVID-19 pandemic by representatives of Russian and Chinese cultures. The research involved two groups of participants: undergraduate and master students of faculty of psychology and faculty of arts (aged 18-23, n=108) affiliated to Russian and Chinese universities accordingly, and university educated experts in visual arts and culture (n=12, aged 25-65) affiliated to the faculties of arts and cultural studies at Russian and Chinese universities. The study design splits the process into two phases. The first involved

the students, Chinese (n=50) and Russian (n=58), while the second involved the experts, Chinese (n=6) and Russian (n=6). COVID-19 related memes from Russia and China formed the material of the study. The survey in both rounds offered the participants a questionnaire containing multiple-choice questions and the possibility to add comments if needed.

Russian and Chinese memes used as the material for the study were selected randomly relying on the authors' subjective evaluation, judging which samples may be more semantically loaded and the interpretation of which might presuppose a solid cultural-specific background. Memes needed to meet criteria to be included in the study. They had to have a distinctive visual component that could be represented by any object (people, flora and fauna, symbols, etc.) and have any format, i.e., realistic and fantasy images, photographs, drawings, paintings. The memes were borrowed from traditional media (print press, tv broadcast) memes (N=400), and also digital (Internet) memes (N=267) were selected, which Chinese and Russian students (5 of each) collected between April 15 and May 15, 2020. Based on the selection criteria, the study chose 10 memes, 5 Chinese and 5 Russian that were the most illustrative.

To evaluate the selected memes, the study developed a perception test questionnaire, which was used in both phases of the study. Participants (both students and experts) were sent the questionnaire and the memes to their email addresses. In the first phase, the students had to indicate their liking using the scores from 3 to 0 (where 3 was high; 2 was medium; 1 was low; and 0 was neutral) for each of the 11 characteristics listed for each meme, which were as follows (displayed in *italics* throughout the text, as well as the additional comments provided by respondents): *interesting – boring, relevant – outdated, important – useless, bright – obscure, cheerful – depressing, thought-provoking – not thought-provoking, smart and inventive – unoriginal, attractive – annoying, hinting – straightforward, meaningful – banal, kind – grim.*

The students were also asked: to suggest a name for each meme, the most popular of which was selected; to describe the mood and associations evoked by the meme; as well as to rate each on a 5-point numerical scale with '5' as the highest score. In addition, each respondent was asked in an open question to give a brief verbal description to each meme. In the second phase, the experts used the same perception test to positively or negatively evaluate the same 11 characteristics of each meme. In addition, the experts had to rate, on a scale from one to five, the visual features of each meme. The experts were also asked to provide a detailed description of those visual features, including the meme's visual idea, choice of composition and colors, general visual form of the meme, and the relationship between the visual and text images.

The hypothesis of the study is that the perception of image reality, which manifests as the relationship between the universal and the particular or the


subjective and the objective, is fundamentally influenced by social and cultural aspects. Social, worldview, cultural, ethical, professional, and other contexts generate image realities that are unique for each social and cultural group. The interpretation of memes as a genre of image reality is based on the joint functioning of three interrelated elements: the visual imagery, the verbal component, and the socio-cultural image. Furthermore, precedence is the key component of memes, since the lack of background knowledge and the failure to understand the cultural code embedded in the meme prevent the “decoding” of semantics and, in fact, desemanticize the meme.

## RESULTS

This section indicates the results of questionnaire responses of the participants (12 experts and 108 students from Russia and China) and conducts a comparative analysis of their evaluation of the 10 Internet memes related to the COVID-19 pandemic. Each meme has a Table which shows both the criteria for evaluating the memes on a scale from 1 to 5 and the average scores of the experts and students.

The paper will then present quantitative characteristics of the memes (see the figures in the corresponding tables) and qualitative assessments given by the respondents during the experiment.

Table 1. Evaluation of the Russian meme “TV Show”



Experts				
	RU	CH	avg	
Visual idea of the meme	2.8	2.3	2.5	
Choice of composition	3.3	2.3	3.8	
Choice of colors	3.3	2.5	3.0	
Visual form of the meme in general	3.1	2.8	3.0	
Relationship between visual and text images of the meme	4.1	3.1	3.6	
Overall score given by experts (visual and text elements)	3.0	2.7	2.8	
Students				
	RU	CH	avg	
Overall score given by students (visual and text elements)	3.0	2.7	2.9	

Note: Russian language question and answers in English: “What day is today?” A. Friday. B. Saturday. C. Wednesday. D. Monday

The text in this meme is important [to speakers of Russian] because if they were erased the concept of the meme would lose its meaning. This meme is one of those visual images that mass audiences can easily decode because it is an actual scene from the TV show *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?* The text and the body language of the woman contestant are also quite unoriginal and international. Indeed, the meme got almost the same scores from the Russian and Chinese students and experts, but the key qualitative characteristics were different.

Experts from Russia described the meme as banal, cliched, and stereotypical; the visual idea is not original. The opinion of the Chinese experts was divided: some participants did not understand the idea; others thought it was not of current interest, and yet others said the meme was interesting. The students had a better understanding of meme's meaning noting that it is *important, relevant, creative, attractive, meaningful, kind, and cheerful*. The experts gave a higher score to characteristics and gave additional comments of the memes evaluating them as *thought-provoking* and *smart and inventive*. The following paired categories were rated with the greatest difference: *cheerful : depressing* (a difference of 1.7 points), *kind : grim* (a difference of 1.6 points), and *meaningful : banal* (a difference of 1.5 points).

The Russian experts unanimously gave a higher score to the visual component across all categories: visual idea, choice of composition and colors, visual form, and the relationship between the visual and text images. The higher score given by the Russian experts may be because, for Russian viewers, memes based on footage from this TV show are familiar and have quite stable semiotics. As a rule, memes referring to a show or a film are a combination of two components, a question with a presupposition and answers that are either completely inappropriate or duplicate each other (verbal component) and a contestant with a serious, puzzled expression (visual component). The combination of a preposterous question with answers and a contestant deep in thought highlights the absurdity of the situation.

The respondents gave the highest score to the relationship between the visual and text images, since it is the combination of verbal and visual components that plays a crucial role in “decoding” semantics in this case. However, it is utterly predictable that the Russian speakers were able to better grasp how the elements are interrelated (the scores differ by as much as one point: 4.1 by the Russian experts vs. 3.1 by the Chinese experts).

Table 2. Evaluation of the Russian meme “Cat”

	Experts			
	RU	CH	avg	
	Visual idea of the meme	3.8	3.3	3.5
	Choice of composition	4.0	2.8	3.4
	Choice of colors	3.6	2.3	3.0
	Visual form of the meme in general	3.8	3.5	3.6
	Relationship between visual and text images of the meme	3.3	3.8	3.5
	Overall score given by experts (visual and text elements)	3.6	3.5	3.5
	Students			
	RU	CH	avg	
Overall score given by students (visual and text elements)	3.4	3.4	3.4	

Note: Translation from Russian: Come up and sit down: we need to talk. Igor, when are going to work

This meme is based on the anthropomorphism of the cat as the master of the house who allows people live on its territory but only under certain conditions. The image is well known on the Internet. The text and the image are interrelated and of equal value: the verbal component in this case supports the semantics of the visual image. It would be impossible to interpret the meme without background knowledge and similarly, the meme loses its semantic load if it is not supported by the text.

This meme was rated higher than the previous one by the Russian and Chinese respondents. The students and the experts gave it almost the same score: 3.4 vs. 3.6, respectively. Both respondent groups gave high scores to *understandability, kindness, attractiveness, and relevance* of the meme. Unlike the previous meme, this meme got a higher score in terms of *creativity* being rated 4.8 by the experts and 4.2 by the students. However, such criteria as *importance, thought-provoking ability, and meaningfulness* were rated as average.

While the visual form of the meme got approximately the same score from the Russian and Chinese experts (3.8 and 3.5 points, respectively), it is worth noting that the relationship between the visual and text images of the memes was rated by the Chinese experts higher than by the Russian experts (3.8 vs. 3.3).

The Russian experts gave quite a high score to the visual idea of the meme, whereas the Chinese experts did not find it interesting: the Russian experts gave higher scores to the choice of composition and colors (4 and 3.6, respectively).



Interestingly, the Chinese experts in their free responses emphasize the facial expression of the cat and the preference for animal images in memes. As for the Russian experts, they claim that such stories are often used in memes and therefore lack originality; however, they consider such memes to be positive and appropriate.

Therefore, despite the general positive impressions of the meme and the positive emotions it evokes in all recipients, the hackneyed image of the cat has resulted in lower scores for the criteria of visuality.

Table 3. Evaluation of the Russian meme “Green”

	Experts		
	RU	CH	avg
Visual idea of the meme	3.8	3.0	3.4
Choice of composition	4.0	2.8	3.6
Choice of colors	3.6	3.0	3.3
Visual form of the meme in general	3.8	3.5	3.6
Relationship between visual and text images of the meme	3.3	3.5	3.4
Overall score given by experts (visual and text elements)	3.6	3.5	3.5
	Students		
	RU	CH	avg
Overall score given by students (visual and text elements)	3.2	3.0	3.1



Note: Translation from Russian: Guard in black: Show me your QR-code. Man in Green: Go on your way, stalker

Unlike the previous two memes, “Green” belongs to a series of memes created by art illustrator M. Sidorenko (whose digital byline is *konhis*), which can be interpreted relying on the image solely, without considering can be deciphered the verbal component: the dialog accompanies the visual image, supplementing the message with universal background knowledge.

This meme got a higher overall score of 3.5 from the experts than from the students who rated it at 3.1, with the least difference between the Russian and Chinese respondents, which is due to the international nature of the meme’s key images.

Remarkably, the Russian and Chinese participants interpreted the mood of the meme in diametrically opposite ways, although in both cases the quantitative indicators were close to neutral. The Russian respondents, both experts

and students, tended to consider the meme rather *grim* (rated 2.6 by the experts and 2.9 by the students), whereas the Chinese respondents, by contrast, said that it was *kind* and *bright* (5.3 and 4.5, respectively). Moreover, the Chinese respondents found it more interesting (the average score is 4.9), *relevant* (5.6), and *important* (5.3). The Russian respondents gave higher scores for *meaningful* (5.1) and *smart and inventive*, the latter being much more highly rated by the students than the experts (5.8 vs. 4).

The visual idea of the meme received better recognition from the Russian experts. Their scores for the choice of composition (4), choice of colors (3.6), and visual form (3.8) were substantially higher than those by their Chinese colleagues. However, the relationship between the visual and text images of the meme was rated slightly higher by the Chinese experts (3.5) than the Russian ones; in their free responses, most Chinese experts stated that the story was interesting, funny, and self-explanatory and that it reflected the reality.

The Russian experts gave varied comments. Most of them believe that the meme has an original idea and is relevant; others failed to understand or appreciate it. Perhaps such a discrepancy, which is especially noticeable among the Russian experts, may stem from the instance that if the recipient has no knowledge of the “fans’ universe”, its characters and vocabulary, it will be difficult to decipher the connotative code of the meme.

Table 4. Evaluation of the Russian meme “Boys”

	Experts			
	Scores (5 to 1)	RU	CH	avg
Visual idea of the meme	4.6	4.3	4.5	
Choice of composition	4.5	4.5	4.5	
Choice of colors	4.5	4.2	4.4	
Visual form of the meme in general	4.3	4.2	4.3	
Relationship between visual and text images of the meme	4.1	4.2	4.1	
Overall score given by experts (visual and text elements)	4.5	4.0	4.2	
Students				
	RU	CH	avg	
Overall score given by students (visual and text elements)	3.7	3.6	3.7	



Note: Translation from Russian: Moscow residents are changing the number of their apartment building to be allowed to go for a walk

This is based on the reproduction of the painting by Fyodor Reshetnikov “For Peace!” (Za Mir!) (1950). The respondents gave it the highest score, even though the story is about the restrictions imposed in Moscow in summer 2020, when each apartment block required an official walking schedule. Yet, the survey demonstrated that the meaning of the meme was clear even to an international audience. It is interesting to note that the meme is effective only when the visual and verbal components are considered simultaneously: unlike the meme “Green” (Table 3), the inscription here performs a supportive sense-making, rather than an auxiliary, function.


The Russian and Chinese students were more critical in their evaluation (3.7 and 3.6, respectively) than the experts (the meme was rated 4.5 by the Russian experts and 4 by the Chinese experts). At the same time, the Russian students did not find the meme interesting, whereas the Chinese respondents (both students and experts) and the Russian experts rated this criterion quite highly (5.1 to 5.4). All the groups mentioned that the meme is *attractive*, *creative*, *meaningful*, and *relevant*. Nevertheless, the Chinese students and experts rated the *thought-provoking* ability of the meme twice as high as the Russians. Moreover, the Russian experts do not think that the meme was either *relevant* or *important*. The score for the mood criterion shows the greatest difference of one point: the students from both groups said that the meme made them feel better, whereas the experts’ opinion was more neutral.

When evaluating the visual language of the memes, the experts from both countries were almost unanimous and gave high scores across all criteria. At the same time, the visual idea of the meme and the choice of colors seemed more expressive to the Russian experts (a rating of 4.6), whereas the relationship between the text and visual components got a slightly higher score from their Chinese colleagues. The respondents from both countries were unanimous in their high score (4.5) for the choice of composition. The choice of colors and the warm colors of the painting seemed more appropriate to the Russian experts than to their Chinese colleagues (4.5 vs. 4.2).

In their free responses, the Chinese experts gave positive feedback characterizing the color, style, and drawing technique as “good”; they also mentioned the expressive form. The opinion of the Russian experts was divided: some experts noted the interesting solution and originality, while others emphasized the propaganda message and the controversial use of socialist realism paintings as memes.

Therefore, the combination of the reproduction, which forms the basis of the meme and has artistic merits (elaborate form, composition, and choice of colors), and the original idea of the meme has had a positive impact on the scores among all groups of recipients.

Table 5. Evaluation of the Russian meme “Hedgehog”



	Experts		
	RU	CH	avg
Visual idea of the meme	3.6	3.8	3.7
Choice of composition	3.5	3.6	3.5
Choice of colors	4.0	3.2	3.5
Visual form of the meme in general	3.5	3.6	3.5
Relationship between visual and text images of the meme	3.5	3.3	3.4
Overall score given by experts (visual and text elements)	3.6	3.3	3.5
	Students		
	RU	CH	avg
Overall score given by students (visual and text elements)	3.3	3.5	3.4

Note: Translation from Russian: Upper row – Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse - left to right: Coronavirus, Economic Collapse, Health Care System Collapse, Devaluation; Lower single - I; a packet of buckwheat

This meme is based on *Hedgehog in the Fog*, a 1975 Soviet animated film directed by Yuri Norstein, with somewhat redefined images of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse.

Regarding the quantitative evaluation of the last Russian meme, the Russian and Chinese recipients shared almost the same opinion. The Russian experts rated it slightly higher (by 0.2 points) than their Chinese colleagues. However, the Chinese students liked the meme slightly better than the Russians (3.5 vs. 3.3).

The Chinese recipients gave higher scores across all categories: *interesting, relevant, important, thought-provoking, creative, attractive, smart and inventive, meaningful, and kind*. The Russian experts, who are familiar with the iconography and the etymology of the story, found the meme *grim* and gave it a low score of 2.1, whereas the Chinese experts thought it was quite *bright and kind*, giving it a score of 5.1 out of 7, which is probably because the Chinese audience appreciates the use of animal images in memes.

When evaluating the visual idea, the respondents mentioned that the composition of the meme was not balanced: the respondents from both countries rated it 3.5. The Russian experts gave a higher score to the cold and obscure colors (4 vs. 3.2), which is in line with how they described the mood of the meme.

The textual commentary again performs a sense-making function in this meme and cannot be understood and decoded by the recipients. Therefore, deciphering the connotative information of the meme presented certain difficulties for part

of the foreign audience. The relationship between the text and visual images was rated 3.5 by the Russian experts vs. 3.3 by the Chinese experts.

In their free responses, the Chinese experts pointed out that the forecast was realistic and the future was uncertain for everyone. The Russian experts were more critical: they mentioned that the meme is overloaded, unbalanced, and ill-considered. This evaluation most likely results from a combination of international components, i.e., the most pressing global challenges presented by the Four Horsemen, and a concept peculiar to an exceptional reality, i.e. a bag of buckwheat. The Chinese audience paid attention to the universal nature and importance of the challenges in the first place, whereas the Russian experts focused on the local concept, which is considered by the Russian-speaking Internet users to be “unoriginal” and “primitive.”

Table 6. Evaluation of the Chinese meme “Girls”

	Experts		
	RU	CH	avg
Visual idea of the meme	3.3	2.8	3.2
Choice of composition	2.6	3.8	3.0
Choice of colors	3.5	1.6	2.5
Visual form of the meme in general	3.3	3.2	3.2
Relationship between visual and text images of the meme	3.3	3.8	3.5
Overall score given by experts (visual and text elements)	3.3	2.9	3.1
Students			
	RU	CH	avg
Overall score given by students (visual and text elements)	2.9	2.3	2.6

Note: Translation from Chinese:

- I want to go to Wuhan!
- No, you don't

The story behind the photo used in this meme has a universal nature and may be interpreted in a variety of ways, depending on the text that complements the photo, as manifested by numerous times to this image was used to create memes on various subjects in China's Internet. Thus, the visual component of the meme in question cannot be interpreted on its own, without the verbal component. However, both the experts and the students mentioned that the semantics of the meme is clear. Besides, deciphering the semantic code of the

meme does not require any culture-specific background knowledge, since the viewer relies on the body language (cf. TV Show).

This Chinese meme was rated low by all respondents. The Russian recipients found it more boring than the Chinese recipients (an average of 3.4 vs. 5). Perhaps Russian participants lacked the background knowledge that before the pandemic, Wuhan was known as a favorite destination for domestic and international tourism. For this reason, the Russian respondents to the survey considered it rather *useless* (rated 3.1 by the experts and 2.8 by the students); *depressing* (rated 2.5 by the experts); lacking *thought-provoking* ability (rated 2.7 by the students); *unoriginal* (3.4); too *straightforward* (3), rather *annoying* (3.5), and quite *grim* (rated 2.5 by the experts).

The experts gave an overall higher score to the meme than the students. The greatest difference in scores given by two categories of the respondents was 0.7 for the criterion of relevance: the experts found the meme more relevant than the students.

The visual form of the meme received almost the same scores averaging 3.2, whereas the visual idea received a higher score from the Russian experts (3.3 vs. 2.8). The most diverging scores were given to the choice of colors for the picture (3.5 by the Russian experts and 1.6 by the Chinese experts). The Chinese experts thought that the choice of composition was more balanced (3.8), as was the case with the relationship between the visual and text components (3.8).

When responding to the open-ended question, the Chinese experts described the meme as *usual*, *unoriginal*, and *banal*. The Russian recipients described it as uninteresting, sad, uninspiring, and pessimistic. Thus, the translated meme can be understood by the audience who speaks another language, but it cannot trigger any strong emotions and it is generally rated quite low.

The difference in the perception of the meme by the Russian and Chinese respondents may be due to different media contexts in China and Russia. Lower scores by the Chinese respondents might be affected by the allegations against China and Wuhan on spreading COVID-19 made by the global media, which intensified during this period.

Table 7. Evaluation of the Chinese meme “Dog”

	Experts		
	RU	CH	avg
Visual idea of the meme	3.3	3.2	3.2
Choice of composition	3.8	3.5	3.6
Choice of colors	3.3	3.2	3.2
Visual form of the meme in general	3.6	3.5	3.5
Relationship between visual and text images of the meme	3.5	4.3	3.9
Overall score given by experts (visual and text elements)	3.6	3.5	3.6
	Students		
	RU	CH	avg
Overall score given by students (visual and text elements)	3.2	3.3	3.2

不出门  
不添乱  
我为国家做贡献



Note: Translation from Chinese: I am staying at home! I am not in a panic! This is what I do for my country

This meme continues the trend of using animals as the main characters of memes to convey meanings allegorically and impersonally. The symbols of staying at home and having rest that are easily understandable in many cultures, such as a soft pillow, a cozy blanket, a tablet, a soda can, and a sandwich, complement the text message of the meme. Stylistically, the picture is close to a comic strip, which also broadens the potential audience and render it suitable international viewing. The author of the meme uses signs that are understood by most of the recipients, which should resonate with the general public.

Unlike the students, the experts gave a higher score to this meme almost across all categories. The score for such a criterion as *smart and inventive* shows the greatest difference (4.5 by the experts and 3.7 by the students). There is a great difference between the scores given by the Chinese and Russian experts: the Chinese colleagues gave higher scores (+value) in all categories, including *creative* (+2.2), *thought-provoking* (+2), *attractive* (+2), *interesting* (+1.7), *smart and inventive* (+1.7), *kind* (+1.6) *appropriate and important* (+1.5), and *meaningful* (+1.5).

When evaluating the visual components of the meme, the experts from both countries were more unanimous and gave them a score from 3.2 to 4.3. The scores for the relationship between the visual and text components demonstrated the greatest difference of 0.8 points, with the Chinese experts rating it higher. In addition, some Russian experts pointed out that they were not able to fully discover the connection between the verbal and visual components. In their free responses, they made the following comments: *visually understandable*; *banal*;

*joke not clear; unoriginal.* The Chinese experts described the meme as *interesting, true to life, and relevant.*

The findings show that in this case the Russian recipients lacked the sociocultural background knowledge to fully decipher the semiotic hybrid of the meme, which affected the level of their scores and the characteristics given to the meme.

Table 8. Evaluation of the Chinese meme “Lunch”

	Experts		
	RU	CH	avg
Visual idea of the meme	3.1	2.3	2.7
Choice of composition	3.8	2.2	3.0
Choice of colors	3.8	2.3	3.0
Visual form of the meme in general	3.5	2.2	2.8
Relationship between visual and text images of the meme	3.5	2.3	2.9
Overall score given by experts (visual and text elements)	3.1	2.2	2.6
Students			
	RU	CH	avg
Overall score given by students (visual and text elements)	2.2	2.9	2.6



Note: Translation from Chinese: Take care! Don't eat it

This meme got the highest score of 3.1 from the Russian experts and a much lower score of 2.2 from the Chinese experts and the Russian students. The scores vary widely by category. For example, the Russian students gave a score of 6.1 for *interesting* opposed to the Chinese students who gave a score of 4 and the Chinese experts with only 2.3 (maximum difference of 3.8 points). The Russian students gave a score of 6.6 for *cheerful* opposed to 1.6 given by the Russian experts (a five-point difference). The Chinese recipients are confident that the meme is *thought-provoking* but the Russian recipients tend to disagree. The Chinese respondents also gave substantially higher scores to categories such as *important, creative, attractive, smart and inventive, meaningful, and kind.*

The analysis of the scores given to the visual component of the meme showed different results: the picture is based on an original story, has a unique style, and is not banal. The composition uses the method of multiplication of familiar bat contours and simultaneous scaling of objects. The Russian experts gave higher scores than their Chinese colleagues to the visual idea of the meme (+0.8); the choice of composition (+1.6) and colors (+1.5); the visual form (+1.3), and the relationship between the visual and text components (+0.9). The text is a conventional poster slogan




which intensifies and adds to the image. Therefore, this meme is interpreted because of the verbal and visual components, as well as the need to know what happened.

It is, however, possible that this meme has lost some of its relevance compared to the first months of the pandemic, after Chinese scientists disproved the theory that the coronavirus passed to humans from bats, and thus the background knowledge became obsolete. In this regard, the groups of experts gave mostly negative evaluations in their free responses. Key words by the Chinese experts were: boring; not true; not attractive; *looks like a textbook illustration; gives a lecture*. Key words by the Russian experts were: *not funny; specific humor; strange presentation; depressing; incomprehensible; grim; gives an ultimatum*.

The analysis of the findings showed that the Chinese respondents reacted extremely negatively to the idea of this meme, which alluded to the exotic culinary traditions of the Celestial Empire. Amid the allegations of Chinese being unscrupulous eaters that poured from the global media during the COVID-19 pandemic, this meme provoked, quite logically, a rejection from the Chinese recipients, hence low scores.

Table 9. Evaluation of the Chinese meme “Sunset”

	Experts			
	RU	CH	avg	
	Visual idea of the meme	3.0	3.7	3.3
	Choice of composition	3.5	3.5	3.5
	Choice of colors	3.5	3.6	3.5
	Visual form of the meme in general	3.3	3.5	3.4
	Relationship between visual and text images of the meme	3.5	3.6	3.5
	Overall score given by experts (visual and text elements)	3.5	3.8	3.6
	Students			
	RU	CH	avg	
Overall score given by students (visual and text elements)	2.5	3.8	3.2	

Note: Translation from Chinese: Stop and watch the sunset


This meme illustrates the need to interpret three key components: visual, verbal, and conceptual. This meme got higher scores from the Chinese respondents, who were aware of the photo appearing in the media of a patient being transported to another hospital building admiring the sunset. The Russian experts did not understand the meaning of the meme (3.5 out of 7), unlike the Chinese experts who understood it perfectly (6.6 out of 7, i.e., a difference

of 3.1 points). The Russian experts found the meme rather *annoying* (3.5) and *grim* (3.3), whereas the Chinese experts found it rather *attractive* (5.5) and *kind* (4.8). The experts gave overall higher scores than the students for categories such as *important, clear, thought-provoking, attractive, and kind*; at the same time, the students found the meme quite *creative*.

The scores given to the visual idea of the meme were close, with a difference of max. 0.7 points. The overall impression of the Chinese experts is hope, positive energy, human love, and a positive meaning; whereas that of the Russian experts is philosophical nature, an unoriginal concept, and an unclear idea.

When evaluating the visual component of the meme, the Chinese experts were also more tolerant than their Russian colleagues. The message of the meme refers to contemplation as the most important category of the Chinese culture and philosophy. Yet, the allegory of the setting sun can also carry a negative connotation: the sunset of a person’s life in this world, which was reflected in the scores of the Russian recipients. So, the attitude towards the meme is ambivalent among an ethnically different audience which is not familiar with the event that was the source of the meme.

Table 10. Evaluation of the Chinese meme “Piggy”

	Experts			
	RU	CH	avg	
	Visual idea of the meme	3.5	4.0	3.7
	Choice of composition	3.5	3.6	3.5
	Choice of colors	2.6	2.7	2.6
	Visual form of the meme in general	3.1	4.0	3.5
	Relationship between visual and text images of the meme	3.6	3.8	3.7
	Overall score given by experts (visual and text elements)	3.3	3.8	3.5
	Students			
	RU	CH	avg	
Overall score given by students (visual and text elements)	3.2	3.4	3.3	

Note: Translation from Chinese: When will I be allowed to go out for a walk

The message of this meme is simple and clear; the translated meme can be easily understood by the general public. To interpret this sample, one does not require culture-specific background knowledge: it is sufficient to “grasp the moment,” international in nature, which is confirmed by the overall high scores for this criterion (6.5 out of 7).

However, the Chinese recipients gave much higher scores to this meme and found it *interesting* (6.3), *relevant* (6.3), *appropriate* and *important* (5.8), *cheerful* (5.8), *thought-provoking* (5.1), *creative* (5.1), *attractive* (6.3), *smart and inventive* (5.5), *meaningful* (5.6), and *kind* (5.6). The Russian recipients were not impressed by the meme; the gap in their scores reached 3.0 points.

A similar trend can be observed in the analysis of visual characteristics of the memes. The Chinese experts gave higher scores across all categories, although the difference was not that great and did not exceed 0.9 points for the visual form of the meme. Similar to the Russian meme “Boys”, the experts from both countries gave the highest scores to the relationship between the visual and text components (3.6 and 3.8) and the visual idea of the meme. The composition of the meme is comparable to the Russian meme “Cat” and presents an animal communicating the ideas of a large portion of the society; its scores are also close (3.5 and 3.6).

The choice of colors (cold monochromatic colors) got the lowest scores: 2.7 and 2.6 by the Chinese and Russian experts, respectively. Nevertheless, despite the minimal difference in the quantitative parameters, the description by the Chinese experts is more positive. The Chinese experts described the visual idea as very nice; a good and reasonable combination; interesting; this is life. At the same time, the Russian experts said that the idea was good but poorly implemented; sad; uninspiring; banal; amusing but not profound.

Therefore, even though the idea of the meme was clear to the participants of both groups, the meme evoked more positive emotions from the Chinese recipients. This is partly because the main character of the meme, the piglet, is quite revered in the Chinese culture and astrology, whereas in the Russian tradition this animal carries rather negative connotations.

The analysis of the summary results of the expert survey showed that in 18 cases the scores of Chinese experts were higher (the Chinese memes in 12 cases with a difference of 1.2 points, the Russian memes in 6 cases with a maximum difference of 0.5 points). In two cases, the experts from both countries gave the same scores: the experts were unanimous in their evaluation of the choice of composition for the memes “Boys” (4.5) and “Sunset” (3.5). As to the other 30 scores, the Russian experts were more favorably disposed than their Chinese colleagues and gave higher scores to both Russian and Chinese memes. From our point of view, the cause lies in a combination of factors, with the key ones being the difference in the types of knowledge – background, linguistic, extralinguistic, historical and cultural, and graphic. The last is undoubtedly influenced by the differences in the approach to professional art education provided in Russia and China.

The Chinese experts were generally more critical than the Russian experts across all categories of meme visuality: to the visual idea, the choice of composition and colors, and the visual form in general. The choice of colors was rated lowest (3.0 by the Chinese experts and 3.6 by the Russian experts). The visual form got

3.4 from the Chinese experts and 3.5 from the Russian experts. The visual idea was rated 3.3 by the Chinese experts and 3.5 by the Russian experts. The choice of composition in general was rated 3.3 by the Chinese experts and 3.7 by the Russian experts. However, the general score for the relationship between visual and text images was the same for the Russian and Chinese experts, although the Chinese experts gave higher scores to 7 out of 10 memes. According to this criterion, the outsiders were the memes “TV Show”, “Hedgehog”, and “Lunch”, which prompted controversial comments in the free responses. The important aspect in the evaluation of this category was that the information was transferred through two channels, verbal and visual. Moreover, their ratio may vary. In some cases, the image may provide more valuable information for understanding than the text, and vice versa. But in most cases they cannot exist separately from each other without losing their semiotic significance.

Regarding the difference in the feedback provided by the students and experts, it is to be noted that experts gave higher average scores to the relationship between the visual and text images (3.6 out of 5). The choice of colors was rated lowest (3.2); in this respect, the Chinese experts were especially critical (3.0 by the Chinese experts vs. 3.6 by the Russian experts). This pattern is observed in the evaluation of almost all memes, except for the monochromatic “Sunset” and “Piggy”: the latter got a score of 4.0 from the Chinese experts for the visual form. Comparison of the visualization scores given by the experts and the students showed that they are generally very close (3.4 vs. 3.2), with the experts’ scores just 0.2 points higher. These differences are also due to a more balanced, (both professional and personal) experience-based perception by the experts and a more spontaneous, emotional and critical perception by the young audience.

Moreover, there was a difference in the scores given by the experts and the students from different countries. Noticeably, both experts and students gave higher scores to those memes, including their visual component, that belong to their native language culture; this was particularly true in the evaluation of the Chinese memes, which got an average score of 3.4 from the Russian experts and 3.9 from the Chinese experts. Accordingly, the Chinese students gave a score of 3.3 to their country’s memes, while the Russian students gave the Chinese memes a score of 2.7. The same holds true for the evaluation of the Russian memes, but the difference between the scores was more subtle (0.3 points for the experts and 0.1 points for the students). Therefore, it is fair to say that, in this case, the age-related and professional contexts had less influence on the evaluations of the memes than the nationality of the recipients. The perception of information based on general knowledge did not cause difficulties for any of the recipients, but decoding the connotative code, the information in which is based on various associative bonds, demonstrated a lack of knowledge of the culture, specific national features, and social realities of another country.

## DISCUSSION

The COVID-19 memes in such ethnoculturally different audiences as Russians and the Chinese perform a compensatory function for young people: the relevant content and a creative form of memes help students to overcome the hardships of the pandemic. A new communication medium, which offers entirely different information opportunities and relations between the audience and the medium, requires researchers to explore and understand these new realities, which affect, among other things, the functioning and audience perception of the content related to healthy living and the issue of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Further research may include a t-test for a broader group of respondents, and the study on how memes are perceived by respondents with according to their demographic profiles (gender, age, education, etc.), as well as the dispersion analysis of repeated-measures ANOVAs to examine differences in emotional responses to a range of memes. Another important line of further research would be the analysis of memes in the context of language cultures, and the study of the perception of memes in terms of content comprehensibility, the degree of involvement in the situation, and the level at which the cultural background may be needed to appreciate the meme. In addition, the immediate task of this project was to analyze the visual imagery of memes and its semiotic relationship to the text in greater detail.

It is suggested to conduct a more detailed study of the empirical data with reference to scientific research on the perception of visual aspects of communication, including memes. The paper mostly analyzes the findings of the current empirical study. However, it is essential to go deeper into the psychology of shape and color perception (Arnheim, 2004; Itten, 2020), etc. by ethnic groups (in this case, Russians and Chinese) in correlation with the empirical data we obtained. As the scope of this paper is limited, this should be the subject of further publications. Also in this respect, it would be beneficial to rely on the triple typology of memes proposed by Shifman (Shifman, 2014a) and refer to poststructuralist concepts (Barthes, 1977; Kristeva, 1980) to study the phenomenon of meme inter-iconicity. Another issue that requires discussion and further research concerns the deeper reasons (such as the influence of the media context, the psychology of perception) that can help explain both the gap in opinions between the Russian and Chinese recipients and, in some cases, their closeness. For example, “Sunset” was perceived differently but not, as Wiggins (2019) supposes, is it so important for us to know the specific reasons why the differences are perceived, as to *why* it is generally understood.

## LIMITATIONS

This research has four limitations. The first three concern the size (N=120) and the F:M gender ratio (X:Y) and geographical bias (predominantly Moscow) of the research sample. The fourth concerns the narrow scope of the linguistic cultures.

## CONCLUSION

The analysis of the scores for meme visualization allows us to conclude that the interpretation of memes requires the analysis of three components: visual, verbal and background knowledge. Meme interpretation involves both culture-specific elements that can be read only by native speakers of a given culture and international phenomena, understandable to most people, regardless of their cultural and social background. When interpreting foreign memes, mainly international background knowledge and knowledge relevant at this point of time are captured. Moreover, culture-specific aspects in memes appear quite often as not to be “read” by representatives of another culture. If the conceptual component plays a leading role, the group of another national identity feels a lack of culture-specific background knowledge and considers such a meme as incomprehensible or uninteresting. In the process of meme perception, the evaluation by recipients is based on deciphering visual, cultural, ideological, linguistic, and semiotic codes. Linguistically and visually close structures are most successfully decoded, whereas memes belonging to some another culture are least successfully decoded. Overall, the analysis suggests that it is the semiotic hybrid that makes the meaning in the perception of native-language memes, whereas the visual imagery becomes dominant in the perception of foreign-language memes by both experts and students. This supports the idea the notion that “Internet memes are not merely content items and thus simply replicators of culture but are rather visual arguments, which are semiotically constructed with intertextual references to reflect an ideological practice” (Wiggins, 2019, p. 24).

As for memes evaluation by groups with an entirely different culture specific background, the differences highlighted in the research are related either to the degree of comprehensibility of the content, to the involvement in the situation, or to the knowledge of precedent facts. It is our understanding that this phenomenon is rooted primarily in the differences between the visual cultures of the countries. The cultural paradigms of the world are radically different for those who have European or Asian mentalities. The Russian cultural paradigm is more diverse and flexible, subject to change and development than the Chinese one, which is based on a commitment to strong traditions. This statement can also apply to the visual culture of China, where traditional painting

has remained almost unchanged over the centuries. At the same time, the artistic traditions in Russia have changed dramatically and repeatedly, which could not but affect the way the perception of visual images is formed. If we extend this point further, we can say that traditional Chinese art is based on the graphic line. This is most likely why the Chinese recipients are more prone to complete a schematic image in their imagination, giving it new meanings. After all, this is inherent in the tradition of Chinese visual art, with its means of expression always being laconic, and images always being schematic. In Chinese painting, the message prevails over formal similarity, in which the clarity and precision of the artistic idea is valued; here we should recall the supremacy of the message over the form according to Shifman's typology (2014a). The attitude to color in images is also based on the color dogmas of Confucian and Taoist philosophy. The five elements (wood, metal, fire, water, and earth) are the source of the origin of China's traditional color culture. These elements have had a profound impact on Chinese society and have merged into the traditional colors of Chinese paintings; five colors (white, black, red, yellow, and green-blue) were selected to correspond to the concept of the five elements. Moreover, it is the presence of these colors that affects the evaluation of the color scheme. Therefore, we can argue that philosophical and aesthetic views inherent in the Chinese culture have a profound impact on the formation of the aesthetic perception of memes by Chinese recipients.

By contrast, the Russian painting tradition is characterized by the depth of space and three-dimensional images, the variety of subtle nuances, the fullness and depth of color combinations, and the realistic portrayal of reality. Moreover, the form in the context of Russian painting is no less important than the message. The psycho-emotional attitude to colors is also different and sometimes even opposing (for example, in the Chinese culture white is the color of emptiness, wisdom and mourning, whereas in Russia white is the symbol of purity and youth). It might therefore be said that the visual traditions of Russia based, among other things, on the principles of realist painting, with its precise and naturalistic manner of conveying forms, volume, and color combinations, could not help but influence the formation of sensitivities in the perception of memes by the Russian audience.

In conclusion, the social, philosophical and cultural context plays a fundamental role in the perception and evaluation of Internet memes, which, in turn, is determined by the reality paradigm predominant in a certain society at a certain time.

## **DISCLOSURE STATEMENT**

The authors do not have any conflicts of interest.

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# The Populist Dimension of Mediated Discourses About Corruption in Romania

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**ABSTRACT:** Understanding populism as a communication strategy (Aalberg et al. 2017) that is based on both messages and styles (Engesser et. al., 2017), the present research investigates the populist elements of political discourses articulating the subject of “corruption” in the context of the attempts to change the anti-corruption legislation by the Romanian government in 2017–2018. Based on audience preferences and on the density of political communication conducted by both political and media actors, the study conducted content analysis articles from three major Romanian TV-related news portals during February 2017 and May 1 – June 5, 2018 (N=548). In addition, computer-assisted content analysis was performed on social media posts of political parties (N=875) and the posts of their leaders (N=540). The research not only identified elements of populist political communication both in the content and the style of corruption-discourses but also reflected the polarization of the Romanian media system.

**KEYWORDS:** corruption, populist political communication, Romania, content analysis, Facebook.

## INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the defining element of Romania’s presence in international news media has been the issue of corruption. Recent attempts by the Romanian government to change the legislative framework impacting political corruption triggered unprecedented protests widely broadcast by national and international media. But even before this time, both national and international media reported widely on corruption in Romania. This issue was the focus of political

campaigns for both parliamentary and presidential elections. For example, Traian Băsescu, the former Romanian president (2004-2015) ran on an anti-corruption platform in the 2004 elections. However, corruption is not a recent topic of media and political discourses. Defined in various ways, from pinpointing its meaning to technicalities of good governance or legal definitions of bribery to the outright moral decay of the body politic, it is a concept that has played a recurrent, if underappreciated role throughout Western political discourses (Buchan & Hill, 2014).

Transparency International's 2018 Corruption Perceptions Index ranked Romania as 61, followed by Hungary (64) and Greece (67), to mention some of the countries from the region (Transparency International, 2018). Thus, from the perspective of international organizations such as Transparency International monitoring corruption perceptions in different countries, the level of corruption in Romania was not reported to be significantly higher than the level of corruption in other EU member states from the region.

As Romania was consolidating its democratic system after the collapse of communism, and as the country was approaching European integration, which eventually took place in 2007, the issue of corruption emerged as increasingly relevant in the public opinion. The overall perception related to corruption was that of an all-encompassing process and widespread phenomenon, which greatly affected the lives of Romanian citizens under many aspects, ranging from quality of life and health to personal security. Studies point to the trigger of such perceptions as being the disproportionate focus of the media on corruption cases, which in turn reinforced the belief that such practices were inevitable to get by in Romanian society (Precupetu, 2007, p. 17). Most of the cases presented in the media involved medium or high-ranking politicians, who would later become the so-called "big fish" that in some cases ended up being prosecuted, trialed and even sentenced to prison. The widely shared belief was that corruption represented an outcome of systemic factors related to the ill-functioning of the transition economy, which often allowed sufficient space for shady deals, primarily based on inadequate privatizations, especially in the 1990's. Romania registered the slowest pace of privatization compared to all other former communist states. This situation favored corruption because it allowed sufficient time to develop illegal economic mechanisms that ensured state-owned companies would end up owned by "entrepreneurs" who were close friends of those in office (Popescu-Birlan, 1994, p. 376).

Another major factor that contributed to the situation was the functioning of the judicial system, which was often perceived as being under the strong influence of high-ranking politicians. The fight against corruption through strengthening the power of anti-corruption prosecutors has therefore emerged as a "sanitary" process of "cleaning up Romania" that promised to redress the

economic and moral fabric of the Romanian society. Anticorruption emerged as a powerful electoral slogan in Romania during the elections held in the 2000's, both before and after the EU accession, but the political communication aspect had little to do with the on-the-ground reality, as Romania still struggled with high levels of corruption and dysfunctional public institutions (Tanasoiu & Racovita, 2012, p. 243).

In January of 2017, the attempt by the Romanian Government to decriminalize certain corruption offenses through an emergency ordinance prompted some of the country's most extensive protests since the fall of communism. Surveys conducted during the events reflected that citizens protested not only to manifest their anger against this specific governmental decision, but primarily to exhibit their support for the fight against corruption in Romania (Stoica, 2017). Given the magnitude of the protests, which one evening attracted about half a million citizens on the urban streets of Romania, the events were highly mediatized internationally, with news outlets all over the world reflecting on what was happening in Bucharest and in other major cities. Reuters noted that those who were protesting were mostly concerned with what they perceived to be an abuse of power (Reuters, 2017), and the BBC reported that protests continued even after the Government had decided to repeal the ordinance (BBC, 2017). Protests lasted almost seven weeks, during which social media played a significant role in enabling political communication between the main actors involved (Mucundorfeanu, 2019).

## **POPULIST POLITICAL COMMUNICATION, THE SUBJECT OF CORRUPTION, AND THE MEDIA**

*Corruption*, together with other topics such as *immigration*, *regional identity*, and *crime* were identified as political issues that are subjects of populist political communication in Western democracies (Taggart, 2017; Smith, 2010). As the number of studies dedicated to populism is rapidly growing, the concept can be sometimes confusing, given its overly stretched borders. Many scholars have considered populism to be nothing more than a style of communication, with an ideological framework that if it exists is highly flexible, if any at all (Taggart, 1996). Other authors consider populism to be a strategy that wins votes by appealing exclusively to the emotions of the electorate (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007). However, more commonly, populism is referred to as a reaction against the establishment, doubled by a strong appeal to the People – as a sort of ultimate authority (Canovan, 1999).

The recent rise of populism across Europe needs to be understood in the context of today's highly media-centered politics that feeds on the communication

of politicians who break the routine. Most of the time, populist leaders prove to be experts in simplifying the complexities of mainstream vernacula, therefore offering the media what it wants (Mazzoleni, 2008). The surge of populism is also the result of the increasing trend of personalizing politics, which media support when competing for audience share. This shifts the focus of citizens from debates over institutions, to discussions about the personality traits of politicians. Some political systems even favor the attention on politicians – as is the case in the USA and France (Kriesi, 2012). But neither is the situation new for Eastern Europe, which for many years has experienced the “presidentialization” of politics (Krouwel 2000). This offers the perfect context for populism.

Therefore, there are different approaches in literature towards populism: ideology centered (Mudde, 2004) and discourse centered (Hawkins, 2010). Some authors also emphasize the normative dimension of populism and consider it as both a threat and a corrective for democratic politics (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2012). According to Engesser, Fawzi and Larsson (2017), the different approaches on populism represent only different aspects of this phenomenon that do not exclude each other.

In terms of populism as an ideology, the literature identifies several types of populism, based on the combinations of four major elements: anti-elitism, restoring sovereignty, people centrism and exclusion of out-groups (Aalberg et al., 2017), which enables a four-fold typology of populism: (i) *complete populism* includes references to all four elements; (ii) *excluding populism* includes only references and appeals to the people and the exclusion of out-groups; (iii) *anti-elitist populism* includes references and appeals to the people and anti-elitism; and (iv) *empty populism* exclusively references and appeals to the people (Aalberg et al., 2017; Jagers & Walgrave 2007; De Vreese et al., 2018).

The discourse-centered perspective views populism as a communication phenomenon, “a set of characteristics or elements of messages that have their roots in, or at least relate to, the aims, motivations and attitudes of political actors, the media or citizens” (Reinemann et al., 2017, p. 14). Populism is often seen as a communication style (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007), as a political style (Moffitt, 2016) or as a political strategy (Weyland, 2001). Populist political communication is a narrative of crisis and threat or rhetoric using emotional statements and simplification (Moffitt & Tormey, 2014; Taggart, 2017).

Research on populist discourses has focused on the content of communication, on its form, on motives and aims and on actors by analyzing their messages. Ernst et al. (2018) developed an instrument to analyze populist political communication applying three dimensions of populist ideology: people-centrism, anti-elitism and restoring popular sovereignty, combined with three dimensions related to communication style: negativity, emotionality and sociability. Populist political communication occurs in fragmented ways (Engesser et. al., 2017), thus

a statement is populist if it combines at least one ideological “key message” and one populist “style element” (Ernst et al., 2018).

Our perspective on populism is in line with an approach, according to which populism is „a characteristic of a specific message rather than a characteristic of an actor sending the message” (Rooduijn, de Lange & van der Brug, 2014, p. 3). Previous research on populist political communication focused on identifying the issues that were subjects to this type of communication out of a corpus of political communication messages (Ernst et al., 2018; Ernst et al., 2017). By focusing on a single subject, the issue of corruption, we followed a different approach. We analyzed mediated messages about corruption in the context of the attempts to change the laws related to the fight against corruption in Romania and the massive protests that followed in January and February 2017 and May-June 2018, from the perspective of populist political communication.

Understanding populism as a communication strategy (Stanyer et. al., 2017) that is based on both messages and styles (Engesser et al., 2017), our objective was to identify elements of populist political communication related to content and to style in the media. We investigated how the subject “corruption” was presented in mediatized populist discourses along four dimensions: anti-elitism, restoring sovereignty, people centrism and exclusion (Aalberg et al., 2017).

(RQ1): What elements of populist content and populist style are present in the media coverage of government attempts to change the legal framework related to corruption?

Traditional media plays an important role for populist political communication (Esser et. al., 2017); there are certain affinities for populist political communication in specific types of media such as television and social media (De Vreese et al., 2018). The relationship between media and populism is driven by a logic of supply and demand. Populist politicians exploit the media’s proclivity towards anything that “breaks the routine” in political arenas. Populist leaders and movements often seem to rely on some sort of “media complicity” (Mazzoleni, 2008). News values of populist actors influenced the presence of populist actors in journalistic contents. Several studies note that journalistic interference is a filter for populist political communication *by* the media and *through* the media (Esser, Stepińska & Hopmann, 2017).

Romania has a hybrid media system (Chadwick, 2013) with a large variety of media channels and the continued prominence of television in the media diet of large segments of the politically active audience. According to Hallin and Mancini’s comparative model of media systems (2004), the Romanian one can be described as a polarized-pluralist system (Balaban, 2007). A varied media landscape and media distribution developed after 1990 and a parallelism between political parties and media institutions developed in the 1990’s (Balaban, 2003). In the last two decades reading online versions of print media has become

popular in Romania, so some newspapers have ceased to be printed, retaining only their digital version. Romanian political communication is performed especially on the five national news TV channels (*Romania TV*, *Antena3*, *Digi24*, *BITV*, and *Realitatea TV*), characterized by strong political parallelism and polarization (Balaban 2007). At the same time, several of these televisions' websites function as news portals, and are among the most highly ranked online news sources based on their traffic.

As media is the key link between political actors and the public, our research focused on populist political communication through the media and by the media. Thus, we included both populist statements delivered by politicians through the media and populist messages delivered by journalists (Esser et. al., 2017; De Vreese et al., 2018). In line with this we formulated the following research question: (RQ2) How does the polarization (political parallelism) of the media system mediate the articulation of populist messages related to corruption?

Populism has developed a special relation to the "new media galaxy" (Keane, 2013) and its new forms of algorithmic gatekeeping (De Vreese et al., 2018). Social media presents particular opportunity structures for populist actors, as it offers a direct connection to audiences, allows the creation of homogeneous groups often with the exclusion of dissenting voices, favors a simplified and emotion-alized style, all elements that have also been identified as central to populist communication logics (Engesser et. al., 2017). Researchers have analyzed populist political communication on social media (Ernst et al., 2017), in the Netherlands (Hameleers, Bos & De Vreese, 2016), and in Hungary and Italy (Moffitt, 2016).

The preference of young people for online media consumption has brought about significant changes to the Romanian media landscape as well, as news consumption via social media has been steadily increasing. Apart from news portals, the online media diet of the Romanian news consumers is defined by Facebook (Balaban et. al., 2018; Mucundorfeanu, 2019). As elsewhere in Europe, political communicators in Romania have turned to the internet not only to avoid media gatekeepers and directly address audiences but have also been successfully employing social media to set the news agenda (Mucundorfeanu, 2019). At the same time, protest movements also made extensive use of social media platform for organizational as well as expressive purposes, including identity (Burean. 2019). Hence our third research question: (RQ3) What are the populist discursive patters of social media posts of Romanian political parties and leaders in the period of the protests?



## METHODOLOGY

Based on audience preferences and on the density of political communication conducted by both political and media actors, the study conducted content analysis on a sample of articles (N=548) from three Romanian TV-related news portals – *Realitatea.net*, *Digi24.ro*, *Antena3.ro*. The time frame January – February 2017 and May 1 – June 5, 2018 corresponded to the large-scale protests related to the proposed changes to anti-corruption measures. The choice of the news portals is based on political parallelism: *Antena3.ro* is close to the PSD (The Social Democrat Party, governing at the time), *Realitatea.net* is close to PNL (The National Liberal Party, in opposition at the time) and *Digi24.ro* is considered to have a neutral position. A keyword search of *corruption* and *reform of justice system* of the three TV-related news portals produced during the two time frames found 548 articles: *antena3.ro* (n=230), *realitatea.net* (n=192) and *digi24.ro* (n=126).

We operationalized populist political communication as the public communication of core components of populist ideology in terms of content and style (14 items,  $\alpha=.741$ ,  $M=0.20$ ,  $SD=0.13$ ). We adapted Ernst et al.'s (2018) populist political communication scale to measure populist communication in general to populist political communication in our study specific topic. The presence or absence of those elements was manually coded as dummy variables by two coders. An inter-coder reliability test was performed on 55 articles, 10% of the total material. A suitable reliability of Krippendorff'  $\alpha=.703$  for the means of the 15 items describing populist political communication was calculated.

Within the 14 items, 3 groups referred to populist content: anti-elitism (3 items,  $\alpha=.71$ ,  $M=0.30$ ,  $SD=0.24$ ), people-centrism (3 items,  $\alpha=.71$ ,  $M=0.02$ ,  $SD=0.10$ ) and restoring sovereignty (2 items,  $rsb=.86$ ,  $M=0.30$ ,  $SD=0.15$ ), totaling 8 items ( $\alpha=.76$ ,  $M=0.13$ ,  $SD=0.12$ ). Style elements such as negativity, emotionality, and sociability that are associated to populist ideology were coded as populist style (6 items,  $\alpha=.62$ ,  $M=0.30$ ,  $SD=0.16$ ).

We also measured if the article expressed a position towards the modification of the laws against corruption using a single item 7-point Likert scale from "strongly not in favor" to "strongly in favor"  $M=4.02$ ,  $SD=2.61$ . In this case, the inter-coder reliability test showed a suitable value: Krippendorff'  $\alpha=.789$ .

We also triangulated our findings concerning the dimensions of the anti-corruption populist media messages with an analysis of Facebook posts of the main Romanian political parties and political leaders during the same period. The analysis of Facebook posts of political parties and their front men will reveal mostly populist political communication through the media. Computer assisted content analysis of all Facebook posts of parliamentary parties and their leaders (N=1203): PSD (n=37), ALDE (n=159), PNL (n=184), PMP (n=198) USR (n=151),

Liviu Dragnea ( $n=27$ ), Călin Popescu-Tăriceanu ( $n=165$ ), Ludovic Orban ( $n=11$ ), Traian Băsescu ( $n=68$ ), Dan Barna ( $n=130$ ), Nicușor Dan ( $n=73$ ). A further parliamentary party, the Democratic Alliance of Hungarians in Romania was not included in the analysis for methodological reasons, as most posts were in Hungarian, and our methodology was not appropriate for a multilingual corpus. The corpus was collected using API interrogation of the respective Facebook pages. Discursive patterns on social media were analyzed by mapping associations of pages of the parties and their leaders with keywords. The keywords were defined using computational corpus linguistics techniques. The corpus of the texts of posts was compared with a reference corpus of Romanian-language foreign news, to find words the occurrence of which is significantly higher in the Facebook corpus than in the reference corpus. All keywords were significant above  $p>.001$ , based on their LogLikelihood values. Keywords were identified and statistics calculated using LancsBox (Brezina et al., 2018). The resulting list of keywords was used to create keyword codes by grouping word forms together. Co-occurrences of keyword-codes and source pages were mapped using KHcoder (Higuchi, 2001). Thus, our paper uses a mixed-methodology, which combines statistical analyses of manual content analysis with computational linguistics.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Descriptive statistics performed on the results of media content analysis showed that overall, the anti-elitism dimension ( $M=0.30$ ,  $SD=0.24$ ) is mostly represented in the media coverage compared to restoring sovereignty ( $M=0.03$ ,  $SD=0.15$ ), and people centrism ( $M=0.02$ ,  $SD=0.10$ ). Media coverage in general was populist much more in terms of style ( $M=.30$ ,  $SD=.16$ ) than in terms of populist content ( $M=.13$ ,  $SD=.14$ ). Additional information on descriptive statistics is provided in Table 1.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for populist political communication

Dimension	Variable	N	Min	Max	Mean	Standard Deviation
Anti-elitism	Discrediting the elite	548	.00	1.00	.08	.27
	Blaming the elite	548	.00	1.00	.75	.43
	Detaching the elite	548	.00	1.00	.07	.26
People centrism	Stressing virtues	548	.00	1.00	.01	.09
	Praising achievements	548	.00	1.00	.01	.10
	Stating a monolithic people	548	.00	1.00	.03	.17

Dimension	Variable	N	Min	Max	Mean	Standard Deviation
Restoring sovereignty	Demanding popular sovereignty	548	.00	1.00	.02	.15
	Denying elite sovereignty	548	.00	1.00	.03	.17
Populist content		548	.00	1.00	.13	.14
Negativity	Negativism	548	.00	1.00	.68	.47
	Crisis rhetoric	548	.00	1.00	.89	.32
Emotionality	Emotional tone	548	.00	1.00	.05	.23
	Patriotism	548	.00	1.00	.03	.16
Sociability	Colloquialism	548	.00	1.00	.09	.29
	Intimization	548	.00	1.00	.02	.15
Populist style		548	.00	1.00	.26	.14
Populist index		548	.00	1.00	.20	.13

Source: Authors

Aiming to see the differences between news portals regarding populist content and style, we conducted a series of one-way ANOVA. For populist content we found no significant differences between the publications regarding anti-elitism  $F(2, 545)=0.90, p=.407, \eta^2=.003$ , also no significant differences regarding people-centrism  $F(2, 545)=2.261, p=.105, \eta^2=.008$ , and no significant differences regarding restoring-sovereignty  $F(2, 545)=1.84, p=.16, \eta^2=.007$ . When analyzing populist content of the 8 items there are significant difference between publications  $F(2, 545)=3.50, p=.031, \eta^2=.013$ . The Post-hoc pairwise comparison using Dunnett T3 correction in the instance of a positive Levine test showed significant differences only between *antena3* and *realitatea.net*  $p=.026$ . There are no significant differences between *digi24.ro* and *antena3.ro*  $p=.582$  nor between *digi24.ro* and *realitatea.net*  $p=.972$ . *Antena3.ro* have the highest populist content among the three publications.

Regarding populist style, there are significant differences between the publications  $F(2, 545)=10.86, p<.001, \eta^2=.038$ ) and a Post-hoc pairwise comparison using Dunnett T3 correction in the particular case of a positive Levine test, showed significant differences between *antena3.ro* and *realitatea.net*  $p<.001$  and also between *antena3.ro* and *digi24.ro*  $p<.001$ . There were no significant differences between *realitatea.net* and *digi24.ro*  $p=.997$ . Both *antena3.ro* and *realitatea.net* have communicated in a higher populist style than *digi24.ro*.

The position of the publications *antena3.ro* ( $M=4.32, SD=2.40$ ), *realitatea.net* ( $M=3.86, SD=2.66$ ), and *digi24.ro* ( $M=3.70, SD=2.87$ ) regarding the modification of the laws against corruption was not significantly different according to the results of a one way ANOVA  $F(2, 545)=2.87, p=.058, \eta^2=.010$ .

Our findings indicate that populism characterized virtually all major political actors that represented the subject of our study, which means that populist

communication was pervasive during the anti-corruption protests in Romania in 2017 and 2018. Most of them referred to anti-elitism, but references to people-centrism and to restoring sovereignty were also often used. We selected some illustrative examples of populist content through the media formulated by politicians from the political parties:

‘Other state institutions (DIICOT, ANI, ANAF) are involved in huge corruption scandals, with files prepared by prosecutors, some with a certain perfume of power. Here is the main source of corruption in Romania today! Those appointed to run the institutions exercise discretionary power and try to control those elected by the people.’ (Popescu-Tariceanu, 2017a).

‘Not only the stupidity and corruption of politicians and officials have squandered public money and blocked the development of the country, as we have heard for many years. But also the corruption and immunity of the System made up of former Secret Services bosses, officers, prosecutors and judges or heads of state power institutions. The time has come to pay for all the harm done!’ (Udrea, 2018).

Political discourses depicted various heads of institutions as conspiring elites who seek to undermine the will of the citizens. Amongst these elites are “prosecutors”, “judges”, “heads of intelligence agencies”, all of whom work together to strengthen a “minority dictatorship” that decides not only in the name of the People, but instead of the People or even against the People. The absolute symbol of elitism represented (both then, and for quite a long period afterwards) the so-called “parallel state”, a political construct approximating the “deep state”. A scaremongering concept, the “parallel state” was described by Liviu Dragnea, former leader of the Romanian Social-Democrats as “a system that uses state institutions in an illegal way, outside and in parallel with the freedoms and the will expressed in voting” (Dragnea, 2018), “an abject fraternity, a contract that wants to get democracy out of the game” (Dragnea, 2018). Moreover, the President of the Romanian Senate accused the acting President of relying on “occult instruments of power” (Popescu-Tăriceanu 2017b), that are influenced by shady NGOs funded by George Soros.

“Dear Romanians from all over the country, the right of the Romanians is holy, we cannot accept anyone to confiscate the vote of the Romanians. Justice, justice, truth everywhere, in institutions. We cannot live with a minority dictatorship.” (Vrânceanu-Firea, 2018).

People-centrism was sometimes marked by appealing to religion, granting the People an aura of holiness: “the right of Romanians is holy” (Vrânceanu-Firea,

2018). Moreover, the political discourse appeals to strategies of strongly personalizing the experiences of so-called “innocent” citizens who are depicted as having fallen victims to the illegal practices of the judicial system. Therefore, such people are “souls” who suffer social or even physical degradation as a result of undeserved imprisonment.

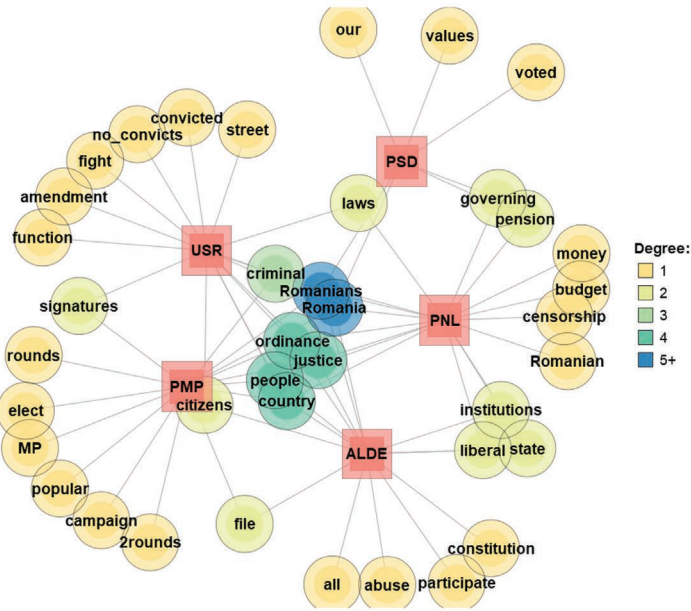
“That is why the Romanian people are called to judge, to pronounce themselves and to express their will. All Romanians with voting rights. Both those who protested in the streets and those who did not. All Romanians, regardless of political options. And their will, resulting from the vote given in the referendum, will be sovereign to us all. Let us therefore give the word of the sovereign people!” (Turcan, 2017).

Politicians in both the ruling party and the opposition scored high on the populist dimension of restoring sovereignty, asking for the will of the “sovereign People” to be respected, regardless of whether they have opted to protest on the streets around the country or to stay at home.

We triangulated the results of the media content analysis by looking at social media discourses of the main political actors, i.e., parliamentary parties and their leaders using methods of computational linguistics.

The list of keywords include terms that designate issues central to the debate around the reform of the justice system, proposed by the governing coalition, and more general political issues like the budget, pensions or the voting system. Figure 1 shows that in the period investigated, keywords related to corruption and crime were central to the communication of USR, a party which ran on an anti-corruption platform. The governing PSD-ALDE coalition’s messages centred on the relationship between the institutions of the state (with the alleged abuses being the reason for the proposed changes of the justice system that triggered the protests), while PNL focused on economic issues, and PMP on the voting system. The keywords with the highest commonality are references to the country and the people:

Figure 1. Party – keyword co-occurrences of Facebook posts



Ernst et al. (2018) argue that there are issues in political communication with higher and lower affinity with populist messages: *immigration, regional identity, corruption and crime, integration, and economic hardship*. Of these topics, our issue-specific keywords relate to corruption, crime and economic issues. However, a hierarchical cluster analysis of the keywords showed that the issue specific ones like institutions of the state, corruption, the voting system or the budget, all cluster together with further keywords that frame them in populist terms. They do so by appealing to the style elements of negativism, crisis rhetoric, emotional tone, dimensions, all of which Ernst et. al. (2018) emphasize, or references to a collective “we” or people, who are central to the so-called style of empty populism (See Figure 2 in the Annex).

Examining in context, the issue specific keywords provide us with discursive examples of populist framings. Elections and voting, a major topic of PSD is framed in terms of the promise of a better life, casting the president as an enemy of the people:

“The president does not understand that the electoral campaign is over, that the elections have been won by someone else and with this game of delays is keeping Romanians away from a better life!” [post by PSD on 2017-01-28]

The proposed reform of the justice system is cast as a fight against occult elites:

“we need to continue our fight until the healthy force of democratic, legitimate organizations, elected by you citizens of Romania, will prevail over the sick forces, the occult forces that have grabbed our country.” [post by ALDE, 2018-06-10].

The proposed elections in two rounds, a major topic of PMP is cast as a means to counteract “the profound suffering of democracy” (post by PMP, 2018-06-04), an example of absolutist rhetoric in the sense Ernst et al. (2018) propose, as something preposterous and unbearable (p. 170). A proposed reform of the pension system is recurrently cast in posts by PNL as “the robbery of the century.” (post by PNL, 2018-05-21):

“The government employs the tactic of a pickpocket, caught in the act, telling you what you can see with your own eyes is not true: it is not him with his hand in your wallet, in your pocket, but in fact it’s your hand.” [post by PNL, 2018-05-28]

The central slogan of the anti-corruption protests was “thieves in the night”, referring to the late-night adoption of an ordinance modifying anti-corruption laws, thus becomes a transferrable element of political rhetoric.

## CONCLUSIONS

The issue of corruption contributes to defining the four dimensions of the mediated populist discourses along the political cleavages in the media landscape. The starting point is recognizing the characteristics of this ideology and the basic populist categories, such as the Manichean perception of society as divided into two separate, internally homogeneous groups and antagonistic camps: “the elite” and “the people” (Mudde, 2004). Anti-elitism populist content was identified in the analyzed articles. This dichotomous division valorizes the category “us”, i.e., the people, as positive, and the category “them” (elite) as negative. In other words, the essence of populism is anti-elitism – an attitude of opposition to all those in power (political parties, officials, but also supranational institutions and organizations).

The polarization of the media system was reflected in the way the three analyzed publications communicated with respect to the attempt to change the laws. Elements of populist political communication both in content and in style were identified in the media communicating on corruption and on the attempts to change the laws to fight corruption. Among the three dimensions: anti-elitism, people centrism and restoring sovereignty, anti-elitism was much more present.

Representatives of the Romanian judicial system were mostly portrayed as the elites that have fought against changing the laws against corruption. The populist style was identified by all the three publications that we analyzed. This can be explained by all three publications did identify the situation as a crisis and communicated in a more negative way. Similarly, even though issue-specific keywords of social media posts differ between the main political actors, these issues are all framed making use of elements of populist style.

From the general perspective of the research on populist political communication, the innovative perspective of the present paper is that it analyzed populist political communication using applied instruments that were already tested (Ernst et al., 2018), on the specific issue of “corruption”. Previous research pointed out the affinity of the topic “corruption” to populist political communication (Smith, 2010; Taggart, 2017).

The limits of our research consisted of its descriptive nature. Being unable to separate between populism by the media and through the media is also a limit of our research. This is an aspect that must be addressed in future research. Even if we analyzed articles from the news portals related to the three news televisions *realitatea.net*, *antena3.ro* and *digi24.ro*, most of the populist political communication performed by Romanian news TVs was not revealed. An analysis of talk shows that were and are still broadcasted for several hours – daily – would have contributed to a better image of the populist political communication related to “corruption” in Romania. This can also be the subject of future research.

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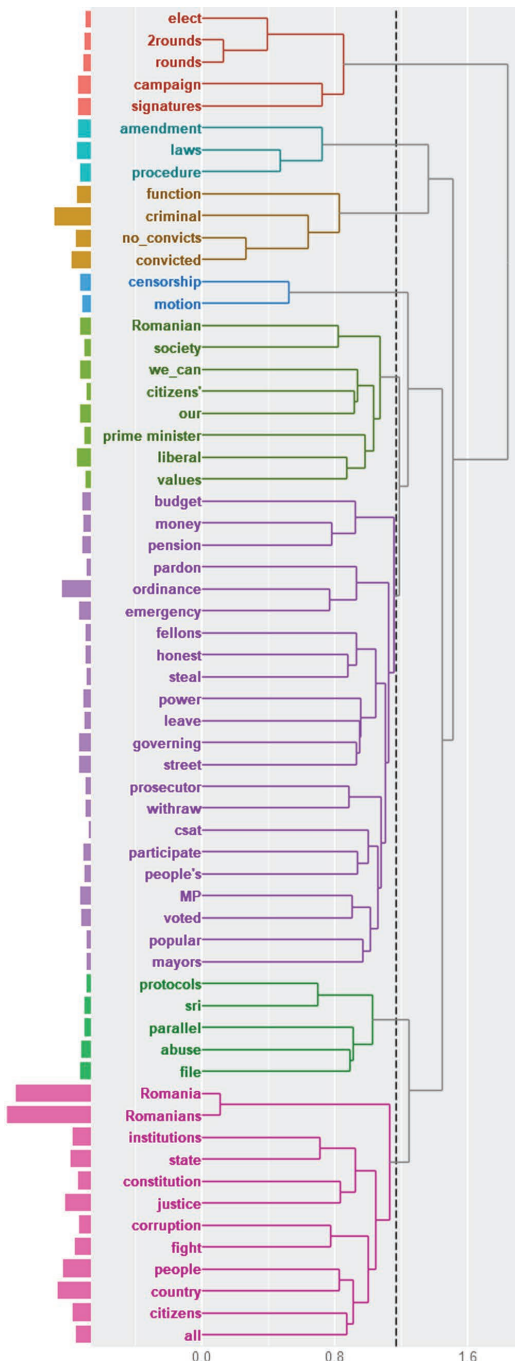
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ANNEX

Figure 2. Keyword clusters



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# The Mass Media's Systemic Contribution to Political Transformation: Coverage of the 1956 Uprising in Hungarian Print Media (June 1988–June 1989)

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**ABSTRACT:** The article is aimed at contributing to the discussion of the role of the mass media system in political transformation. For this purpose, reporting on a political issue relevant to the transformation was selected for tracing the theoretical assumption along empirical results: the hitherto taboo topic of Hungarian uprising in 1956. I studied how 1956 was reported in Hungary's main print media, *Népszabadság* and *Magyar Nemzet*, from June 1988 to June 1989. These newspapers, despite still being controlled by the government in the dissolving socialist system of the end 1980s, helped a functional public sphere emerging. The newspapers broadened the interpretive scope by facilitating dissenting opinions and enabled a hitherto suppressed discourse about Kadar's role in the historical events of 1956. The results suggest the newspapers acted as professional mediators and had a systemic stabilising effect on Hungarian society in this smouldering conflict.

**KEYWORDS:** mass media, political transformation, professional journalism, Socialism, 1956.

## INTRODUCTION

On the systemic level, the effects of political and economic functionality in the change of institutions and organisational roles have well been researched, especially concerning the systemic change from socialist systems of soviet type to democracies in Eastern Europe (Merkel, 1996; 2010) as well as the organisational changes of the national media systems in Eastern Europe (O'Neil, 1997; Aumente, 1999; Thomaß & Tzankoff, 2001; 2015). However, effects of mass media functionality in the transformation have been less researched.

With my research, I want to contribute knowledge about the mass media's social functionality as having been an important factor in the political transformation

process in the Hungary of the late 1980s.<sup>1</sup> Based on system theory, I assume a dominance of functional logic in the modern, institutionalised social order that informs journalists and provides room to manoeuvre even in firmly politically controlled work environments. In the political systems in Eastern Europe that developed after World War II within the sphere of power of the Soviet Union, the political and economic freedoms, including the freedom of the press, were restricted. On the other hand, these systems embraced professional excellence in journalism (Huxtable, 2018) and – at least officially – self-criticism, among others from mass media, which was also a legitimising basis of the one party rule.<sup>2</sup> Because of the latter, I assume that the mass media in the states of Eastern Europe more or less functionally mediated the current conflicts, in terms of a normatively aspired but differently developed professionalism of journalism, and accordingly were able to assume a more or less stabilizing role in the course of the systemic transformation.<sup>3</sup>

In Hungary, one of these main conflicting issues were the notable political events of 1956 around the Hungarian uprising that was later suppressed with the help of the Soviet military. In 1958, former prime minister Imre Nagy and members of the 1956-government were disgracefully hanged and buried in unmarked graves. In the Hungary of Kádár, the events of 1956 were taboo. Thus, in 1989 the ceremonial re-burial of Nagy and the other victims was the hard-earned success of the relatives and members of the opposition.

In the following, after outlining my theoretical argument, I will present findings from the content analysis of the related reporting from the 30th anniversary of Imre Nagy's death in June 1988 until re-burial with full honours of him and four others in June 1989 in two major newspapers: *Népszabadság* and *Magyar Nemzet*.

## THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

In order to analyse a mass media impact in political transformation, a theoretical definition of mass media as a functional-structural, social system, in which information is processed (Luhmann, 2000) seems to be appropriate, because the theory focusses on communication as the basis of social order in the constant integration process of society (Fehr, 1977; Imhof, 2002). In order to manage

1 The research project from which the results on the reporting of a transformation issue in Hungary are presented here had a comparative approach (see <https://gepris.dfg.de/gepris/projekt/273811628>).

2 Marx already considered self-criticism a prerequisite for a successful workers' movement, even if it was later cultivated in the real, Marxist-Leninist systems largely only as a ritual in the entrenched one-party system. c.f. Mommsen 1989.

3 Besides the evidence for mass media functionality presented in this article, I found evidence in Poland (c.f. Dupuis, 2020) but not in Romania.

the growing complexity of societies, these have developed divisions of labour and functional systems (*i.e. symbolically generalising communication structures*). The structure of these functional systems surpasses, by inherent force of utility, or functionality, the anachronistic structure of social rule that is based on hereditary hierarchies and the segmentation of social groups (Luhmann, 1987).<sup>4</sup>

Around the function of the successful society-wide exchange of information have developed contingent organisational structures of mass media systems in mainly national regulation systems. The journalistic subsystem of mass media serves the reporting on current affairs following professional programmes within work-sharing editorial organisations (Blöbaum, 1994). However, individual journalists are part of the functional systems that are intertwined in mass media organisations. They are professional journalists in mass media and economically dependent in their role as employees – as well as citizen with political interests in the political realm (Dupuis, 2012, p. 76).

In whatever organisational context, the operative functionality of mass media is important for maintaining stability in modern society (Luhmann, 1970). A functional mass media structure imposes functionality onto the public discourse concerning the relevance of certain issues and their representation (Luhmann, 2000). This explains the institutionalisation of mass media particularly in democratic systems and an according recognition of professional authority that grants a certain systemic autonomy (Scholl, 1997).<sup>5</sup>

Ceasing information exchange as well as the withdrawing of allegiance is the main threat to authoritarian governments that control mass media organisations. Gorbačev correctly detected this problem and addressed it with his *glasnost* programme (1990). Governments that try to control the public are vulnerable to a lack of bottom-up information and more genuine, clandestine or transnational, public discourses within alternative, and more functional, secretly organised media structures that the government cannot access (Asen, 2000).

I assume that in Hungary, in the striving for political autonomy professional journalism stabilised the social order during political transformation. This should be recognizable in main mass media events that were concerned with transformation issues during that time. I assume that we can see a mediating communication developing in mass media, which – *different* from political communication – was not unidirectional and mobilizing, but according to the social function of mass media more striving to represent the different existing relevant conflicting semantic frameworks of political legitimacy (as defined by Klein, 1989, 2016).

4 However, the semantic structure of the older social order, even if it is challenged and dismantled by functional order, remains a reusable structure of social order in the collective memory, c.f. Holl (2003).

5 However, Mobilisation is not a function of mass media but the function of the ad hoc system of public opinion (Luhmann and Hellmann, 2004), even if today it emerges mainly in mass media (Gerhards, 2002)

## HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In the political systems of the Soviet model that were established in Eastern Europe after World War II, the mass media organisations were not supposed to be organisationally independent of the political system. Like all other professional organisations, mass media organisations were a part of the ideological transmission belt system of society (Goban-Klas, 1997) and directed by the governing communist or socialist party respectively in a one-party system. In Hungary, during the Kádár era 1956–1988, the Minister of culture and the representative of cultural affairs György Acél loosened the organisational ties. He had an erratic way of controlling all intellectual life using “manual control” (“kézivezélés”) and favouritism (“kegygazdálkodás”) or “*the policies of the three t’s (tiltás (ban); türes (toleration), támogatás (support)*” (Tőkés, 1996: 16, see also Bajomi-Lázár & Kékesdi-Boldog, 2018). Generally, this meant that cultural organisations and the mass media in Hungary were less rigidly controlled as those in other communist systems ((Havliček & Kende, 1985). But, also that journalism was more determined by informal decision making and personal contacts (Takács, 2012).

During the timespan covered by my analysis at the end of the communist era in Eastern Europe the mass media system changed continuously, becoming more liberal concerning the editorial independence of political actors from civil society and their opportunities to reach the public. In November 1988, the Central Committee voted for the lifting of censorship. Furthermore, a service for the publication of press releases and declarations from the developing proto-parties and groups of the civil society was introduced (c.f. Sükösd 2000): the *Országos Sajtószolgálat* (OS, National Press Service).

At the same time, the communist world was not only economically collapsing and facing enormous and complex systemic difficulties (Goldman, 1997), but was already abandoned when Gorbačev cancelled the Brezhnev doctrine. At the beginning of 1988, Kádár after 30 years of governing had been forced out of the leading positions in the *Magyar Szocialista Munkáspárt* (MSZMP, Hungarian Socialist Worker Party) because of the government’s weakness in solving the enormous economic troubles of the declining communist regime (Fowkes, 1995, p. 182). The elites agreed on the necessity of reform but were fragmented when it came to the different concepts of these reforms and their ultimate goals (Bozóki, 2002, p. 3ff.). Thus, the Communist Party dissolved into fractions around the members of the Central Committee.

The leading actors had privileged access to the main print media outlets via office and owing to the political leanings and sympathies of those in charge of them (O’Neil, 1997, p. 16). Károly Grósz, the pragmatic reformer of the economy but staunch communist who disapproved of the pace and direction of reforms



to secure systemic change, in his role as Party leader. Grósz had direct access to the *Népszabadság* until November 24th, 1988, when he was replaced by the reformer Miklós Németh.<sup>6</sup> As the Secretary-General of the Party's mass organization – *Hazafias Népfront* (HNF, Patriotic People's Front), Imre Pozsgay had control of the daily newspaper that organisation published – *Magyar Nemzet*.

When he became Minister of the State within the cabinet of Grósz in 1988, Pozsgay, pushing for reform, became a central actor of political transformation.<sup>7</sup> In 1987, he participated in the conference *A Magyarság esélyei* in Lakitelek where the proto-party *Magyar Demokrata Fórum* (MDF – *Hungarian Democratic Forum*) was founded by opposing intellectuals and he made sure that the declaration was published in *Magyar Nemzet* on November 14, 1987. He strategically employed the 1956 issue in his public communication, notably in his radio interview on January 28, 1989 (see below), but the “*explosive reactions*” to this strategic step exceeded his expectations (Rainer, 2002, p. 214).

The 30th anniversary year of the secret trials against former Prime Minister Imre Nagy and his associates and their executions took place in 1988. Nagy was a reformer who opted for a liberal and national discourse. Nagy took office for a second time in the autumn of 1956 only to be expelled a few days later when the Soviet invasion crushed the uprising. János Kádár, who ruled the country for the ensuing three decades, was deeply involved in these events. Thus, under his otherwise quite liberal regime, the violent events in 1956 and the later convictions or emigration of thousands of Hungarians were strictly banned from public and were erased from all history books. However, as Gyáni (2006, p. 1200) wrote:

“Awareness of the origins—the original sin—of the regime was not going to be expunged, not even by the compromise that it made with the majority of society in the 1960s, when it relied on systematically depoliticising everyday life and creating a private sphere for economic and cultural activity.”

In 1988, the claims of the relatives of Nagy<sup>8</sup> and his associates for an appropriate burial of the convicted became public in underground circles, fuelled by their

6 The influence they gained from this access was reinforced by the essential Communist Party's separate telecommunication network in the inner circle of nomenclature, the so-called ‘K-system’. Later, Miklos Nemeth, who replaced Grósz as the Prime Minister in November 1988, communicated his views via *Magyar Hírlap* (O’Neil 1997, 16). Because he did not exactly employ the 1956 issue in his political rhetoric, I did not include *Magyar Hírlap* in the content analysis.

7 The second political actor who used this issue for his political profile was Viktor Orbán, but he entered the public discourse only at the moment of the funeral, and the political power he gained from his positioning in this discourse unfolded only later – and could even be considered to still be ongoing until today, c.f. Szilágyi and Bozóki (2015).

8 Notably from Erzsébet Nagy, the daughter of Imre Nagy, whose semi-public speech in a private home of dissidents was later published in the underground magazine *Beszélő* (Nagy, 1987)

international recognition.<sup>9</sup> Historians were the first to object publicly to the restrictions on evaluating the recent past (Nyyssönen, 1999, 2003). As reaction and for keeping control, the MSZMP established a committee of historians and Party members for analysing Hungary's political, economic and social development after World War II. On January 27, 1989, this committee declared that the events in 1956 were a "people's uprising". The next day, Pozsgay, the head of the committee, announced this idea on a morning news programme as well as on the political radio broadcast *168 Óra*. Pozsgay made this announcement single-handedly, while Grósz was out of the country and without any prior consultation with the other leaders of the Central Committee of the MSZMP, which caused a severe crisis within the political leadership.<sup>10</sup>

During 1989 ongoing public reappraisal of the 1956 events and the general liberalisation process, injustices against those convicted for participating in the uprising began to emerge. For example, from January 1988 onward, all Hungarians could apply for a passport for regular travel, but people convicted for their involvement in the 1956 events were denied these documents. Besides the historical grievances, these factual discriminations fuelled the grief in society about the ongoing violation of human rights in the name of communist ideology.

## CONTENT ANALYSIS

### METHOD

This research focusses on the impact by the systemic functionality of mass media. The socio-systemic functionality of information and mediation regarding politics is professionally most strongly institutionalized in the subsystem of news reporting (Jarren & Steininger, 2016). Thus, I conducted content analysis of the two leading Hungarian newspapers in terms of importance to the official political discourse (Gálik & James, 1999, p. 79). The party organ *Népszabadság* (NSZ, Freedom of the People) was published by the MSZMP) and *Magyar Nemzet* (MN, Hungarian Nation) was the organ of Hazafias Népfront (HNF, the Patriotic People's Front), *Magyar Nemzet*. In January 1989, *Népszabadság* had a circulation of 460,000 and *Magyar Nemzet* a circulation of 132,000 (Bajomi-Lázár, 1999, p. 36).

For the content analysis, I have included all articles (N=367) that mention the 1956 uprising, the events and the people involved, from the 30th anniversary of the execution of Imre Nagy on June 16, 1988, until the national funeral

<sup>9</sup> In Paris, at the cemetery of Pere Lachaise, a symbolical grave was erected and pictures circulated the underground press.

<sup>10</sup> This crisis is documented in the minutes of the Meeting of the HSWP CC Political Committee, [http://chnm.gmu.edu/1989/archive/files/hungarian-1956-uprising\\_1705379738.pdf](http://chnm.gmu.edu/1989/archive/files/hungarian-1956-uprising_1705379738.pdf)

on June 16, 1989. The *Népszabadság* produced 143 articles spread over 157 pages and *Magyar Nemzet* produced 202 articles spread over 210 pages.

## CONDUCTION OF RESEARCH

In order to analyse the collected newspaper articles,<sup>11</sup> I used a *mixed method* approach (Kuckartz, 2014). First, I conducted a quantitative frequency analysis of the articles. Second, I worked with case summaries that noted the overall message in the articles and the arguments of the cited actors or the author. To evaluate the selection of the 1956 uprising for reporting in the context of the current events I applied news value theory. In the second step, I analysed the width of the journalists' argumentations and their selection of other voices (guest authors, interview partners, etc.). I noted the individual organizational affiliations of the communicators, but I often present these only in broad categories in the findings, such as party officials, experts in central functions, members of the opposition.

## FINDINGS

First, I studied the issue attention cycle over the timespan included in my research concerning the frequency and extent of reporting (see Figure 1). I added important political events in note form as well as the transformation of journalistic practice in the reporting. According to the newsworthiness and career potential of the event, I expected a sudden rise of attention from January 28, 1989, onwards. This was after Imre Pozsgay went public after the historical committee had finished its work on re-evaluating recent history to call the former "counter-revolution" of 1956 a "national uprising". This event proved to be a pivotal point according to the number of articles. However, as we can see in the Figure 1, the newspapers had already paid attention to activities concerning this issue *before* that event.

The studied print media paid attention to the 1956-issue as early as June 1988, irrespective of the minor relevance of the incident: *Népszabadság* published a Budapest police press report about an illegal demonstration on June 16, 1988. The organisers, some of them would have been formerly involved in "subversive activities" in 1956, were accused of trying to influence the around 350 to 400

<sup>11</sup> Unfortunately, at the beginning we only had access to the printed newspaper holdings of Staatsbibliothek Berlin. We later checked our selection of articles for completeness via the Hungarian digital database Arcanum, which in the meantime had expanded its holdings to include the newspapers we needed. Accordingly, we could not automatically select the articles but had to read the printed copies of the newspaper for selecting all articles dealing with the issue of 1956. I would like to take this opportunity to thank my Hungarian assistant Alexandra Bayer for her great help. We coded the page, the newspaper section, the headline and added a case summary, including the authors' as well as the political actors' positions that were reported upon or interviewed.

present people and would face trial. *Magyar Nemzet* did not publish that press release. Rather it reviewed on June 17, 1988, a live-radio broadcast on the same day of *Kossuth Rádió* in cooperation with *Voice of America*, produced by the head of the political department of *Magyar Rádió*, Laszlo Zeley, on the topic of Hungarian history after 1948. The broadcast featured guests from the scientific and intellectual communities in Hungary and the USA.

From then on, the newspapers published articles that touch on the subject of the re-evaluation of the Hungarian past and frame it in different political contexts. Members of the nomenclature were given the opportunity to speak about the recent history: Imre Pozsgay, who claimed the re-evaluation of the Hungarian past already at this early stage (MN 5.7.1988). Rező Nyers, just before was re-elected into the Central Committee of the *MSZMP*, who condemned the Hungarian politics from the 1940s and 1950 (Nsz 9.7.1988).

Otherwise, routine reporting of the official agenda such as: Prime Minister Grosz in the international press who criticised the demonstrators from June 16 for initiating fascist propaganda (a translated article from the US news magazine *Newsweek*, Nsz 12.7.1988); Grósz on a visit in the USA, where he promised the families of the executed for participating in the 1956 events that he would permit a re-burial, but deny the victims any rehabilitation (26.7.1988); Károly Grósz criticising journalists who were on a hunger strike to demonstrate against travel restrictions relating to their 1956 convictions because of the already ongoing legislative procedure of the amnesty law (MN 23.7.1988); In an interview Jenő Laszló, the head of the department of the Ministry of Justice, explained about the current distinct drafts for either an individual or a collective amnesty by the government (MN 29.7.1988).

But already in August 1988, in an op-ed piece in *Magyar Nemzet*, the historian Andras Gerő re-interpreted the events of 1956 as an outcome of the events of 1948 (MN 20.8.1988). The newspaper also published a review about current historical publications on 1956 (24.8.1988). *Népszabadság* followed with interviewing the new director of the *Institute of Party History* of the *MSZMP*, Sandor Balogh, who claimed a “new historiographic approach” that he intended to establish (Nsz 27.8.1988) as well as an op-ed by Ferenc Glatz who called for more autonomy for historians (1.10.1988). At the end of October 1988, *Népszabadság* printed an interview with Gyula Boric, state secretary at the ministry of justice, titled “Where are the files”, i.e. the files of the secret trials of Nagy and his associates. In addition, a press release of the Budapest Police that there were no misdemeanours to report on October 23, 1988, the anniversary of the national uprising in 1956.

Meanwhile, *Magyar Nemzet* published an interview with Pál Demény, a prominent early Communist who suffered political persecution in the 1940s and after 1956 (15.10.1988) as well as an op-ed piece by the sociologist György Csepeli (21.10.1988) and another with Isvan Horany from the Hungarian Institute

of Pedagogy, about the need to teach “historical competencies” (24.10.1988). These broadened the spectrum of voices in public who claimed to be able to judge the events competently.

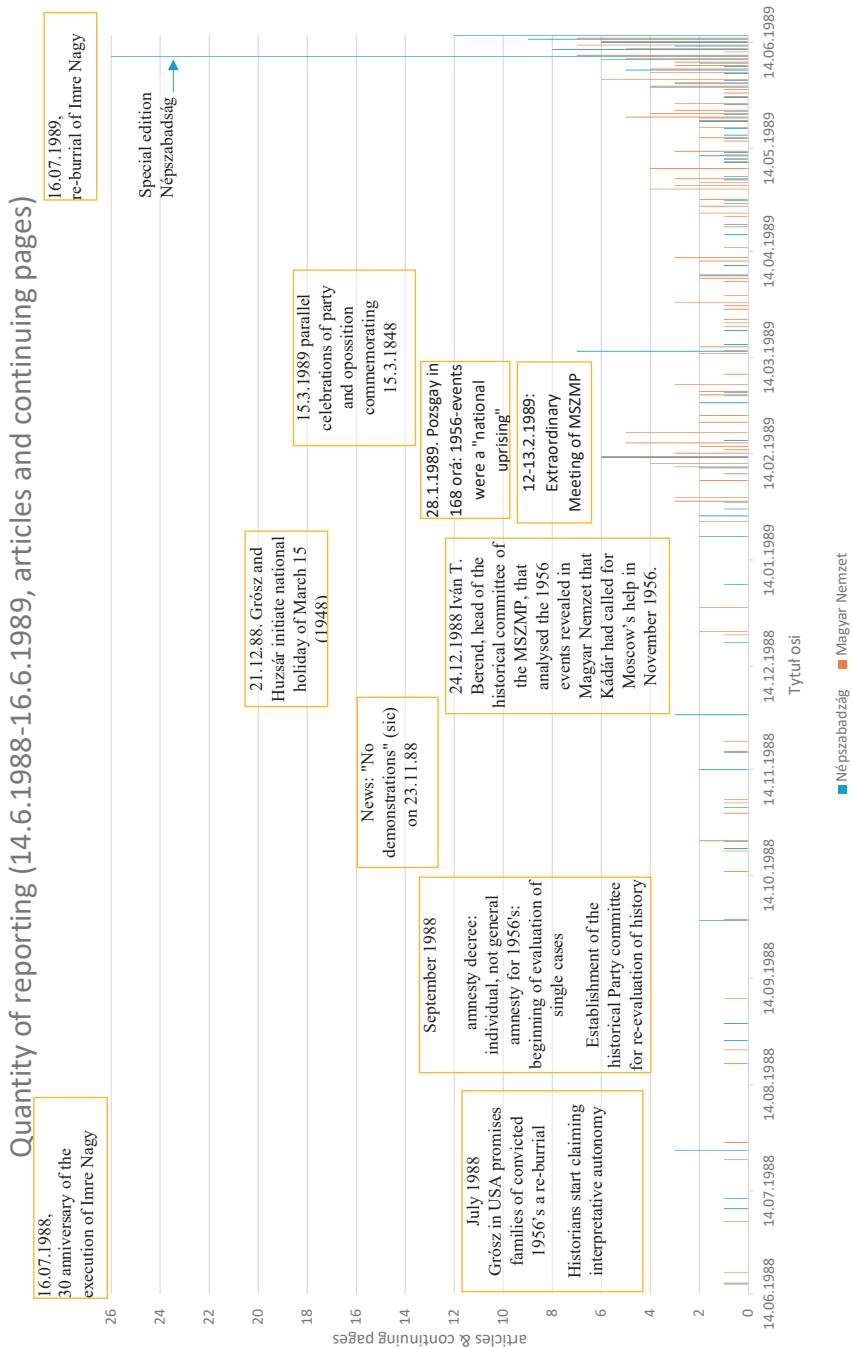
Routinely, the hearings and adoption of the legislative decree on the suspension of convictions between October 23, 1956, and May 1, 1957 were reported in both newspapers (MN 8.9.1988, MN and NSZ 1.10.1988), but only *Magyar Nemzet* reported in December the numbers of people amnestied by then (31.12.1988). This goes as well for reporting Grósz's return from Austria where he had talked to émigrés and a statement by Grósz about Imre Nagy in an interview in the Spanish press (8. and 14.11.1988). Also the fact that the *MSZMP* incidentally stated in a press release announcing that the 1956 events brought a momentum for reform (4.11.1988) and a wreath ceremony took place paying tribute to the soldiers who were killed fighting the counter-revolution in 1956, this was reported in *Magyar Nemzet* only (5.11.1988).

On the other hand, *Népszabadság* routinely published a press release from the Budapest police that no noteworthy protests took place on November 23, the anniversary of the uprising that showed the current issues, and the high potential of political mobilisation (24.11.1988). Furthermore, the speech of Károly Grósz to the Party members in Budapest on November 29 in full, in which he promoted the ongoing reforms within the socialist system and aggressively warned of sliding into counter-revolution (30.11.1988).

From December 1988 onwards, there is a change of tone in both print media's representation of the discourse. *Magyar Nemzet* started publishing longer news features about 1956-related people, places and current events (23. and 24.12.1988). Meanwhile, *Népszabadság* published two very personal comments from prominent journalists (7.1. and 21.1.1989.) and a long article about a meeting of the Council of Ministers that decided on the re-burial in Rákoskeresztúr cemetery (27.1.1989).

After the famous interview, when Imre Posgay, in his competence as chairman of the party's 1956 reappraisal commission, called it a „popular uprising” instead of the hitherto “counter-revolution”, the reporting intensified and opened to a much wider scope of voices than before. In the following, I will qualitatively analyse the content of reporting and style of journalism referring to relevant, but not all articles in the corpus of material, documented in Figure 1, due to space limitations.

Figure 1. Quantity of reporting (June 14, 1988 – June 16, 1989, articles + continuing pages)



Both newspapers published in detail Pozsgay's statement. *Magyar Nemzet* gave broad attention to reactions reported in the international press, especially

in February 1989. Thus, the *Magyar Nemzet* paper broadened into the realm beyond the previous national discourse. Previously, *Népszabadság* only once reported international political reactions in the Soviet Union with citing cuttings from the Soviet press (1.1.1989) and continued to publish some international press reviews; for example, it did so on February 13, 1989, after the special meeting of the Central Committee, but it did so far less frequently in general.

In the course of the events, both newspapers published the important news of the day concerning the 1956 issue. Especially *Népszabadság* followed the activities of the NGO of the relatives of 1956, the *Committee for Historical Justice* that was permitted but also burdened with the preparations for the re-burial ceremonies. *Magyar Nemzet* paid more attention to oppositional claims regarding the events of 1956 and the government's reactions; for example, the announcement of the spokesperson of the government, György Marosan, that all documents from the revision of the Imre Nagy trial will be published. *Népszabadság* printed more newswires from the two Hungarian news agencies, Magyar Távirati Iroda (MTI, Hungarian Telegraphic Office) and Országos Sajtószolgálat (OS, National Press Service), concerning the tough but respectful political negotiations between the Committee for Historical Justice and the MSZMP. Thus, the political positions and strategies that finally enabled the participation of two members of the Hungarian government in the funeral only after the government had publicly acknowledged the illegality of the Nagy trial became public. *Magyar Nemzet* did not cover this in so much detail but instead offered more information about discourses on further issues related to the 1956 events in Hungarian history in local and regional political circles in and outside the Communist Party. The paper also published a range of comments from oppositional political actors.

Generally, *Népszabadság* mainly took a more detached position when covering the events of 1956, reporting on newswires reports or publishing its own news. The paper published fewer opinionated comments from guest authors, and even fewer comments from its own staff, than *Magyar Nemzet*, which developed a more emotional and narrational journalistic style of reporting. From December 1988 onwards, *Magyar Nemzet* regularly published long features. The stories about plot 301 in Rákoskeresztúr Cemetery became famous for their investigative and suspenseful approaches, partly due to their being published in a time of transition when the extent of state control or secret service measures was not clear.<sup>12</sup>

Overall, *Magyar Nemzet* took a more moral position towards the 1956 issue and focussed on the question of guilt and atonement, whereas *Népszabadság*

<sup>12</sup> For example, in an interview with the former director of the cemetery Attila Balázs the editor Béla Kurcz found out details – which he published – about those buried. Among other things, a register of names was disclosed in this interview, and after Balázs withdrew his statements in a phone call at the editorial office, his complaints were recorded and published as well (source: interview with Béla Kurcz on 31.5.2018).

adopted a position – first aligned with the government, later more independently in argumentation – to seek reconciliation. Furthermore, it published a number of interviews with notable personalities that were directly involved in the events and historical documentation, especially in special sections from June 10 and 15, 1989, dedicated to the 1956 issues. In the course of the events, *Népszabadság* showed that an increasing level of self-reflection was occurring in its editorial office. For example, the newspaper apologised for not publishing the letter to the editor by Antal Gyenes that had been published in *Magyar Nemzet*. On July 10, 1989, the paper, announced the foundation of an in-house think-tank for the analysis and discussion of current affairs.

*Magyar Nemzet* focussed on the radical reformers and paid attention to, but did not grant much reporting space, the perspective of the more cautious reformers of the Central Committee that did not want to touch the communist foundation of the country. Rather, it opened a wide debate to a range of actors from civil society or proto-parties respectively and gave a voice to the people concerned. This was also the focus of *Népszabadság*, which reported on the positions of the involved actors of civil society but less of the proto-party-oppositional forces.

## CONCLUSIONS

The aim of this study was to illustrate an abstract assumption with systematically collected, mainly qualitative empirical findings on print media coverage. However, the decision making in the editorial offices that led to the media coverage studied cannot be factually traced back on the basis of the product of this decision making. The interviews that I conducted with some professional journalists and members of the opposition who were working in media or respectively underground media at that time helped to estimate the situation. I would like to express my sincere gratitude for their willingness to recall detailed information.<sup>13</sup>

Anyway, the results of the content analysis shows the strengthening professional journalistic approach in the late 1980s as reporting went beyond the hitherto effective political interpretation of the Hungarian uprising in 1956 in the selected print media. As early as July 1988, both newspapers already published interviews, which included critical comments on the Party's handling of the 1956 events. By publishing articles by historians that were claiming their professional autonomy and among others access to concealed historical documents, the newspapers helped questioning the discourse hegemony of the party. This

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<sup>13</sup> Erzsébet Békés, Pál Eötvös, Laszlo Faragó, Zoltán Farkas, János Haidú, Miklós Haraszti, János Horvát, Béla Kurcz, Pál Léderer, Gábor Nemes, Péter Pallai.



allowed a broader discourse on negative consequences that had resulted from rendering as taboo undesirable historical knowledge. The deep cleavage around party or respectively fraction affiliation and, more general, the deep split between private and public life in Hungary came into the picture, as well as an awareness of the loss of the ability to judge current events based on knowledge from professional analysis of history.

The print medias' representation of the political discourse surrounding the selected issue changed over the course of the events, significantly in January 1989; the scope for the perception of more deviant voices that made themselves heard in public was continuously widened, and evermore related information (more trials, more details, etc.) entered the public discourse.

Organisational affiliation and the siding of the newspapers with certain public voices became more visible. Especially *Magyar Nemzet* opened the debate to radically critical voices and covered more international reactions. *Népszabadság* gave more attention to the current negotiation among the involved players: between the party and relatives, notably the Committee for Historical Justice that was organising the funeral, thus also publicly revealing the defeat of the MSZMP to this committee by agreeing to an international announcement of the party's failure in history. The newspaper developed a more detached style of political reporting whereas *Magyar Nemzet* implemented a more advocate style of journalism. Finally, on the approaching event of the funeral of Imre Nagy and his peers, the editorial office of *Népszabadság* seemed to traverse a certain catharsis by publishing many pages that contributed to its own self-reflection and by founding a think-tank for future public debate.

Summarising, over the time period of examination, the two studied mass media outlets increased their functionality by delivering more comprehensive information services for an integrating, albeit conflicted, public sphere as I have theoretically considered and, based on the historical context, also thought possible. The Hungarian media system provided a relatively advantageous starting point for transformation. At least theoretically, mass media were assigned professional autonomy. Furthermore, journalists enjoyed leeway within the personalised erratic structure of Hungarian media control during the Kádár era. Thus, mass media could quickly adapt to facilitating the transformation discourse among the elites dissolving into antagonist political currents. The coverage embedded pictorial TV coverage and its effects that we already know about from previous research of the live broadcasting of media events. This is showing a quite functional mass media impulse in the political transformation, the investigated key mass media as having been a systemically preserving structure of social order in times of political crisis.

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# Adolescents on YouTube: gender differences regarding the videos they upload and watch

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**ABSTRACT:** This study examines whether gender is a key factor when producing and uploading audio-visual content to this social network. The research has been carried out using content analysis methodology applied to a sample of 300 videos uploaded to YouTube by adolescents aged 11-17 years, which were collected and analysed during the state of emergency in Spain (13 March – 21 June of 2020) as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Contents uploaded by these *YouTubers* are amusing, and their topics differ significantly depending on the author's gender. Boys focus mainly on playing games, while the range of topics among girls is more diverse. There are no significant differences in the way both genders approach the topic of COVID-19. Channels oriented toward girls are protected from comments their followers might make about them, whereas boys are more exposed to members of the public who view their audio-visual productions.

**KEYWORDS:** YouTube; teenagers; gender; visual consumption, audiences.

## INTRODUCTION

Scientific literature regarding the analysis of YouTube videos has increased in recent years, attracting the interest of the scientific community (García, Catalina & López de Ayala, 2016; Khan, 2017; Burgess & Green, 2018; Montes-Vozmediano, García-Jiménez & Menor-Sendra, 2018; Pereira, Moura & Fillol,

2018). However, there is a scarcity of research related to the types of videos YouTubers upload from a gender perspective. In order to provide insight into this area, the present research is based on an exploratory analysis of the video content recorded by Spanish adolescent YouTubers, with gender being a determining factor.

## THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

### CONSUMPTION AND AUDIENCES

Watching videos has become one of the most common activities for children and minors on the Internet for some years now (Holloway, Green & Livingstone, 2013). In the case of adolescents, YouTube and Instagram comprise the largest collective social network and space for consumption, and to a lesser extent, for audio-visual production (Anderson & Jiang, 2018).

As far as the production-creation binomial is concerned, it is clear that minors try to follow the creative patterns of professionals to a large extent (McRoberts, et al, 2016). However, the most common situation is for a user to share videos that have already been broadcast, such as television content, which is quite usual if the political perspective is considered (Berrocal, Campos & Redondo, 2014; Fontenla-Pedreira, Rúas-Araújo & Conde-Vázquez, 2020). In other areas, such as the social or cultural realms, the percentage of self-recording or user-generated content is higher. If we look more closely at the adolescents involved in content production, Guerrero-Pico, Masanet and Scolari (2019) mention the existence of three categories of producers: *casual*, *aspirational*, and *expert*, which reflects the degrees from low to high of the types of productions they must confront, the capacity to plan, the use and proposals of narratives, and aesthetic/motivational values.

On the other hand, regarding the YouTuber phenomenon, popularity is presented as one of the factors for understanding audio-visual production on this platform. Valderrama and Velasco (2018) argue this reality could be reinforced in a socio-technical way. The application of algorithms and any resulting successful models could promote combined forms of social recognition. To this should be added the impact of analyses aimed at YouTube audiences that are proposed as an operational and social requirement for achieving fame. All of this is leading to a situation, in which alternative or underground proposals exist, even for children, adolescents and young people, yet in reality the practice is marginal and offers few options for achieving popularity.

## YOUTUBERS, THE NEW IDOLS AND COMMUNICATORS

YouTubers operate in an ambivalent space, as they must preserve values such as authenticity, closeness, and accessibility for their followers, while at the same time furthering their own self-promotion, or their own brand (Senft, 2012; Abidin, 2015; Smith, 2017). Moreover, as they become more popular, they tend to promote or encourage the acquisition or consumption of other brands or products, which may influence their followers' perception of authenticity. This promotion of products or the inclusion of advertising in non-professional formats even appears in underage YouTubers (Martínez-Pastor, Ongkrutraksa & Vizcaíno-Laorga, 2020). Indeed, Suárez-Álvarez, García-Jiménez and Montes-Vozmediano (2021) conclude that YouTube has become an advertising showcase in which minors play a semi-professional role on the creation of their audio-visual productions. These conclusions contradict Fernández and Chamizo (2020) who indicate that the most common situation is the self-promotion of their own brands or products by this type of child or adolescent YouTuber.

Audio-visual content published by YouTubers is now considered a valuable tool capable of contributing to the development of a variety of marketing strategies for the purpose of reaching new audiences through more compelling and far-reaching content (Lopes, et al., 2020). The influence that YouTubers exert on their followers has been studied from varied perspectives. Corrêa et al. (2020) consider that the commitment shown by followers toward YouTubers is related to areas such as cognition, affectivity and behaviour, which lead to a particular connection that affects the intention of followers to use a brand promoted by these YouTubers. Studies show that the audio-visual content of YouTubers generate the most interaction with users who choose to rate and comment on them at levels of participation that are unmatched by videos published by other contributors (Montes-Vozmediano, García-Jiménez & Menor-Sendra, 2018).

According to Balleys, Millerand, Thoër and Duque (2020), the principle of identification is inherent to the creation of videos made for and watched by teenagers on YouTube. Both creators and viewers are searching for a type of common affinity through a sense of shared intimacy. This occurs within the context of a dual necessity for recognition through the exchange of videos and messages that often have a confessional-intimate nature. In this sense, the public validates YouTubers and sees their own reflection in them, partly as a way of knowing themselves. Indeed, not only do the topics of the videos, which should be interesting for teenagers, encourage this connection, but the platform itself and the videos with a personal/intimate format encourage this link as well. This situation occurs with some ostensibly amateur videos.

Especially for young audiences, YouTubers are capable of being role models with a certain involvement in the development of their identity (Lovelock, 2017; Pérez-Torres, Pastor-Ruiz & Abarrou-Ben-Boubaker, 2018). However, another

study carried out among a pre-adolescent audience has not conferred an especially relevant role to YouTubers in the development of identity among minors (Aran-Ramspott, Fedele & Tarragó, 2018). According to these authors, even though YouTubers are present in leisure activities and are seen as cultural icons, pre-adolescents demonstrate a clearly critical attitude, from which it can be inferred that they do not adopt the values and models of behaviour proposed by the YouTubers themselves.

Djafarova and Rushworth (2017) conclude that the influence exerted by non-traditional celebrities, such as bloggers, YouTube personalities, and “Instafamous” profiles is noticeable among young audiences (their study focused on women in the 18-30 year age range), as they are considered to be more credible, and the strongest impact on these young audiences is due to their ability to relate to these celebrities. However, in terms of a direct influence on the purchase impulse, Instagram celebrities stood out.

The increase in audio-visual consumption is associated with leisure, an area that encompasses the productions of YouTubers. These productions can be compared to other types of creators or broadcasters that appear on YouTube, such as young people themselves, the media, public institutions, or private entities (other than the media). In this context, YouTubers are the producers who publish less videos specifically focused on instruction or prevention (García & Montes, 2020), and consequently they fail to use their ability to influence the public for these purposes. Nevertheless, the profiles of certain YouTubers do tend to be pedagogical in their communications, and instruction is one particular ingredient they use to gain followers.

In short, YouTubers are successful creators. They are everyday members of adolescent culture, in addition to being the new celebrities who can influence others with regard to their behaviour and opinions (Bonaga & Turiel, 2016), the language they use, and the way they express themselves (González, 2018). They represent a close role model with which adolescents can identify, and this situation is enhanced when the YouTubers themselves are adolescents (Westenberg, 2016). Therefore, it seems pertinent to study how these micro-celebrities communicate with their peers, especially those who are minors.

## **GENDER VARIABLE**

As a starting point, this research refers to the study by Fernández-de-Arroyabe-Olaortua, Lazkano-Arrillaga and Eguskiza-Sesumaga (2018), in which they confirm that the gender variable is relevant for understanding not only consumption, but also the creation and diffusion of content related to adolescent leisure in different social media. In their research, these authors observe that males prefer to consume content of YouTubers and tutorials focused on video games.



Moreover, it is precisely in video games where continual violence and sexist behaviour can be noted, and where they are eventually considered to be normal.

As far as females are concerned, their digital behaviour is more oriented toward personal experiences, life events, interest in fashion, and the desire to share content. Other differences include girls also engage in more interpersonal relationships and have greater self-control over their media consumption than boys (Masanet, 2016). Some risks include the loss of a sense of privacy (Montes-Vozmediano, García-Jiménez & Menor-Sendra, 2018), the impact of aesthetic standards from the world of fashion with specific stylistic ideals, and the continuing stereotyped roles assigned to women (Fernández-de-Arroyabe-Olaortua, Lazkano-Arrillaga & Eguskiza-Sesumaga, 2018). In this sense, some authors point out that such divergences can be diminished in digital consumption compared to the remaining media behaviour (Fernández & González, 2017).

According to Regueira, Alonso and Da-Vila (2020), who studied the 50 most successful YouTuber accounts in Spain through their Instagram profiles, it is clear that females represent a limited percentage on YouTube channels, with the highest number of subscribers and views, and they have a smaller female audience as well. Adolescent girls are mainly associated with stereotypical roles such as beauty, Draw My Life, and fitness. Consequently, it can be argued that YouTube might be reproducing the types of gender imposition seen on traditional media.

Indeed, as pointed out by Maloney, Roberts and Caruso (2017) and Blanco-Ruiz and Sainz-de-Baranda (2018), YouTube is a space where masculinity predominates in various aspects such as creativity and video production. Moreover, this is a space where the content sustains gender roles by linking specifically feculent humour to males, and cosmetic tutorials to females (Scolari & Fraticelli, 2017).

At the same time, the situation would improve if development of the types of intimacy were maintained in a binary way based on whatever is considered to be feminine or masculine (Balleys, 2017), yet this is compatible with the growing emergence of phenomena that aim to break the previously mentioned male hegemony (Marôpo, Sampaio & Mirada, 2017).

## OBJECTIVES

The overall objective of this research is to study the videos that teenagers upload on their YouTube channels as a means of communication among youth from a gender perspective. To achieve this objective, the following points have been studied: the number of videos uploaded by each gender and their periodicity, the type of audio-visual production, the tone (positive, negative or neutral), the video category, topics approached, number of views and comments, as well as references to COVID-19. The research questions are as follows:

1. Do teenagers upload the largest number of videos to YouTube with the most periodicity?
2. What type of video is uploaded to YouTube according to the differentiation between male and female YouTubers?
3. Are there gender differences in terms of tone, in the sense that the videos published in Spain are positive, negative or neutral?
4. Can differences be found in the categories of videos published by males and females?
5. Do both male and female adolescent YouTubers use varied concepts in their videos?
6. Is there greater interaction regarding the videos (number of views, comments, *likes* and *dislikes*) depending on the gender of the YouTuber?
7. Has COVID-19 been mentioned and approached more by male or female teenage YouTubers?

## METHODOLOGY

This research is in line with investigations based on content analysis as a method for analysing YouTube (Baños-González, Tiralaso & Fernández, 2020; Tur-Viñes, Núñez & Martínez-Pastor, 2019), and has been carried out using this method and outlined in phases. Firstly, a data-content diagnostic sheet was designed. In the next stage, a database was designed and created, in which the data of the 300 videos analysed were recorded, sufficient size to allow the assessment and validity of the results. It allows to obtain representative results on what volume and type of content teenagers watch and upload to their YouTube channels, and it complies to sampling with standardised conditions. Thirdly, all the videos were viewed. Finally, the information generated by the sample data was analysed.

The criteria defined for the discrimination of the sample under study are as follows: videos with more than 1,000 views per video; up to 15 minutes uploaded to the YouTube social network by Spanish YouTubers between 11 and 17 years of age; more than 1 million followers during the state of emergency decreed by the Spanish government on 13 March 2020 that lasted until 21 June 2020 (the last day of the extraordinary situation). The profiles (girls/boys) that met the criteria were analysed during the set period. Determination of the age of adolescence is defined by the World Health Organization ([WHO], 2020) as the stage of growth and human development between 10 and 19 years of age, and the United Nations Children's Fund ([UNICEF], 2020) segments this period into three stages: early (10-13 years), middle (14-16), and late adolescence (17-19). Thus, 11 YouTubers in this study are in early adolescence, 7 are in middle-adolescence, and 1 is in late adolescence at 16 years of age. In this research, the age of the YouTubers has not

exceeded the legal age for the purpose of discovering what contents are being uploaded by adolescent boys and girls in the age range of minors.

The number of followers has been obtained by reviewing each profile of the YouTubers, and the age has been confirmed by searching in the “more information” section in the profiles of the YouTubers themselves, Google searches, and where possible, in their videos on the YouTube channel (see Table 1).

Table 1. Youtubers analysed

Username	Age	Gender	Subscriptions in millions	No. of videos analysed
Adexe & Nau	14, 16	Boy	10.90	16
La Diversión de Martina	15	Girl	4.01	10
Ariann Music	14	Girl	3.96	14
The Crazy Haacks	15, 14, 11	2 boys, 1 girl	3.66	29
Sparta356	16	Boy	3.51	4
Alexity	11	Girl	3.49	19
Karina & Marina	12	Girl	3.12	26
TeamNico	11	Boy	2.77	4
Jugando con Aby	11	Girl	2.71	1
El Mundo de Clodett	11	Girl	2.60	12
AleGame22 YT	17	Boy	2.59	8
Annie Vega	13	Girl	2.53	12
DivertiGuay	11	Girl	2.38	17
Lady Pecas	11	Girl	1.92	16
Acenix	14	Boy	1.81	4
Pino	13	Boy	1.77	34
Daniela Golubeva	13	Girl	1.77	17
TheExaL04	16	Boy	1.43	30
Silvia Sánchez	13	Girl	1.13	27

Source: Authors' own data

To make the gender comparison, the videos were coded on the basis of the gender of the YouTubers (boy or girl) and their identification was made by viewing all of the videos to confirm their authorship. In order to present the data in a homogeneous way for all the elements of the sample, a review was carried out on 30 June 2020 regarding the popularity ranking of the YouTubers, the number of reproductions, the number of *likes* and *dislikes*, and the number of comments (if admitted).

Once the categories in the database had been chosen, the criteria were set for the sample population: teenage YouTubers between 11 and 17 years of age; videos

of up to 15 minutes; more than 1 million followers; and more than 1,000 plays per video– by. The sample was coded by assigning numbers to the categories and analysed through a univariate descriptive statistical analysis that allows for the measurement of the distribution and frequency of the values of each variable distributed in the categories.

In order to analyse this digital cultural system that YouTube has become, in which adolescents communicate, share, access information and engage in play, a hierarchical exploration order of seven levels was established.

First, the number of videos published, and their periodicity have been studied. Second, each *video* was defined by t according to eight categories of topic segmentation of the contents of the videos as follows: (i) video games, (ii) choreography or music videos, (iii) videos with typical teenage scenes, (iv) amusing videos that show actions that try to entertain, (v) testimonies, (vi) tutorials that explain the process of carrying out some kind of activity, (vii) videos with animals or pets, and (viii) videos in which the influencer expresses his or her opinion to their followers on a topic (Yarosh, et al, 2016). A challenge category (Khasawneh, et al, 2021) is added, which includes those actions that with a viral trend, the YouTuber performs a challenge whose purpose is to get more likes. In this case, for example, the challenges can consist of obeying their parents for a day, getting their brother or sister to do his homework, or killing 100 or 1000 characters in Fornite to win a financial prize given by their mother or father.

Third, the *tone* category of the videos is divided into 3 groups: *positive* when the message transmits the intention of solving a problem or issue; *negative* when a fact or situation is exposed as something undesirable; and *neutral* includes those videos that only explain or describe an action without giving an opinion.

Fourth, the grouping known as *category* has been analysed, which includes the possibility of videos being entertaining, informative, instructional, and preventive. Fifth, divergence in the treatment of topics was examined by carrying out an analysis of the 20 most recurrent concepts of all the videos from the point of view of the author's gender. Sixth, the interactions received by each video have been registered, accounting for the number of views, *likes* and *dislikes*, and comments received for each video. Finally, the seventh level, this study examined references made by adolescents to the coronavirus situation in the videos they uploaded to YouTube during the state of emergency. The aim of this level was to discover the degree of importance they place on the social reality they were experiencing and whether they expressed this to their followers. To complete this point, a time pattern was developed to show video uploads according to date as well as trend lines during the summary period.

## FINDINGS

### NUMBER OF VIDEOS AND PERIODICITY BY GENDER

The channels are categorized according to the gender of the YouTubers: either girls or boys. A total of 300 videos were analysed, of which 180 are from girls (60% of the total) and 120 from boys (40% of the total). The channel known as “The Crazy Haacks” contributed 29 videos to the sample, of which 20 were from the two boys and 9 from the girl. Of this total, there are significant differences in the number of videos uploaded according to age. One can observe that at the lower ages, the girls contributed more videos than the boys. However, even though boys uploaded fewer videos of the total number, they are the leaders in video uploads in the greatest age range. This occurred because none of the 16 – and 17-year-old Spanish female YouTubers whom the study analysed have more than 1 million followers and were therefore excluded from the study. Girls aged 11 to 13 years of age uploaded 156 videos (86.7% of their gender) compared to 38 videos for boys (31.7% of their gender) of the same age. From 14 to 15 years of age, video production tends to be fairly equal between boys (32 videos) and girls (24 videos). In the 16-17 age range, boys are more prolific than in younger ages, offering 50 videos that reach 41.1% of their audio-visual productions (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Videos by gender and age



Source: Authors' own research data

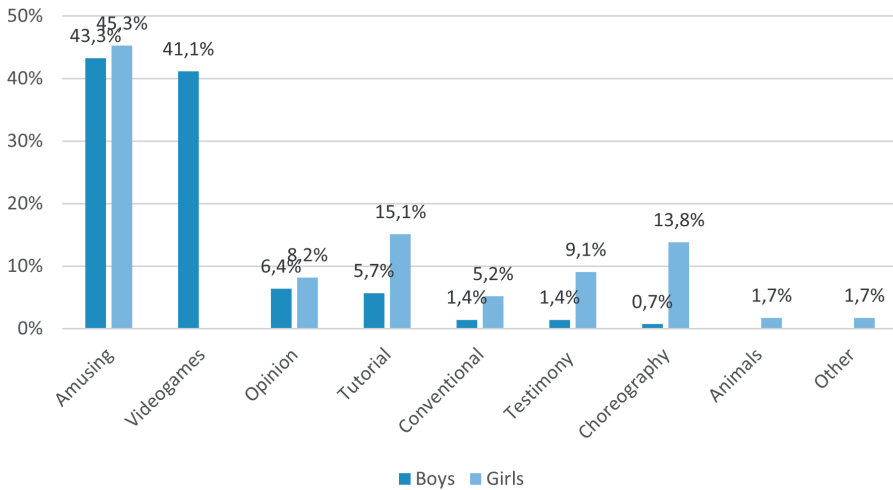
In terms of periodicity, 94% of teenage YouTubers upload an average of 1 to 3 videos per week. A total of 3 YouTubers increased their production to an average of 4 to 5 videos per week for two weeks during the state of emergency:

they included one boy (TheExaL04, 16 years old) and two girls (Alexity, 11 years old; Karina and Marina, 12 years old).

### VIDEO TYPE

The videos uploaded by the Spanish YouTubers combine different types of content. They share videos that are edited and of high quality, which confirms that the audio-visual productions they upload to this social network are well-developed, and not the result of improvisation. Boys and girls both contribute mostly amusing videos in similar percentages. The girls contributed 105 productions (45.3% of their gender), whereas the boys contributed 61 (42.3% of their gender). It bears mentioning that the 50 videos dedicated to video games in which YouTubers show their skills playing real games were all contributed by boys (41.1% of their gender), yet the girls are the leaders among the rest of the video types (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Video typology



Source: Authors' own research data

By delving into more detail, we can see that in the case of boys who upload videos to their YouTube channels while playing video games (Fortnite and Minecraft), not only do they play, but they also talk while they play, narrate what they are doing, make jokes, and perform actions not directly related to the game, such as a certain amount of conversation with a relative who is present, and is usually a brother or the mother. During the games, they manage to develop communication skills with their followers and increase their strategic competence, decision-making skills, spatial-temporal perception, and their ability to process information, as well as competence in reading virtual maps.

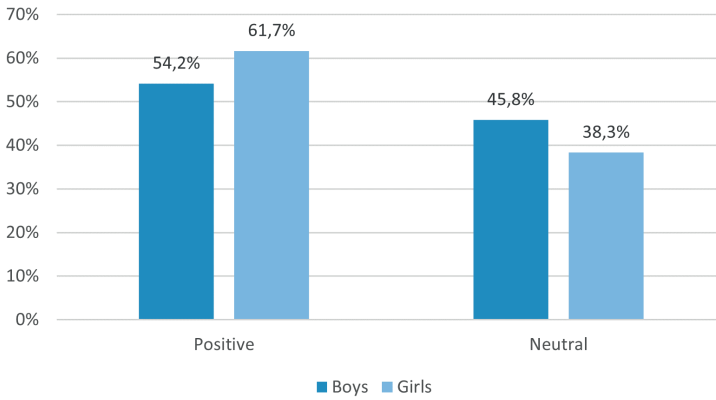
In the case of girls, the topics are more diverse. Videos of the teenage girls focus mainly on tutorials (n=35 compared to n=8 for the boys). These videos explain the procedures of some particular activity, how a product works, how to perform some beauty treatment, or tutorials related to choreography or music videos (n=32 compared to n=1), in which they dance and demonstrate their skills in this area. The girls display practices in their videos that may be of interest to their audience or help them improve their communication skills, and they sometimes interact with family members who are usually parents or siblings.

The girls are involved in the issues that interest them and are affectionate toward their audience. In their videos, they take a position on a topic or issue in 21 videos (compared to 2 for boys), express their opinions in 19 videos (compared to 9 for boys), and show conventional scenes from their daily lives in 12 productions (compared to 2 for the boys). Animals are not a topic of interest to boys, as none of their videos contain this theme, compared to teenage girls who submitted 4 videos of this type.

### **tone of the videos published**

The tone of the videos has been categorized into positive, negative and neutral. They are considered to have a positive tone when the YouTubers try to solve a problem or give recommendations on how to confront a challenge in Fortnite, how to make a sandwich without a toaster, or how to give a fresh smell to a cupboard. Videos with a neutral tone are limited to those, in which boys play an online game while explaining what they are doing without taking a position on its content or on the actions they are carrying out. In the case of girls, videos are considered to be neutral when they demonstrate an activity such as a beauty treatment, in which they comb their hair or put makeup on their faces without revealing their opinion about the activity. Regarding a negative tone, none of the videos uploaded to YouTube by teenage boys and girls has had a negative tone, in which an undesirable situation, non-constructive action, or violent situation was shown. Videos made by the girls are more likely to solve a problem or address an issue that may be of interest to their audience than videos created by boys. Female YouTubers shared 111 positive videos, representing more than 60% of their gender (61.7%), and boys shared 65 videos, representing more than 50% of their gender (54.2%). Fewer videos with a neutral tone were registered. Girls shared 69 videos that were neutral compared to 55 for the boys (see Figure 3).

Figure 3. Video tone

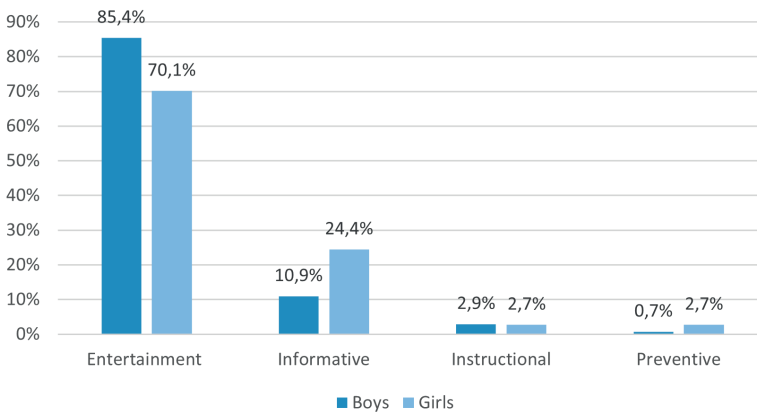


Source: Authors' own research data

### VIDEO CATEGORY

The videos that teenagers record to upload to YouTube are mainly for entertainment purposes. The boys lead the way with 117 videos (85.4% of their gender). Even though the girls upload more videos with 155 productions, this number is proportionally lower (70.1% of their gender). Both genders combine this type of video with content that is informative and instructional, yet teenage girls prefer to give their videos more informative features (n=54 girls; n=15 boys). Regarding the instructional category, (n=6 girls; n=4 boys), and the preventive category for situations of risk (n=6 girls; n=1 boys), almost no attention was paid to these classifications by either gender group (see Figure 4).

Figure 4. Video category



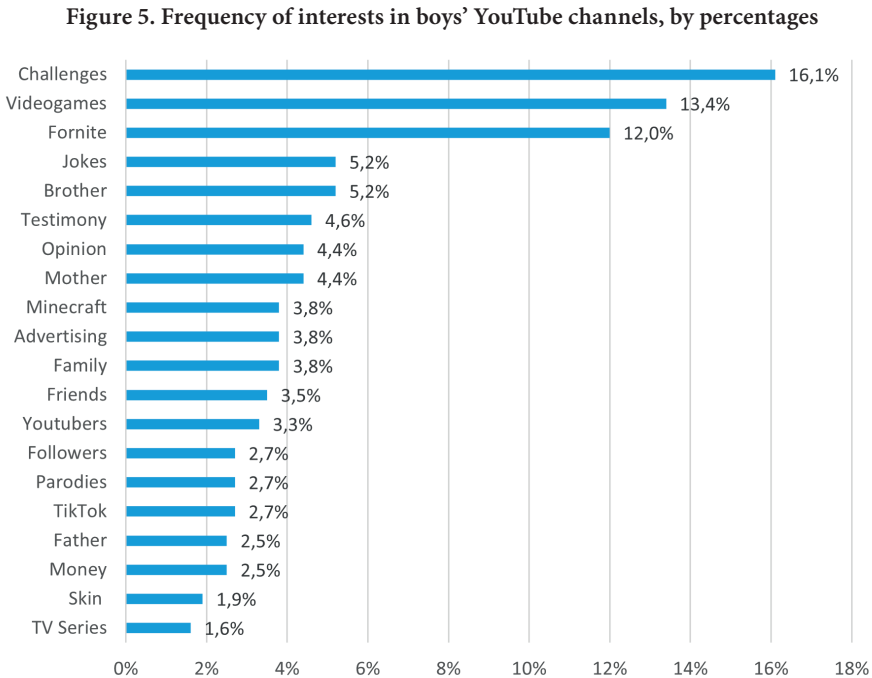
Source: Authors' own research data



### INTERESTS ACCORDING TO GENDER

Analysis of the interests has uncovered the most relevant aspects of the topics approached by the sample. In order to achieve this objective, the 20 most recurrent concepts in each video have been observed based on the gender of the creator. In the case of both boys and girls, the level of interest by gender has been distinguished according to the diverse challenges faced (boys focused mainly on video games while girls directed their attention toward beauty, food and family), as well as a high level of family participation in the recording (mother, father, brother, or sister), or with these same family members acting as co-stars in the videos.

In the case of boys, the interests most often recorded are connected to video games (13.4%), Fortnite (12%), Minecraft (3.8%), and skin (1.9%) in reference to the video game Fortnite, for a total of 31.1%. Next, the most frequently discussed topics were facing challenges (16.1%) and jokes (5.2%). Regarding the family, participation or reference to a sibling (5.2%), mother (4.4%), references to the family in general or to some other relative (3.8%), and to the father (2.5%) stand out, for a total of 15.9% (see Figure 5).

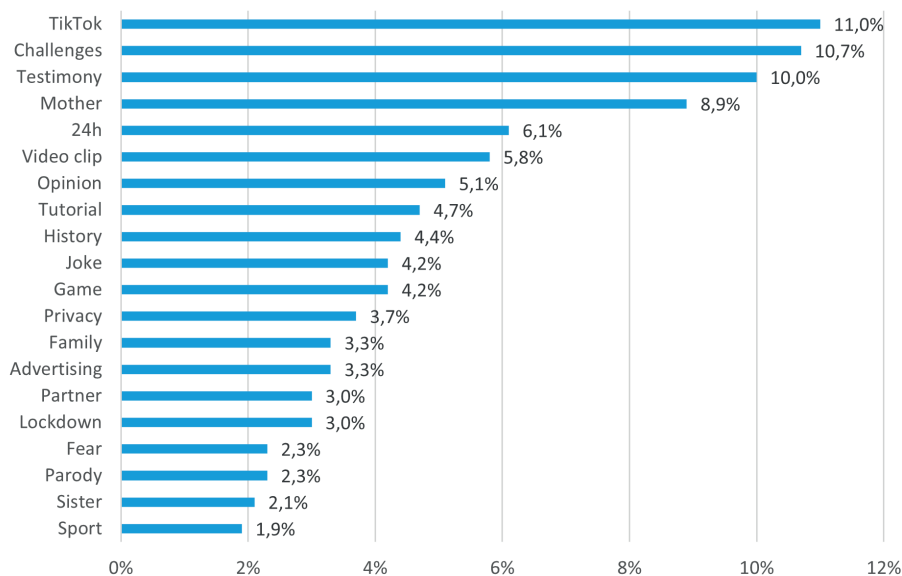


Source: Authors' own research data

In the case of girls (see Figure 6), their videos show a greater dispersion of the main interests featuring in the videos they uploaded to YouTube. Among them, the most outstanding interest at 11% is the social network TikTok, followed

by facing ‘challenges’ (10.7%). Next, they focus on giving testimonies (10%), and similar to the case of the videos made by male adolescents, the participation of a family member is also relevant, and is distributed as follows: mother (8.9%), reference to the family in general or to some other relative (3.3%), a partner (3% [an interest that does not appear in the videos made by boys]), and a sister (2.1%), for a total of 17.3% (see Figure 6).

Figure 6. Frequency of interests in girls’ YouTube channels, by percentages



Source: Authors’ own research data

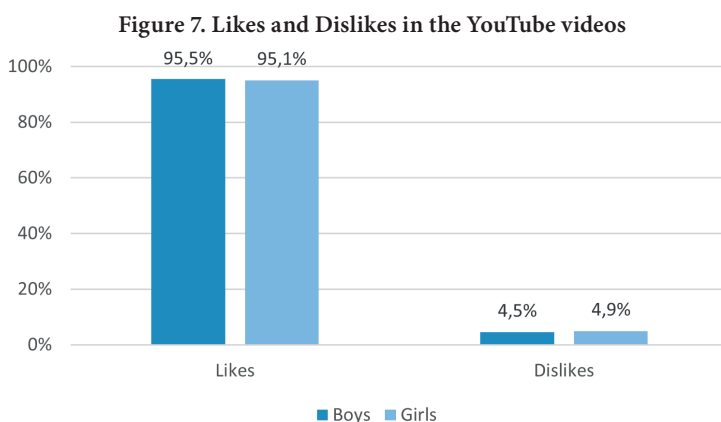
## VIDEO INTERACTION

The criteria for classifying the interaction of the videos are based on the evaluation and calculation of the number of views, *likes* and *dislikes*, and comments obtained by each video analysed.

The number of views reached more than 150 million (150,445,346), which shows the incredible magnitude of the potential impact their content has on their followers. Among them, it is worth noting that of the 11 solo girls’ channels only one (Ariann Music) allowed fans to write comments on the videos they watched. In the case of the boys, the opposite is true. Of the 8 boys’ channels, which included The Crazy Haacks (where the two older siblings are boys) all but one (TeamNico) allowed their followers to write comments about the content they watched, thereby exposing themselves to what the audiences may think of them. This blockade of comments on most of the channels belonging to girls

does not allow for an effective comparison in the comment category to confirm which channels receive the most interaction from their audience.

Regarding the possibility of clicking on *like* or *dislike* in relation to the videos being watched, all channels except one (Silvia Sánchez, 13 years old) allowed fans to do so and to express whether they like or dislike what they are watching. The total number of interactions is more than 7 million (7,067,209), and among both girls' and boys' channels, they are overwhelmingly *likes*, with figures exceeding 95%. It is worth noting that despite the lower number of videos contributed by the boys, they received a higher level of interaction. The boys received 3,782,424 *likes* and 179,350 *dislikes*, whereas the girls received 2,951,823 *likes* and 153,612 *dislikes* (see Figure 7).



Source: Authors' own research data

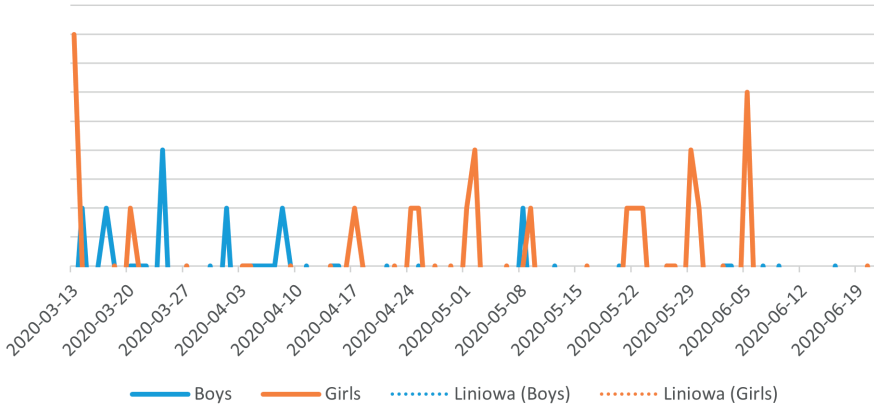
### HOW BOYS AND GIRLS ADDRESSED THE COVID-19 SITUATION

From 13 March 2020, the day when the President of the Government announced the state of emergency, until it ended on 21 June 2020, there were no significant differences with regard to references or approaches taken toward the coronavirus situation according to gender. A total of 55 audio-visual productions made by the girl YouTubers (31% of their gender) and 40 made by the boys (33% of their gender) refer to the situation the country was experiencing due to the coronavirus pandemic. The remaining videos do not deal with the pandemic nor its effects.

However, by observing the temporary pattern during the state of emergency in Figure 8, it is possible to see that at the beginning of the state of emergency adolescent girls uploaded more videos that discussed or dealt with the COVID-19 situation than boys. Even though peaks of interest were detected during the period of state of emergency, the relevance of the coronavirus situation gradually decreased. Similarly, the trend line indicates a sustained tendency

among girls regarding this subject during the time range studied, and as the boys' interest in this subject diminished as the days passed, they displayed a downward trend in this area (see Figure 8).

Figure 8. COVID-19 addressed in the adolescents' videos



Source: Authors' own research data

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The *underage influencers* analysed in the study are what Guerrero-Pico, Masanet and Scolari (2019) call expert producers whose productions are elaborate audio-visual pieces which seek to generate a community of followers with whom to share their experiences, as Balleys et al. (2020) point out. Girls between 11 and 15 years of age are the most prolific video creators among the YouTuber sector under study. They do not, therefore, reflect the parameters of under-representation of females reported in other studies such as that of Regueira, Alonso & Da-Vila (2020) who conclude that YouTube was reproducing the sexist patterns of the traditional media.

However, when girls reach the ages of 16 and 17, they are no longer present on this social network, and not a single female YouTuber with 1 million or more followers has been registered. Along these same lines, it is evident that female YouTubers are concentrated in the 11-13 years age group (their presence is scarce from the age of 14 onward), while the boys start to gain their share of influence between the ages of 13 and 17.

If this trend were to continue in the coming years, we would find a lower presence of outstanding female YouTubers. It seems that 16 and 17-year-old girls are contributing more audio-visual productions on TikTok (Suárez-Álvarez

& García-Jiménez, 2021), which could give rise to adolescents' migration towards this new digital native social network, as Mercedes (2015) and Angulo, et al., (2019) point about migrating of young people from Tuenti, Facebook and Snapchat to Instagram. The scientific community should continue investigating to confirm whether this migration actually occurs and whether girls are leading the way. It would be interesting to monitor these creators in order to gain knowledge regarding their lack of interest in publishing on this platform as their age increases and find out why this is happening.

On average, girl YouTubers have three more videos per author compared to their boy counterparts. However, this is not because they publish more regularly, as nearly all YouTubers release between 1 and 3 videos per week.

As far as typologies are concerned, amusing videos are by far the most highly represented overall among both genders. Once this common priority interest has been defined, female YouTubers show greater diversity in the typology of content they approach, while male YouTubers only have one other significant alternative typology: audio-visuals related to video games, a preference detected in studies such as that of Fernández-de-Arroyabe-Olaortua et al (2018). Behaviour that does not coincide on TikTok where boys do not create or share video games, but rather focus on viralized audio-visual productions with greater self-representation (Suárez-Álvarez & García-Jiménez, 2021).

In any case, there are only three categories in girl's productions and two in boy's that exceed 10 percent of production in both genders. The three main typologies among female YouTubers are amusing videos tutorials, choreography and music videos, while among male YouTubers, the typologies that stand out are amusing videos and video games. Except for this last typology, which has no equivalent among female adolescent YouTubers, the audio-visuals produced by female YouTubers predominate in the rest of the typologies. Some repetition of gender roles associated with girls has also been observed (Regueira, Alonso, & Da-Vila, 2020; and Scolari and Fraticelli, 2017) for the publication of tutorials on beauty. However, more significant is the finding that confirms the greater typological diversity of their audio-visuals, and that amusing videos predominate in both female and male YouTubers.

If we analyse the tone of the videos, the first thing that stands out is the absence of videos with a negative tone. Moreover, a positive tone dominates (as opposed to the third category, the neutral tone) among both boys and girls. However, girl YouTubers are prominent in the use of a positive tone (more than 60% of their videos have this tone), while in the case of boys, the figures are more uniform: 54.2% are positive videos and 45.8% are neutral. Therefore, a less neutral discourse predominates in the case of girl YouTubers in which a constructive approach prevails with the intention to contribute to the solution of a problem, or to actually resolve a problem or situation.

In the context of the video category, YouTube has consolidated itself as an entertainment platform, a status it has held for over a decade, which is in line with the results from Bañuelos (2009) y Murolo (2010). Two thirds of the videos published by teenage YouTubers belong to the video category, which is clearly predominant among teenage YouTubers of both genders. The topics addressed in their videos emphasise this desire for amusement among teenagers, as stated by García and Montes (2020), and certify the difference in gender as a key factor in audio-visual production on this digital platform. Although both genders show their predilection for performing and recording challenges and have the participation of some family members in their content, the disparity of interests between girls and boys has also been confirmed. Boys focus on video games and making jokes, while girls direct their attention toward other social networks such as TikTok, where they dance, pose, perform, and express their testimonies on topics that concern them.

When analysing the interactions received by teenage YouTubers one may notice that although the boys provide fewer videos, their audience is clearly more active, provide a higher number of clicks on the *like*, and *dislike* options. Regarding the pandemic, boys and girls were similar in the way they mentioned the situation in their videos. References to COVID-19 did not reach even a third of the videos among either gender. However, there was an appreciable difference in the declining interest in the pandemic among boy YouTubers, while girl YouTubers made references to COVID-19 relatively consistent throughout the state of emergency. The boys seemed to follow certain patterns of novelty or opportunity, such as when an issue was headline news, while the girls seemed more interested than boy YouTubers in addressing the issue at the beginning of the pandemic, and demonstrated more regularity in their comments. The results support the conclusions by Garcia and Montes-Vozmediano (2020) about the creation of preventive or formative contents, but only in the case of girl YouTubers.

This study has limitations, specifically the selection criteria for the videos of a maximum duration of 15 minutes. This resulted in the exclusion from sample, and thus analysis, of many audio-visual creations related to video games published by adolescent YouTubers, as this type of video is usually of longer duration. However, the characteristics of these audio-visual productions and the preference among the boy YouTubers for these kinds of videos are equally evident. Although the selection criteria for audio-visuals to have a minimum of a thousand views can also be biased. We consider this to be a relevant, but not excessively demanding figure as we did deal with channels that have more than 1 million followers. Consequently, this number of views has allowed us to ensure that we analysed videos that have attracted sufficient interest and have experienced a certain degree of dissemination.

## FUNDING

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## The Age of Algorithms: Interview with Professor Lev Manovich

It's 20 years since you published *The Language of New Media*. The book is now regarded as one of the most influential foundations for new media research. Did your predictions on how the media would look like in 2021 come true?

*The Language of New Media* was published in 2001, and was based on a number of my texts published earlier that I expanded. The first of these texts appeared in 1991. So, in reality, the book is almost 30 years old now. So why it is still used in many thousands of university courses today?

One of the reasons is that I did not try to predict the future. Instead, my goal was to place “new media” (new cultural and media forms that use computers) in the larger context of history of the arts, design, film, photography, and computers. I showed how new media relied on conventions and techniques that were already dominant in modern culture. At the same time, I also discussed new representational and aesthetic possibilities that new media offers or can offer. This historical perspective is what assured the book's longevity, as I see it.

One of the goals of the book was to try and discover and outline key common characteristics that digital cultural objects and digital phenomena share. This is reflected in the book organization. I don't talk about digital cinema, multimedia, web sites in separate chapters. Instead, it is laid out in a different way: each chapter describes a concept that many new media objects and phenomena share, such as an “interface” or a “database.”

And did you expect the critical importance of software and algorithms that happened over the last decade?

I used the term “software studies” and “software theory” for the first time in *The Language of New Media*.

And in early 2000s, I started publishing texts developing this idea further. I prefer this term to “algorithm studies” or “critical code studies” because algorithms are only one part of software.

The field of software studies gradually took shape in the mid-2000s. In 2006, Matthew Fuller, author of the pioneering book *Behind the Blip: Essays on the Culture of Software* (2003), organized the first Software Studies Workshop in Rotterdam. In the introduction to the workshop, Fuller wrote: „In a sense, all intellectual work is now ‚software study,‘ in that software provides its media and its context, but there are very few places where the specific nature, the materiality, of software is studied except as a matter of engineering.” In 2008 I organized a second Software Studies Workshop and after that The MIT Press started “software studies” publishing series (<https://mitpress.mit.edu/books/series/software-studies>). Today the crucial roles played by algorithms in most areas of contemporary society including politics, economics, media and culture have become visible to everybody – but this was not the case even eight years ago.

/// You introduced the notion of the “cultural software”. In what ways this concept advance our understanding of digital culture?

I am using the term “cultural software” to refer to types of software which support actions we normally associate with “culture.” These cultural actions enabled by software can be divided into a number of categories. The following are some of them: 1) creating, sharing and accessing cultural artifacts which contain representations, ideas, beliefs, and esthetic values (for instance, editing a music video, designing a package for a product, or writing a blog post); 2). engaging in interactive cultural experiences (for instance, playing a computer game); 3) creating and sharing information and knowledge (for instance, writing an article for Wikipedia, adding places in Google Earth); 4) developing software tools and services which support all these activities – web browsers, photo and video editing apps, programming languages for artists such as Processing, game engines, and so on.

Why the perspective of software studies is important? Let’s say I want to better understand the media objects that billions of people experience and engage with every day: websites and blogs, animated titles of TV shows and ads, designs, illustrations, photos, and so on. Very often, these objects are parts of interactive media experiences—navigating the Web, playing a video game, browsing Instagram and TikTok. The examples of “engagement” are sharing, editing, remixing, and commenting. And all this media is experienced, created, edited, remixed, organized and shared with “cultural software.” Therefore, to understand media today we have to learn about this software—its genealogy (where does it come from), its anatomy (the key features shared by all media viewing and editing software), and its effects in the world. How does media design software shape the media being created, making some design choices seem natural and easy to execute, while hiding other design possibilities? How media viewing/

managing/remixing software shapes our experience of media and the actions we perform on it?

These are the questions I added in my 2013 book *Software Takes Command*. And because today “media” and “software” are so intertwined, this book also asks a big question – what “media” is today conceptually? Do the concepts of media developed to account for industrial area technologies, from photography to video, still work in relation to media that are designed and experienced with software? Do they need to be updated, or completely replaced by new, more appropriate, concepts? For example: do we still have different media or did they merge into a single new meta-medium? Are there some structural features that motion graphics, graphic designs, websites, product designs, buildings, and video games all share since they are all designed with software?

In short, does “media” still exist?

/// In your new book *Cultural Analytics* you identify the rapid growth of “more media”.  
/// What are the key differences between “new media” and “more media”?

“More media” is a phrase I first used in 2009, as a way of labelling the new scale of media culture – which includes not only billions of people creating their own content and sharing it online, but also more semi-professionals and professionals worldwide. For example, according to the last year’s data, there are 30 million YouTube channels which have at least 10 subscribers.

“New media” and “more media” are not opposites. The latter is a new stage of “new media development.

*The Language of New Media* (written in 1999) described the forms of digital culture that emerged in the 1990s. *Software Takes Command* (first version published online in 2007) covered the history of software for media creation and editing and the new visual languages they enabled as they were adopted around the turn of the 21st century. My latest book *Cultural Analytics* (written in 2016-2019) investigates the new post-2005 stage where billions of people create digital media and share it online. So, this is what I called “more media.”

Here cultural software is given new roles. We delegate to it more agency. It is no longer only a tool, a medium, or an assistant. Instead, it now engages it in cultural behaviors – for example, deciding what new posts to show, and if we have this option on. And while for now we still take photographs, write posts, and perform other cultural actions ourselves, gradually such actions may get fully automated in the future. For example, in 2018, Google added the autocomplete feature to Gmail that automatically completes the email response as you start writing – you only need to press the Tab key to accept. This is why all cultural and media scholars and students need to acquire a good understanding of data science and artificial intelligence (AI) fields.

First media became digital. In the 1990s, algorithms (in cultural software) are used only by professional creators as low-level tools to create and edit media, i.e., digital images, video, texts, music, and design. Next (in the 2000s), the new scale of media being created and shared by both professionals and normal people led to our society adopting algorithmic methods for its organization (i.e., search engines) and discovery (i.e., recommendations). And in the following stage, which starts around 2016, the technology behind these algorithms is being replaced by a new one (i.e., supervised machine learning using deep neural networks). So, this is where we are now.

/// In 2007 you created the Cultural Analytics Lab, of which you are the director. What prompted the creation of the lab and how has it evolved over the years?

Everyone is constantly saying that we are drowning in information in the ocean of information. And the other hand, everyone understands that new abundance of data creates completely new opportunities. *Cultural Analytics* aims to create an apparatus that can allow us to adequately see and describe the present. Research labs, media creators and publishers, museums, universities, non-profits and endless other organizations publish information online about their activities. This potentially can be used to create much more detailed maps of our world and our culture than we have today. These maps will show us both popular and infrequent topics, ideas, visual styles...And they can be updated periodically or in real time. Twitter's lists of popular hashtags and Google Trends are very rudimentary and very partial examples of such maps. and each uses only one type of data (tweets and google searches, respectively).

It seems to me that any person living now or 1,000 years ago is in a similar situation – information appears in front of us, and our brain processes it. „I like this young man, I can marry him; this one I don't like, and I will never marry him.” The human brain is an amazing computer – much more powerful than all super-computers today. It is constantly processing millions of impressions – visual, spatial, auditory, gustatory. And it is constantly comparing everything. For example, you see an image and immediately realize that it is unique; you see another image and realize that it is rare but not unique; and you see yet another image and realize it's very common.

However, each of us sees only a tiny percentage of physical or media reality. For example, let's say I want to compare designs of cafes in all capitals in Central and Eastern Europe that opened in the last five years. It will be impossible for me to visit them. Or maybe I want to see all exhibitions taking place every month in New York, which has around 1800 galleries – and this is also impossible. So, while my brain would be able to identify the typical and unique and compute trends, I will not be able to feed it all the needed information.

However, in many cases, the information is available online – for example, every gallery in the world has a text about its shows and some images of the artworks from every exhibition. Can we collect all this information and use computational and visualization methods to see all these images together, and be able to ask questions – what is typical and what is unique, or what are the frequently used techniques and themes, or is there any visual difference today between the languages of fine and commercial arts, and so on? And can we do the same for all films being released every year, all TV dramas, all books, and so on? This was the motivation that led me first to think of cultural analytics in 2005 and then set up the lab after I got funding.

/// **What area has been insufficiently explored? In other words: What’s the next big step in media studies?**

I don’t think that the questions I will describe below will become “big” any time soon. But they are important for me, and certainly they have not been sufficiently explored.

I am gradually realizing that we don’t know what really happens when we look at photographs, or other images. Semiotics treats images as signs. Humanities and media studies often only pay attention to their semantics – focusing on meanings and interpretations of their “content.” Experimental psychology of art and philosophy think about aesthetic pleasure images can give. Pragmatic philosophy and social sciences talk about effects and actions provoked by images, and how they can change our beliefs.

But certainly, this is not all images do. They may be doing much more. They can be also doing much less – partly, because of their abundance today.

You look at endless photos, some briefly, some longer, in different contexts. Your brain “processes” them, using memory and language. The responses to images may also provoke emotions. This is all true. But all the terms listed above – meanings, pleasures, effects, emotions – in my view are simplistic, too broad and often maybe not be even relevant. Maybe in the future neuroscience can help as it progresses. But as of today, we don’t know how the brain really works in detail, and therefore our theories about what happens when we look at images are only theories.

I look at hundreds of Instagram images in a day. I go to museum and see a few dozens paintings. Most of them I don’t remember afterwards. Do they even leave tiny traces in my brain with its 100 billion connected neurons? I see them, yes, mechanically – like an AI which is always switched on. But do they ‘affect’ me? Do I ‘read’ them? Do I ‘interpret’ them? Do I feel ‘emotions’? Do they make me see the world ‘differently’? No.

Certainly, some techniques do exist to measure and predict some effects of visual media – eye tracking devices, EEG and FMRI recordings, statistical analysis that may look at the behavior of many online users after they looked at some ads or products listings. And for the industry, this may be enough. A particular ad campaign resulted in the strong increase of sales of product A or better recognition of brand B. And often, this is also enough for social sciences. A study found a strong correlation between teens looking at content C and their behavior D. But for me, this is not enough. I want to know what else happens when I see a single image, or a thousand images. Did the proliferation of images (the result of digital media and the internet!) changed their effects on us?

/// Artificial intelligence is playing an increasingly important role in the modern world.  
 /// How are media, design, and aesthetics are being affected by Artificial Intelligence?

This Fall, I am finishing my second book on these topics (the first called *AI Aesthetics* was published in 2018). Since my space here is limited, let me briefly summarize a couple of points developed in more detail in the book.

How much of a revolution is the adoption of AI in media production and design? In thinking about media history, we often focus too much on most recent technologies – such as AI. However, all media creation in human history always required use of some tools. As soon as a human wanted to externalize ideas or images in their head, or represent something which exists or can exist, some form of *media technology* was needed. The surface of a cave and mark making instruments 100,000 years ago, or clay and stone later, analog photo and film cameras later still, and so on.

In other words, creating material cultural representations and certain types of cultural performances (such as making music with some instrument – but not singing or dancing) was always a result of a “collaboration” between a human and some tool or a machine. From this historical perspective, there is no fundamental difference between all other media technologies and AI – regardless of whether we mean, by the latter, the traditional algorithms we write, agents-based simulation, supervised machine learning using deep neural networks, or other approaches.

This, however, does not mean that the development of “media AI” does not lead to any fundamental changes. But what are these changes, besides speeding up many production tasks, or further democratizing it, or enabling some new effects? Does AI lead to some fundamentally new types of representations or communication techniques, comparable to the adoption of print, linear perspective, film, audio recordings, television, digital images, 3D computer graphics, VR, internet or the web? So far, the answer is no. Does it mean that the changes in media culture AI is bringing about are only qualitative? It is too early to say.



But – why do we think that qualitative changes are necessarily more important than quantitative? The technologies behind the web are the same today as 30 years ago, but the adoption of the web as the standard medium of communication in 1990s and 2000s decades changed society significantly.

To conclude, let me mention one example of a recent qualitative change in media culture that AI has contributed to. For me, it's a really good example of how a quantitative change can have very big consequences. Did you notice that over a period of a few years – approximately between 2014 and 2019 – the quality of images captured by cameras in mobile phones improved dramatically? Partly it was due to the increase of sensor resolution and other hardware improvements, and also addition of multiple lens to a phone. And partly it was due to the use of AI in cameras. Looking at the photos I captured with my phone in early 2010s, I find many of them are unusable. But by approximately 2020, it became difficult to take a really bad photo. Practically in any situation, the photo has a perfect exposure (i.e., enough details in dark, medium, and light parts) and the main subject in is focus.

I think this is a huge change. Billions of people take photos these days, and many of them do it daily – and the ability to capture good photos in almost every situation really enhances their lives, and their loved ones.

*Lev Manovich was interviewed by Jacek Mikucki in October, 2021.*

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Dr. Lev Manovich is a leading theorist of digital culture, and a pioneer in using big data to study visual culture. He was included in the list of „25 People Shaping the Future of Design” in 2013 and the list of „50 Most Interesting People Building the Future” in 2014. He is the author and editor of 14 books including *Cultural Analytics*, *AI Aesthetics*, *Theories of Software Culture*, *Instagram and Contemporary Image*, *Software Takes Command*, *Soft Cinema: Navigating the Database and The Language of New Media* which was described as „the most suggestive and broad-ranging media history since Marshall McLuhan.” Manovich is a Presidential Professor at The Graduate Center, CUNY, and a Director of the Cultural Analytics Lab. The lab created projects for the Museum of Modern Art (NYC), New York Public Library, and other organizations.

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**LEV MANOVICH (2020). CULTURAL ANALYTICS, LONDON: MIT PRESS  
CAMBRIDGE, PP. 336, ISBN: 9780262037105,  
[HTTPS://DOI.ORG/10.7551/MITPRESS/11214.003.0001](https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/11214.003.0001)**

Written by internationally recognized American scholar and media and communication professor Lev Manovich, “Cultural Analytics” presents readers with a comprehensive, in-depth analysis of digital communications media and its relations to various aspects of modern culture. An exciting book at the intersection of data science and media studies, presenting concepts and methods for computational analysis of cultural data. The author comprehensively presents concepts and methods for computational analysis of cultural data, with a particular focus on visual media. Manovich presents us with a well-structured and extremely thorough overview and precise analysis on the different methodological approaches to data with special emphasis on contemporary media trends. The founder of the field of cultural analytics, he broadly discusses the shift from “new media” to “more media”. In 1999 he wrote the renowned “The Language of New Media” and now offers more updated concepts. Carefully displayed groundwork ensures even readers without excessive background knowledge regarding Big Data and the digital society, can easily follow his arguments and understand visualizations. The author directs his book for academic researchers and students in art, design, the humanities, social sciences, media studies, data science, and computer science; professionals working in design, photography, film, urban design, architecture, journalism, museum and library fields, curating, and culture management. But his intended audience is every-body who works with social media and the web in any role e.g. creator, blogger, strategist, manager, developer, marketer or PR specialist.

After all, contemporary media communication is often based on computational analysis of media artifacts. Furthermore, user interactions enable web searches, recommendations, filtering, customization, interactions with digital devices, behavioral advertising, and other operations that form common practices in the digital culture. The core ideas and principles that make digital media operations possible are introduced and described in the book in a gentle, non-technical way. Such an approach teaches readers how to explore cultural datasets. In the cultural framework applied, the individual, group and societal practices are explained to show how our hypermodern society thinks about using data and algorithms. “Cultural analytics refers to the use of computational and design

methods— including data visualization, media and interaction design, statistics, and machine learning— for exploration and analysis of contemporary culture at scale. One goal of these explorations is to enable us to see what hundreds of millions of people around the world today create, imagine, and value” (page 10).

The explored concepts and theories are put into a greater perspective, and results in an unbiased end-product that approaches all questions and debates by considering all sides of the arguments within the digital culture phenomena. Manovich both interlines and differentiates the phenomena from digital humanities, and his arguments are clear and well-established in research. He led for years courses on data visualization and digital media (precisely from 2005) and published numerous projects both online and in the *Journal of Cultural Analytics*. Now, in this book, he offers a not less than encyclopedic coverage on relevant topics and techniques, with a focus on a smaller number of topics explored in more depth.

After an exhaustive Introduction, Manovich divided the book into three parts, each consisting of three sub-chapters. The first part, called “Studying Culture at Scale”, Manovich defines the field of studies, shows historical background and identifies the most vivid examples of the digital society and communication practices from a media-orientated perspective. The second part, titled “Representing Culture as Data”, covers not only media but also digital-related: behaviors, interactions, and events. Manovich looks at the digital universe in terms of things that one can select for analysis. Cultural data, cultural information, and cultural discourse, as well as artifacts and experiences are identified and described. The third part “Exploring Cultural Data” focuses on methodology. Exploratory methods are used for studying visual media datasets are discussed. Manovich offers a few ideas fundamental to visualization theory and data visualization practice. He describes visualization as both a mapping from one domain to another, visualization as a reduction of information, and as a predominantly spatial representation (pp. 188). An inspiring aspect is that Manovich identifies a new paradigm, which he calls media visualization. He writes about sampling, digital image processing and clearly shows how to use image features for exploratory media analysis.

Especially after reading third part, it is evident that the visual dimension is central in “Cultural Analytics”. Manovich points out the media angle of his considerations, and emphasizes that before we can “theorize” contemporary media, we need to *see* it, and this is not possible anymore without computers because of its new scale. His proficiency in that matter proved many projects, in which he worked as computer animator, motion graphics designer, software developer, media artist, and professor of digital art. This final and focal position, in my personal opinion as a media tutor, had most influence on the form of the book.

As to final remarks, readers can consume the book chapters in sequence, or just move to any chapter that interests them. Manovich, an experienced academic, makes each chapter relatively self-sufficient. Throughout the book, readers can find summaries of the already covered material and presentations of new material organized in numbered lists. Also, each chapter has its own bibliography, which in my opinion should be avoided. However, such an organization of the presented material and bibliography is probably more helpful when “Cultural Analytics” is used in classes.

All in all, given the extensiveness and the complexity of the book, detailed with illustrative case studies on digital analytics and visualized examples, the monography brings the contemporary theories closer to the reader. “Cultural analytics” could prove equally essential to seasoned experts seeking to deepen their knowledge of global digital media even further, and to newcomers from different social science backgrounds seeking a good entry point into this dynamic field. The academic but accessible writing style of Lev Manovich makes this book definitely worthy of both study and to be read for a deeper understanding of both media-universes, the visually-orientated and the digital.

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**ZRINJKA PERUŠKO, DINA VOZAB, AND ANTONIJA ČUVALO (2021).  
COMPARING POST-SOCIALIST MEDIA SYSTEMS – THE CASE  
OF SOUTHEAST EUROPE. LONDON AND NEW YORK: ROUTLEDGE, TAYLOR  
& FRANCIS GROUP, 301 PP., ISBN 978-0-367-22677-0.**

The main goal of the book *Comparing post-socialist media systems – the case of Southeast Europe* is to examine and explain why the media systems in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) are different from media systems in Western Europe, with particular focus on the media system in post-socialist countries of Southeast Europe. Zrinjka Peruško and colleagues want to understand the most important changes in media systems in this region and to determine why, decades after the fall of communism and the beginning of democratic transition, the media autonomy, independence and freedom of expression in that specific region still rates lower than other European countries.

The Foreword is written by Paolo Mancini, whose renowned book *Comparing media systems – Three models of media and politics* (2004), co-authored with Daniel Hallin, inspired the academic community and left such a mark in the studies of media, communication and journalism, and beyond. It is interesting to see how Professor Mancini reflects his impressions and corresponds with Peruško and colleagues, who based this book on Hallin and Mancini's empirical benchmark and expanded their original approach with historical institutionalism and other theoretical research concepts. As Mancini in the foreword explains: "This book helps to answer the question that was asked frequently when our book came out as it secures an important initial point: if one intends to compare Western Europe with 'the other Europe', that is that part of the continent that for more than 50 years passed through the Communist experience, it is necessary to speak of 'other Europes' and not just of one single 'other Europe.'"

The book consists of six chapters. The first sentences of the *Introduction* immediately snare the reader's attention as they interestingly connect the socio-political context of Southeast Europe, the fall of Berlin Wall, collapse of socialism, later unification of European Union and disintegration of Yugoslavia with references to the Eurovision song contest. This part sketches the cornerstones of the book and introduces us to the theoretical and empirical discussion that follows, particularly about the three approaches to comparing the media systems in the CEE countries, the media systems of CEE countries, which cluster with Western Europe and the important aspects of socialism and its impact on media systems.

The second chapter, *Explaining the transformations of post socialist media systems*, focused on problems about studying change, the periodization of media and social change and the aspects of comparing. This chapter starts from a rich theoretical framework and diversified concepts and approaches in contemporary scholarship to explain the transformations of post-socialist media systems. The authors base the research on three social revolutions identified as critical junctures, namely the bourgeois, socialist and democratic revolution, alongside a number of “communication revolutions”, to be able to explain how the media systems in this region work today. In that context, the authors thoroughly discuss the political, socio-economic and cultural and symbolic fields which influence the shaping of media systems across identified temporal junctures.

In the third chapter, *Prelude to modernity*, the authors describe the historical development of media systems in detail, starting from the mid-19th century and the beginning of modern society in Europe. This chapter takes us through the most important social, cultural, technological and political aspects of the development of media markets, focusing on political, economic and cultural transformations which contoured the lines of contemporary media systems in this part of Europe. Readers get to know the turbulent political history of the Southeast Europe, economic privileges of those in power, the early relationships between the state and the media in the Ottoman and Habsburg empires, especially in terms of censorship. The authors describe the rise of media markets in Slovenia, Croatia, Serbia, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Macedonia in historical contexts of early modernity and later the professionalization of the press and radio, discussing the issues of political parallelism and journalistic autonomy until the beginning of the World War II.

The next chapter, *Media systems in socialist modernity*, guides us through the 45-year history of socialism in Yugoslavia, explaining how the media systems of various republics, and later individual states, have been shaped by the main political, socio-economic and cultural transformations, along with the rise of social movements, protests, and nationalism and ethnocentrism. The authors try to highlight the important aspect of the socialistic one-party state and its role in creating the framework for media environment. From this aspect, Peruško and colleagues distinguish between the three periods of media roles and development: the administrative period, in which the role of the state was extremely powerful and media at least independent; the self-management period, when the state still controlled the media, but in aspects of media production and legislative norms the media started to slowly liberalize during the 1960s; and the period of decadent socialism, characteristic for 1970s and 1980s, opened up and diversified the media and public sphere. The later development of the television market and the dominance of TV in comparison to print and radio, has been portrayed

through tables with interesting data about the viewership, genre distribution across TV channels, daily TV program dating from the 1980s, etc.

The fifth chapter, *Towards democracy – post-socialist media systems in digital modernity*, focuses on the influence of digital communication revolution on transformations in media systems of Southeast Europe from the beginning of 1990s and throughout the turbulent period of political, economic and cultural events and changes. The political post-socialist transitions are discussed within a rich theoretical framework of comparative political science approach and individual country case studies, as well as other relevant academic debates and concepts regarding the nature of democratization and its relation to the media. Thus, Peruško and colleagues carefully build the relation of changes in the political sphere with the media systems through temporal and historical highlights of important periods, such as the period of leaving socialism, the civil war and disintegration of Yugoslavia, the building of state and institutions, the problem of remaining political cleavages and polarizations as legacies of the turbulent past, and finally the period of consolidation of democracy and the establishment of hybrid regimes. The most striking transformations of post-socialist media systems of the Central and Eastern Europe in this respect, according to the authors, were the transformation of state radio and television stations into public broadcasting services, the adoption of media laws, creating media institutions, media polities, and other legislative and practical rules that protected the freedom of expression and journalists as professionals. This chapter thoroughly reviews the media policies in the six states of the former Yugoslavia, particularly the aspects of the freedom of expression with many examples of its restriction; the regulatory system for broadcasting with the description of relevant regulatory bodies; the media pluralism policies with examples of regulatory frameworks for media diversity, pluralism and transparency and the role of the state; digital media policies with points of progress and setbacks in terms of development of online communities, digital challenges and media literacy; and governance of public service media with various models tested and the remaining problems with license fees in Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and North Macedonia. The chapter also has a detailed discussion of the political parallelism, media market, media audiences, journalistic autonomy and media ratings in the post-socialist socio-political context.

In the final chapter, *Why the media systems are the way they are*, Zrinjka Peruško, Dina Vozab and Antonija Čuvalo try to answer this intriguing question by presenting “causal configurations of the conditions and paths leading to different outcomes in terms of media system transformations in Southeast Europe during the era of digital modernity” (2021: 195). The important part of this section is an unusual, but sincere, informative and very useful approach of the authors when they explain the setbacks, challenges and problems considering

their theoretical approach and research design. The final chapter presents the original research design and detailed analysis of the adaptations of political, socio-economic and cultural-symbolic fields to the classical concepts of media system, specific conditions and temporal media paths which have largely influenced the media systems nowadays. At the end, the authors discuss the “missing pieces” and suggest directions of further research in the field of comparative media studies. A very detailed and useful Methodological Appendix and Index are incorporated at the end, with an impressive list of references published across 27 pages.

The book *Comparing post-socialist media systems – the case of Southeast Europe* is rich in theoretical approach, neatly structured and easy to follow. It represents a valuable insight into the history of media and journalism development in the Southeast Europe and countries of former Yugoslavia. Peruško and colleagues contribute to the research of comparative media systems by providing informative, understandable, carefully designed and comprehensive framework for the study of the interplay between media and political, socio-economic and cultural-symbolic fields of influence. For those of us, who were born in the socialist Yugoslavia, studied journalism in the period of the country’s disintegration and the rise of the authoritarian Milošević’s regime, worked in professional media in times of democratic transition and now teach and research media studies and journalism in the digital era in a hybrid political regime, the book represents a much-needed guide for professional journalists, academics, researchers and students of journalism through space and time, familiar, however forgotten events and institutions, legislations, organizations, movements and associations that influenced the post-socialist media systems in this part of Europe.

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**FRANCESCO MARCONI (2020). NEWSMAKERS: ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE AND THE FUTURE OF JOURNALISM. NEW YORK: COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY PRESS. 216 PP., ISBN: 9780-231549356, DOI: 10.7312/MARC19136**

It is a commonly accepted truism that technology has a tremendous impact on most aspects of our lives. It has also changed the ways public are consuming the content of the media and workflow of media outlets themselves. The proliferation of new technologies has enabled scholars to hypothesize over their profound significance for the changing journalistic profession (Nygren & Dobek-Ostrowska, 2015), which is clearly visible through the widespread use of social media by journalists for their work activities (Willnat & Weaver, 2018). In addition to the clear benefits, the evolution of the media sphere has also brought challenges. Through the process of datafication (Mayer-Schoenberger & Cukier, 2013), in which every social action is quantified we produce a staggering amount of data. Processing large sets of unstructured information has become a key part of daily professional routine for many journalists. This process, however, could be supported by the cutting edge in computing. Nowadays, with the further development of technology, artificial intelligence (AI), machine learning and big data became the buzzwords that grant almost magical properties to everything that incorporates them. The author of the reviewed book believes that the future of journalism will be closely tied to AI and provides a detailed compendium of these latest technologies and their potential implications for newsroom practices.

Francesco Marconi appears to be the right person to answer burning questions about the future of the relationship between technology and journalism. In addition to the academic experience gained at Columbia Journalism School and MIT Media Lab, he was a chief of R&D at the Wall Street Journal and led a team managing AI at the Associated Press. In the *Newsmakers: Artificial Intelligence and the Future of Journalism*, Marconi often reveals the intricate issues related to AI and argues, that it can greatly augment traditional journalistic practices. The book comprises three chapters and is an excellent guide that will be of interest to both scholars and practitioners of journalism.

The publication begins with an intriguing introduction, in which the author gives a preview of further considerations by analyzing his own book with AI-based algorithms and provides a set of real-life examples from AI usage within newsrooms around the globe. The author also introduces a fictional character, *Newsmaker*, whose story will serve narrative purposes. *Newsmaker*

is a journalist trying to adapt to the digital era with the use of AI in her daily work routine. Consequently, the author also presents three points of impact where new technologies can support newsroom work: newsgathering, production and distribution.

The first chapter entitled “Problems” is aimed at presenting the status quo in the current model of journalistic work and outlining the opportunities that the implementation of AI in editorial offices can provide. Marconi starts this part of the book by sketching out the vision of the *Newsmaker* taking full advantage of new technologies in the “world of human-machine cooperation” (p. 20) – both in her private and professional life. Further, the author introduces acknowledged newsmaking elements (newsgathering, production and distribution) and emphasizes that by combining AI with each of them, the traditional model of journalism will be able to evolve. The process of gathering news has come a long way and has always been linked to the development of technology: from telephony to Web 1.0 and eventually social media (see Zubiaga, 2019). In the age of datafication, AI could provide “news about the news” (p. 32) which would make *Newsmaker’s* work more efficient. Journalists could also benefit from cooperating with machines during the production phase, alongside expanding their perspective on the story through the data. At this point, Marconi also tackles and demystifies the issue of potential job losses, that is often associated with the evolution of AI. In the words of the author, “the reporter should be the reporter, not the assistant and the reporter” (p. 38) and technology is there to augment the traditional journalistic process and should be perceived as evolution, not revolution. Moreover, using the example of the Associated Press, the author clearly states that there was no downsizing, indeed additional automation editors were being hired. He concludes the chapter by describing the need to change the current ways of distributing news in order to make it more dynamic and engaging for the audience. AI can help shift the logic of distribution from directing traffic to a website to take advantage of the richness of the Internet – the possibilities of digital storytelling, the multitude of formats available (e.g., infographics and video) and audience contact.

The next section of the book with the title “Enablers,” focuses on first-hand ways to apply AI in editorial processes. It begins with the conceptual definition of AI that should make it easier to understand for non-technical readers. Using *Newsmaker’s* story as an example, Marconi introduces the logic behind AI, which requires input data and is subject to a learning procedure. In the context of media outlets, this means that the newsmaking process can be enhanced with the automation of creating news and reinforcing existing journalists’ tasks for tailored needs, like e.g., automated analysis of millions of documents in order to find a story. However, what seems to be significant in the context of the message of this book, the author emphasizes that AI is unable to replace the journalist

because it is unable to develop „journalistic intuition”. He also notes that implementing these algorithms may be met with industry resistance, as automation and augmentation both have many potential uses in newsrooms, and whoever “think(s) about AI as a tool that can solve a problem or create an opportunity” (p. 70). Next, Marconi acquaints the reader with machine learning (ML) as another potent method for supporting the *Newsmaker’s* work, that could further help journalists with publishing optimization. Marconi also raises the controversial topic of news automation, highlighting both the NLG (natural language generator) software possibilities for newsrooms and the fact that human editors must be in control of this process. Thus, the future of media outlets would require the employment of a variety of new professionals, such as automation editors, computational journalists and newsroom tool managers. Importantly, the author continues to emphasize that the use of new tools does require new skills – such as a basic understanding of AI and support of programmers in the editorial office. Concluding the chapter and outlining further technological perspectives that may find application in the editorial office (e.g., VR headsets and drones), Marconi also points out potential problems that may be associated with the development of AI and ML. Deepfake as a disinformation tool is based on these technologies and contributes to the need for intensified fact-checking, but it can also erode trust in journalists and the results of their work.

The final chapter is devoted to the future of journalism in the era of new technologies. According to the author, its future is iterative journalism, which is “the idea of adjusting coverage in real time to serve the rapidly changing information needs of readers. This is possible by mixing editorial insights with audience feedback” (p. 130).

Marconi believes that journalism should be more empathetic and should put more emphasis on responding to the readers’ needs. This can be accomplished with the help of AI and by applying three steps. First, journalists should focus on “minimally viable” stories, where machines could take over the initial research in identification of what is meaningful to the audience. Second, by augmented audience understanding, journalists have the opportunity to contact their readers and look beyond just the quantitative data. Lastly, the author encourages to experiment with new practices in newsrooms and trying to become more interdisciplinary within the organization.

In conclusion, the author yet again emphasizes the need for the adaptation of media outlets to the new technological environment and that AI should not be feared, because it can enhance not just automate journalism. The undoubted merit of the book is the variety of examples of application of AI in practice and the language adapted to readers who are not tech-savvy. It also poses important questions about the future of the journalism profession, which cannot function isolated from technology. Marconi’s book provides insightful tips for the

professionals that could help to introduce advanced algorithms in their organizations but is also a valuable proposition for scholars interested in journalism studies.

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**MALCOLM GLADWELL (2019). TALKING TO STRANGERS: WHAT WE SHOULD KNOW ABOUT THE PEOPLE WE DON'T KNOW. LITTLE, BROWN & CO, BOSTON, 400 PP., ISBN 978-0316478526.**

According to Shayne Lee, associate professor of sociology at the University of Houston, Malcolm Gladwell is a “detective” of emerging fashions and subcultures, chronicling jobs that were never known to exist. His work is overturning popular understanding of prejudice, crime, food, marketing, race, consumers and intelligence. Gladwell’s writing skills and his way of doing analysis of social phenomena have the ability to shape and redirect popular understanding of sociological concepts makes his work an excellent framework for exploring human action and the shape of consciousness shaped by cultural and social structures.

As in all his journalistic and scientific articles, in his latest book, analysed here, sociologist Gladwell uses scientific data collected by leading social scientists and intriguing stories to present a more complex model of society. Writing about issues such as otherness, difference and cultural relations on different levels of scale make people more informed about the nuances and complexities of the human condition. Sometimes the best conversations are those in which the stranger remains a stranger.

The act of understanding each other is complicated by language, but also by history, culture, sense of humour; even more complicated is the act of trusting. What we personally believe to be good abilities to read the intentions of strangers is not always so, and history sometimes gives us examples of this: when the British Prime Minister, Chamberlain met Hitler, Gladwell reports, he judged him to be a “reasonable man dedicated to peace”.

But understanding each other and interpreting each other’s intentions are necessary activities for life in society. Gladwell, using some case studies, analyses the major difficulties that can be encountered, and the serious and harmful consequences to which they can lead, in the hope that increased suspicion and distance from those around us will not remain the only means at our disposal.

Let us imagine hypothetically that we are in the middle of a crowded square and suddenly see someone we do not know, a stranger, who appears in front of us. He speaks our language, but does not seem to be trustworthy. He looks unkempt and is quite talkative. How would you act? Would you interact with him or would you rely on your first judgement and avoid him by turning your back on him?

Deciphering and understanding someone you do not know is more difficult than you might think. The art of understanding someone is already difficult in relationships with loved ones, relatives, friends, and therefore even more complex in front of a stranger.

Since our life is full of strangers (just walking down the street, getting on a bus to meet new people), it is necessary to analyse the strategies we use when dealing with others. These are often influenced by prejudices which do not allow us to properly assess who we are dealing with. This understanding, moreover, is the basis of many professions. Think, for example, of a policeman at a checkpoint who has to stop a motorist in the street, or an emergency doctor who encounters a patient for the first time. For Gladwell, as human beings, as social animals, we constantly need to understand strangers, the problem is that we are not very good at it.

Contrary to what we think, we are essentially incompetent at this task of understanding. The evidence of our inability is not only evident in our daily lives. They are present in certain historical facts. And it is precisely this that Gladwell intends with *The Stranger's Dilemma*, to highlight this inability of ours to overcome stereotypes and prejudices in the relationship of understanding the other through events of the past. Gladwell's aim is to overturn common sense, to turn personal beliefs upside down, and to explain what misunderstanding and the failure of communication are all about. He is convinced of the idea that understanding depends not only on language, but also on the culture and history of individuals.

The beginning of the book focuses on an event that took place a few years ago in Texas: a policeman's arrest – at a roadblock – of a young woman, Sandra Bland, who committed suicide in her cell a few days later. For Gladwell, this is one of the most sensational events related to the inability to judge a stranger and shows how communication difficulties can lead to the worst possible consequences. This event started the Black Lives Matter movement, which we know all too well today. Another example happened in 1938, when Chamberlain, the British Prime Minister, judged Hitler to be a peaceful and trustworthy man at their first meeting, a historical error with well-known consequences. How is it possible to misjudge someone you do not know?

According to the author: "The belief that we know more about others than they know about us, and that we can understand them better than they understand themselves (but conversely they cannot understand us), leads us to speak when we would do better to listen". This belief is called the illusion of asymmetrical understanding. In addition, according to the author, we make three mistakes when dealing with strangers: the presumption of honesty (judging an innocent person by their appearance), the illusion of transparency (the inability

to consider a stranger as a person) and finally the underestimation of the context in which a stranger presents himself. These mistakes lead to failed communication.

Thanks to this book, it is possible to understand some strategies to understand the mistakes we make with strangers. *The Stranger's Dilemma* is a book that reveals how we relate, a description of contemporary life that confronts us with our beliefs and prejudices in order to analyse and understand them. The ultimate goal? To accept one's limitations, to admit that understanding others is not easy, to admit that it takes an arduous effort.

To sum up, here are the salient features of the sociologist's thinking. This book is based on a dilemma. We have to talk to strangers, we have no other choice, especially in a world without borders, which we have today. We no longer live in villages. Police have to stop people they don't know. Intelligence officers have to deal with deception and uncertainty. Young people go to parties precisely to meet unknown people, it is part of the romantic thrill of discovery. Yet, faced with this most necessary task, we find ourselves incapable. So, we think we can transform the Unknown into the familiar and the known without sacrifice and additional costs, but it is not so.

What to do then? Accepting our limitations in deciphering the unknown, surrendering to otherness, is the most likely solution. What we can understand of a stranger, Gladwell argues, will always be as fragile as crystal. At the slightest mistake, it will shatter into a thousand pieces. Despite this, the risk is worth taking. As human beings, our mission is to live in society and to cooperate with Others, even if they are strangers. Cooperate and communicate with others with caution, especially in times of pandemic. Where we are distant but united, sensitive, hurting, masked and unknown. However distant.

In conclusion, looking at the current scenario of health and economic crisis, one of the most complex challenges that institutions and citizens had to face after the Covid-19 pandemic was to communicate and understand the emergency, rebuild their routines, re-evaluate their relationships, change schools, give up losing a job. Our mobile lives have become immobile in an interconnected and sick world. At the same time, the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted the importance of social relationships and how human communication with the Other can transcend all legal and cultural boundaries. This is another reason why, as Gladwell says, we should strive to understand the Unknown rather than simply criminalise it, especially in the context of global crises.

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## **THE 71<sup>ST</sup> ANNUAL ICA (VIRTUAL) CONFERENCE “ENGAGING THE ESSENTIAL WORK OF CARE: COMMUNICATION, CONNECTEDNESS, AND SOCIAL JUSTICE”, MAY 27-31, 2021 (ONLINE)**

Media and communication scholars from around the globe participated in, virtual reality this time, the 71st Annual Conference of the International Communication Association (ICA). The Polish Communication Association organized a panel “Advancing Media Theory in the Times of Societal Crises.” The goal of the panel was to advance theoretical approaches related to media and societal crises. Taking the COVID-19 outbreak as a point of departure, the papers presented in the session evidenced current media shifts towards ‘mass-self communication’ and ‘cumulative deliberation’. Moreover, studies from Central and Eastern Europe went a long way to extend the notion of societal crises by the rise of polarization and a sharp decline of trust in the media.

Due to the virtual reality mode of the conference, all participants recorded and uploaded their presentations at the ICA conference platform. Although conversations were limited mostly to an exchange of comments on ‘chat’, it was still possible to learn about current studies and developments in communication research from presentations and papers available online.

In the session sponsored by the Polish Communication Association, there were four presentations. The first was offered by Mark Deuze from the University of Amsterdam (in the Netherlands). In his contribution, Deuze introduced and defined the field of study regarding media and communication theory in a reference to the most recent, 7th edition, of the famous publication “McQuail’s Media and Mass Communication Theory’ (2020). In this edition of the book, scholars outline seven fundamental theories explaining the role of media in society, as they emerged from a century of scholarship. In his presentation, Deuze showed how each of these theories can be considered to be ‘at work’ in current debates and concerns about the role of media and communication in the global coronavirus crisis. He also paid specific attention to the dual convergence of, on the one hand, a hybrid media system where traditional mass media institutions (such as mainstream journalism, advertising, film and television) exist and operate side-by-side to a new media environment mainly consisting of so-called ‘mass self-communication’ in social media. On the other hand, all this convergence takes place alongside that of the social spaces and locales of work, leisure, education, the public and private sphere, friendships, and the family in the ‘supra-locale’ of the



home where (under conditions of social distancing, quarantine and self-isolation) all life is organized and structured from a distance, in media.

In second presentation, Svetlana S. Bodrunova from St. Petersburg State University (Russia) offered an interpretive concept of cumulative deliberation that explains how public discussions are won by cumulation of support and opinion, rather than a rational deliberative process. According to Bodrunova, the concept offers an alternative view on the nature of public discussion and allows for avoiding excessive normativity in explaining today's deliberative processes. In her presentation Bodrunova illustrated cumulative deliberation by the examples from online discussions in four languages and operationalized the concept for networked discussion studies combining it with the ideas from general systems theory.

Next, Michał Głowacki from University of Warsaw (Poland) presented his research (conducted with Karen Donders from Vrije Universiteit Brussel, Belgium) on public service media in Poland in the times of social polarization and the rebirth of political parallelism. Głowacki and Donders argued that the lack of independence of PSM organizations in Poland, politicized news, and PSM contributing to societal and political polarization in general does not fit existing theoretical conceptualizations such as the polarized pluralist media system or competitive authoritarian tradition. They also discussed how Polish PSM these days can be conceptualized in a manner that contains more explanatory power as to why we are observing a consistent deterioration of the state of play of PSM in Poland. Their research showed that the fragile checks and balances system that emerged in the post-Communist period and, which came with political influence over PSM while at the same time still allowing for some internal pluralism and journalistic autonomy, no longer exists in Poland. According to Głowacki and Donders, this cannot only be attributed only to the policy of the PiS government though and relates to a resistant value pattern among ruling elites as well as citizens of which large parts accept, and in some cases even prefer, 'Government Service Media' over the ideal model of PSM.

Finally, Agnieszka Stępińska from Adam Mickiewicz University (Poland), presented her study on a level of trust in media in times of a socio-political crisis in Poland in 2020 (COVID-19 and postponed presidential elections). By providing results of the survey conducted in 2020, Stępińska discussed a question of media trust in highly polarized political system accompanied by and a low level of trust in political institutions and a high level of political parallelism of the media system.

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## THE 8<sup>TH</sup> ECREA CONFERENCE “COMMUNICATION AND TRUST: BUILDING SAFE, SUSTAINABLE AND PROMISING FUTURES”, SEPTEMBER 6-9, 2021 (ONLINE)

The 8th ECREA conference, initially scheduled for October 2020, was postponed to September 2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Still, given the state of the pandemic in the fall of 2021, the International Organising Committee decided to arrange the event in a fully virtual format. The theme of the conference addressed several fundamental questions, including What futures are we building up? What is the role of media and communication in these processes? What type of social, political and cultural futures are media and communication inducing and modelling? What relations exist between them and what are their main normative cornerstones?

Scholars from around Europe accepted invitations to diagnose, discuss and rethink the roles and responsibilities of academics and professionals in the contexts of the present circumstances and in the anticipation of future challenges. During the online conference, as many as 1185 registered participants from more than 17 countries presented their papers in 229 parallel sessions, 3 plenary sessions, and 5 special sessions. ECREA members participated also in 31 business meetings. As ECREA reported on its website, the opening plenary session about “Decolonising the curriculum” attracted the interest of many – with more than 300 participants listening in on the discussions. The most popular sessions, however, dealt with the topics surrounding *Children, Youth and Media*, *Journalism and its audiences*, and *Disconnection and the good life*.

The conference was accompanied by the General Assembly of ECREA and ECREA’s Executive Board Elections and voting on General Assembly items. Furthermore, the elections in each of 24 thematic sections and 4 temporary working groups, as well as 3 permanent networks, took place. Members of the Polish Communication Associations have been actively participating in ECREA’s activities for many years. This year, four of them were elected to serve as either a chair or vice-chair of the following sections and networks: Katarzyna Kopecka-Piech from Maria Curie-Skłodowska University in Lublin, Poland (a member of the Executive Committee of the Polish Communication Association) is a vice-chair of Mediatization Section, Dominika Popielec from Kazimierz Wielki University in Bydgoszcz, Poland is a vice-chair of Interpersonal Communication and Social Interaction

Section, Agnieszka Stępińska from Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, Poland is a vice-chair of Political Communication Section, and Małgorzata Winiarska-Brodowska from Jagiellonian University, Cracow, Poland is a chair of Central and East-European Network.

*Agnieszka Stępińska*

ADAM MICKIEWICZ UNIVERSITY, POZNAŃ

## THE 13<sup>TH</sup> CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPEAN COMMUNICATION AND MEDIA CONFERENCE CEECOM 2021: “THE NEW COMMUNICATION REVOLUTION”, CRACOW, POLAND, OCTOBER 21–23, 2021 (ONLINE)

Media and communication scholars from Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) gathered for an online edition of the Central and Eastern European Communication and Media Conference (CEECOM), organized by the Jagiellonian University in Cracow, Poland. The conference addressed societal, technological, and scholarly research shifts in data-driven communications.

The “Central European Journal of Communication” team organized a special Journals panel during the first day of the CEECOM 2021 event (October 21, 2021). The goal of the session, entitled “Scholarly Journals in Central and Eastern Europe: Collaborative Practices to Support Knowledge Exchange”, was to discuss the critical role of advanced and collaboration-oriented editorial practices, to support adapting to new advanced media industries (high technologies, creative clusters, digital culture, and so on) alongside more agile and informal forms of the knowledge exchange (pitching sessions, summer camps, the Living Labs, after-work culture). The overall goal was to ask the CEE Journals Editors how they reflect on the pandemic effects; for instance, face-to-face communications replaced by the hybrid and the virtual workplace. During our session we also asked about the understandings of scholarly collaboration, as opposed to competition, alongside ways to engage with the youthful representatives of media and communications scholarship. The discussion on a need for the Central and Eastern European hyper knowledge exchange ended with practical recommendations to strengthen CEE research communities.

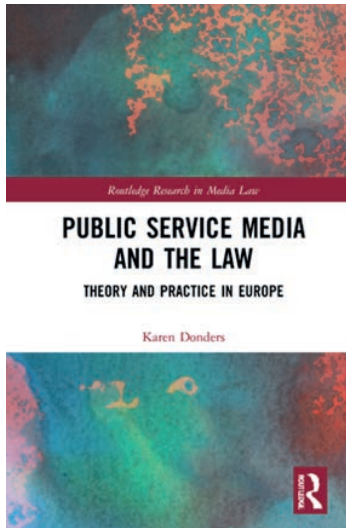
We are most grateful to the CEECOM organisers, as well as all the participants of the CEJC round table: Viktorija Car (Medijske Studije, Croatia), Márton Demeter (KOME – An International Journal of Pure Communication Inquiry, Hungary), Anna Gladkova (The World of Media, Russia), Rafał Kuś (Zeszyty Prasoznawcze, Poland), Elena Negrea-Busuioc (The Romanian Journal of Communication and Public Relations, Romania), Sergei Samoilenko (Communication Association of Eurasian Researchers, CAER) and Agnieszka Stępińska (Central European Journal of Communication).

“Collaboration is the key”! We look forward to our future discussions.

*Michał Głowacki*

UNIVERSITY OF WARSAW, POLAND

## PROFESSOR KAREN DONDERS WINS THE MEDIA AND DEMOCRACY KAROL JAKUBOWICZ AWARD



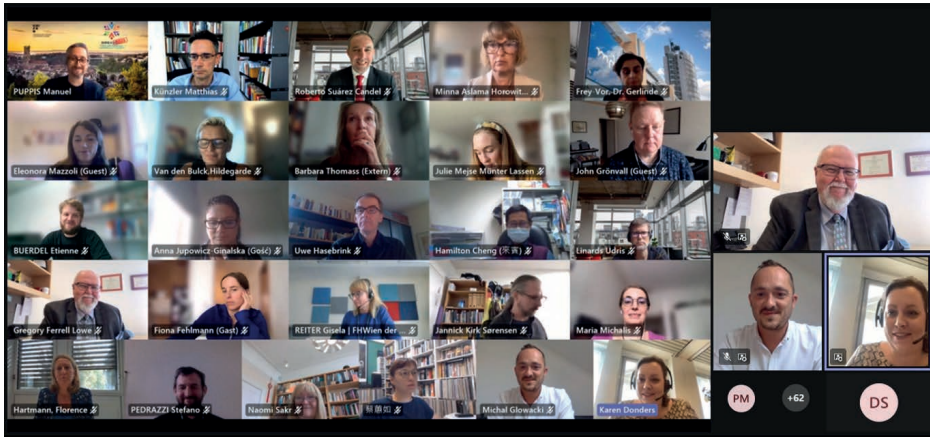
The Media and Democracy Karol Jakubowicz Award 2021 was granted to prof. Karen Donders (Vrije Universiteit Brussel/VRT) for her recent book, “Public Service Media and the Law: Theory and Practice in Europe” (London and New York: Routledge).

The Award Committee, which includes the Editors and Associate Editors of the “Central European Journal of Communication” and the Executive of the International Association of Public Media Researchers, noted that prof. Karen Donders’ book raised the importance of a healthy public service media (PSM) in the times of illiberal turns, fake news and government propaganda. Karen Donders has gone a long way in investigating a mismatch between

normative media theories with the practice in Western and Eastern Europe, also looking at media policy behaviors and related PSM culture. An in-depth examination of case studies from Flanders, Ireland, the Netherlands, Poland and the United Kingdom produced a set of recommendations for human rights-based media policies – something of potential value to scholars, policy-makers and public service media.

Prof. Karen Donders is the Director of Public Engagement at Vlaamse Radio – en Televisieomroeporganisatie (VRT) – public service media in Flanders. Prior to joining VRT, she worked as a full professor at Vrije University Brussel, Belgium. Her previous publications include monographs, edited collections and scholarly papers on European media policy and innovation in public service media.

The Award ceremony took place on September 28, 2021, during the online Closing Plenary of the RIPE@2021 Conference “Public Service Media’s Contribution to Society”.



Photos: Book Cover; Ripe 2021 Conference Closing Ceremony (September 28, 2021) screenshot by: Dagmara Sidyk-Furman

The Media and Democracy Karol Jakubowicz Award recognizes novel methodologies and the societal impact of scholarly publications on media systems, media policies, media ethics, and public service media in Central and Eastern Europe, and beyond. A full list of this year’s nominees can be found on the Award’s website: <https://www.ptks.pl/en/awards/the-media-and-democracy-karol-jakubowicz-award>.

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