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Post-Sensationalism: Catastrophism and Fight Paradigm in Romanian On-Line Media

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Abstract: In traditional journalism, sensationalism was a characteristic of tabloid press. The main instruments used in sensationalistic headlines were bombastic epithets (awesome, amazing, greatest etc), and exaggerations used to increase the impact by curiosity. In the last decade, transformation with society and online media consumption behaviour have triggered a change of paradigm: we believe that we are facing a post-sensationalism media narrative, defined by catastrophism and the fight paradigm. In the context of a huge news feed overloaded with information, in the purpose of increasing the number of views of online media, the journalistic discourse has transformed radically and switched from informative to a more aggressive approach. The study shows that in Romania, the pursuit for clicks has generated a new discursive paradigm, a sort of post-sensationalism era, which we referred to as catastrophism and fight paradigm. This conclusion is based on quantitative and qualitative research that analyzed Romanian online press headlines and content in approximately the same period of time both in 2018 and 2019. The research followed the frequency and context of usage of a few hashtags and keywords connected with our main concepts of concern: sensationalism, catastrophism, fight paradigm. In other words, we selected a few words that are, in our opinion, the most representative for the aforementioned concepts, and, with the use of professional instruments of press monitoring, we analysed their frequency and dynamics.

Keywords: *sensationalism, online media, catastrophism, fight paradigm, Romanian media.*

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1. Introduction

Many people in Romania - scholars included - tend to underestimate the fact that the media is a business, despite its noble mission to serve public interest and deliver truthful and reliable information. For this reason, most of the books addressed to students who study media science approach subjects related to writing and newsgathering and rarely present the economics behind mass media discourse. It is important to keep in mind the fact that like any other business, the press has to prosper or at least survive, otherwise it can no longer fulfill its mission. Moreover, now more than ever, journalistic content is influenced by marketing tactics and we will show in our paper a few of these changes. Our main thesis is that the main tactics that Romanian editors use in order to maximize clicks are: topic tabloidization, content sensationalism and clickbait titles. Thus, the Romanian media landscape is dominated by a **negative, alarming narrative.**

At a closer look to the pieces of news published by Romanian press institutions, it can easily be noticed that in recent years its business model has changed dramatically. And this happened because of a reason easy to understand: when people are being served free information from all over the world, they are no longer eager to spend extra money on it. When advertisers are given a variety of efficient and cheap channels to promote their brands, they are not that excited to buy media anymore.

Moreover, online journalists now have direct access to accurate, precise quantitative feedback regarding their readers behavior: how many clicks they made, how much time they spent on a specific page, how many of them abandoned an article (Carlson, 2018; Cherubini & Nielsen, 2016; Christin, 2018; Ferrer-Conill et al., 2021; Hanusch, 2017; Zamith, 2019). These same numbers are what digital media is selling to advertisers. Striving for survival in this gloomy environment, online press had to adapt in order to succeed in attracting viewers on their websites and make them click throughout the site, so that the numbers that web analytics show are attractive enough for advertisers.

According to *Digital News Report 2018* (Newman et al., 2018), a study conducted by Reuters Institute and Oxford University, it seems that 88% of Romanians get their information and news online and 65% use social media as a main news source. The same study reveals the fact that in Romania, Facebook is used in a big proportion for information and news gathering. Furthermore, it appears that Romania has one of the most polarized online discussions. This finding is quite relevant to our discussion, as we will later see in the case study that the fight paradigm is an important trend in both local and national media.

Keeping in mind the different pattern of mass media consumption, it is not hard to understand why editors had to identify new editorial and marketing strategies to catch the readers eye. But eye-catching tactics bring about a series of challenges in an industry where public interest should be the main concern. Alfred Hermida (2012) stresses that the rise of the role of social recommendations has weakened the traditional gatekeeping function of the media and this very fact determined editors to model their content after social media posts. That is why many Romanian local and national newsrooms started to follow in the footsteps of yellow journalism and use its efficient ways to gain attention. This way, whenever a piece of news is marketed on social media, the common is being presented as scandal, the mundane is sold as shocking and each small failure as a catastrophe (Bazaco et al., 2019; Chen et al., 2015; Rubin et al., 2017). The technique that lies at the foundation of this kind of behavior on the web and uses overpromising to lure readers and is called clickbait, for reasons that are easy to grasp.

2. A few conceptual clarifications

We stated earlier that the tactic that editors use consists of subject tabloidization, content sensationalism and clickbait titles. Some explanations would be useful.

By definition, tabloidization means the transformation of news, literature, etc. into a popularized, lurid, and sensational form (Bastos, 2016; Magin, 2019). In relation to a news subject, we believe that tabloidization means going with emotions and personal details of a specific event rather than action and/or facts. From a functional perspective, a tabloid media subject acts more with the scope of entertaining than informing.

Furthermore, it is important to our discussion to stress the difference between what are considered to be tabloid topics ('soft news') and tabloidization as a strategic means of exaggerating the importance of news by presenting them as more interesting, extraordinary and relevant than might be the case (Johansson, 2020; Molek-Kozakowska, 2013, p. 193).

Sensationalism, on the other hand, could be regarded as a subtype of tabloidization and refers to exaggerating the meaning of common events. By definition, it represents the presentation of stories in a way that is intended to provoke public interest or excitement, at the expense of accuracy.

As Chen et al. (2015) state in their paper, "whereas there is a compelling argument for the democratizing role of 'soft news' reporting in mainstream media, the deceptive tactics of click-baiting are much more problematic". In other words, the main concerns are not directed at the content or

topics that are being published, but at the way they are presented to the public.

Most commonly, luring is done by means of forward referring (Blom & Hansen, 2015) or amplifying the uncommon character of the information, and the latter is done by promising shock, sex, laughter or tragedy. During our study, we observed the fact that Romanian digital media often appeals to fear in order to grab the reader's attention: tragedy, sickness, death, danger, disaster, catastrophe are some of the terms journalists use to describe mundane happenings. Even more, as it will be seen in the case study, the data we collected show that Romanian online press appeals considerably more to a rhetoric of fear, conflict and panic than the rhetoric of shock and sensation.

As stated in the first part of this paper, most part of digital media readers in Romania are lured on social media, which means that click-baiting is not done only in the title of the article, but also within the article's description and thumbnail: each of these elements is usually constructed in order to maximize its persuasive effects.

If the purpose of news headlines was to inform the readers and deliver them the most important piece of information - as classic journalism preaches - then, most online news pages fail at attaining their objective. But we believe that we can agree on the fact that in the digital world, news headlines no longer have the purpose to summarize the article, but on the contrary, the less they tell the reader, the better, because the more ambiguous the lure is, the bigger are the chances to produce more clicks.

Before seeing what are the main tactics that editors use, we want to note the fact that from a pragmatic point of view, headlines are not autonomous texts. They can be regarded as fragmented meaningful pieces that require construction efforts based on context specific senses, taking into consideration a series of encoded cultural concepts (Carston, 2015). This idea is closer to headline's role and structure in the digital environment than what classic journalism manuals taught.

Generally speaking, headlines can lure readers and attract clicks by using omission, rhetorical questions, over-promises, augmentatives and dramatism. As we will see later on in our study, the results of our analysis show that in the Romanian media landscape, the most frequent rhetorical tactics are the use of augmentatives (especially the ones with alarming effect) and dramatism. We felt that this kind of persuasive tools needed to be distinguished from the common sensational media, so we placed them under the notion of **catastrophism**.

The surprising occurrence of headlines that contain words related to the idea of fight and conflict is not just related to a process of tabloidization

or sensationalism. We can consider it a sign of a larger phenomenon of media conflictualization which runs in parallel with the ongoing conflicts in society. Media's speech is more conflictual than it has ever been, regardless of the publication and the subject that is being treated. Therefore, we think we are justified to believe that Romanian online press has entered a new paradigm, which we call the **fight paradigm** (Bader & Sîrb, 2019).

As far as news descriptions and thumbnails are concerned, their role is, on the one hand, to make news items fit in naturally in the audience's newsfeed and, on the other hand, to make the public click on the link they are promoting. The first objective can be attained by choosing the right tone of voice for the link description, while the latter by using attention triggers, such as words with a very powerful semantic.

3. Case study: materials and methods

Having observed an increasing number of alarming headlines in local and national online media, we decided to conduct a quantitative study to verify if this is indeed an existing trend in Romanian press and if it is truly the case to talk about catastrophism as a specific narrative paradigm. Therefore, we initiated a research of online media using professional monitoring tools offered by courtesy of Zelist Monitor who provided exhaustive information and graphics for the requested periods: 1st of January – 1st of April 2018 and 1st of January - 1st of March 2019.

We made a quantitative analysis of headlines in online media, both from news media and social media, based on some keywords which we considered significant for the three concepts we wanted to analyze: fight paradigm, catastrophism and sensationalism. For *fight paradigm***,** the selected keywords were /atac (*attack*), /scandal/ (*scandal*), /exploziv/ (*explosive*) and /bombă/ (*bomb*); for *catstrophism***,** we analyzed headlines containing the words /incendiar/ (*incendiary*), /dezastru/ (*disaster*) and /cumplit/ (*terrible)*; As far as *sensationalism* is concerned, we considered the keywords /senzațional/ (*sensational*) and /incredibil/ (*incredible*).

For our follow-up study (that regarded the same phenomenon, but in 2019), we included in the second survey keywords which seemed to have a high occurrence in the media, namely /atac/ (*attack)* for fight paradigm and /cumplit/ (*terrible*) for catastrophism.[1] We selected only a few of them for each category only because it is extremely difficult to analyze all the keywords related to a kind of attitude implied in headlines. The semantic borders among these keywords are sometimes case-related issues, for example /bomb/ can be at the same time placed under fight paradigm and catastro-

phism, while /scandal/ could be in different contexts related to both fight paradigm and sensationalism. So, we selected these keywords among others (e.g. amazing, alert, hit, fight, force, catastrophic, war, tragedy, violent etc) merely for reasons of space economy. Even with only these six keywords, the total number of headlines aggregated from Romanian main online media was close to a million. The distribution in the study cohort for 2019 in different kinds of media and numbers of titles or headlines for our item are shown in the next table.

Table no. 1 – Distribution of different keywords in media during 2019
Source: Zelist Monitor

Keyword	**Number of aparitions**	**Procent**
Scandal	79456	24%
Explosiv	7997	2%
Bomb	44375	13%
Attack	103789	31%
Incendiary	3140	1%
Disaster	32332	10%
Terrible	11795	3%
Sensational	6869	2%
Incredible	46795	14%
Total	**336548**	

As a method, we used the data provided by a professional monitoring agency of online media (Zelist Monitor) which offered both numeric and procentual rate of occurrence of the researched keywords. In the analysis of the online realm we considered almost all forms of online media, both institutionalized (as news sites, aggregators, commentaries) and non-institutionalized (social media and forums). For the press we used an evaluation standard based on professional criteria which classified sources as a) trustfull; b) to be read with attention and c) doubtful (to avoid) and d) not yet evaluated (N/A).

In the evaluation of the dynamics of these keywords, we used weekly graphics of the total numbers of apparitions. The survey monitored the frequency of the pursued keywords and the interactions, intersections, concordances, discrepancies between different types of media. The results provided by the primary analysis were integrated in tables and graphics and reexamined in the given social and political context. To see differences and evolution in comparison with our 2018 study, we compared in terms of proportionality the outcomes of the 2019 survey with those of the previous year. All the figures and graphics presented below were created by the authors in accordance with the data provided by Zelist Monitor.

3.1. Results

General distribution of keywords

As it can be seen in Figure 1 and 2, whereas in 2018 catastrophism and fight paradigm related headlines have gathered approximately 72% of the news we analyzed, in 2019 their presence reached 83%. Thus, it appears that the traditional sensational narrative is less and less used as clickbait technique and it is replaced by a post-sensationalism discourse, characterized by aggressive and/or alarming language, regardless of the subject matter.

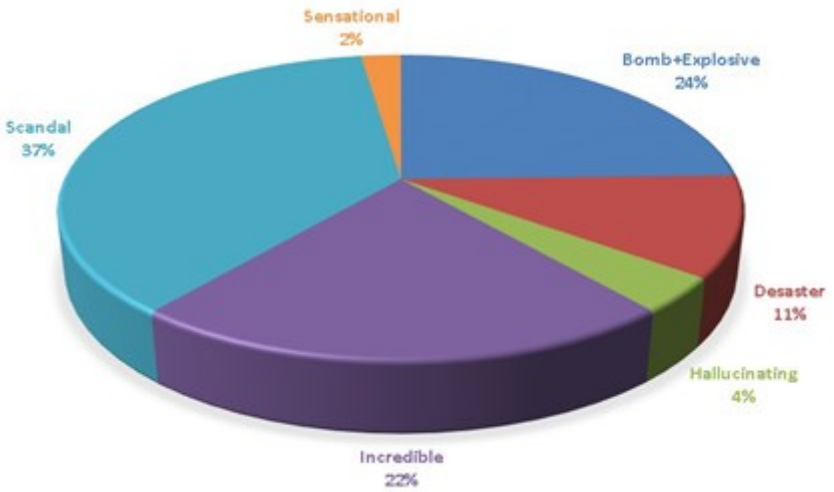


Fig.1: Distribution on sources 2018: fight paradigm and catastrophism vs. sensationalism

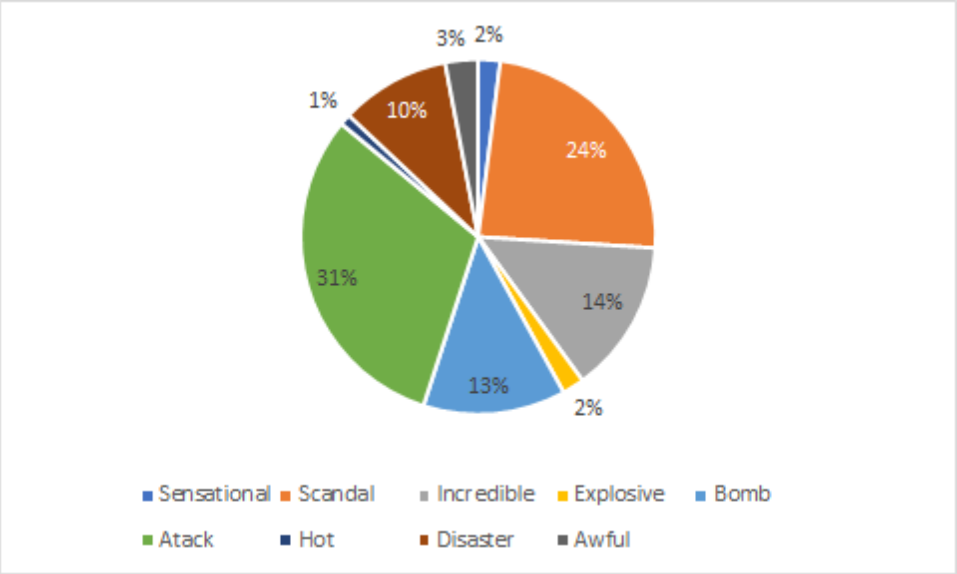


Fig.2: Distribution on sources 2019: fight paradigm and catastrophism vs. sensationalism
Source: Authors' own conception

Fight paradigm

The keyword /scandal/ was traditionally used in tabloid press as a part of sensational headlines. But if we examine properly the semantic of /scandal/ we can find an inner conflictual meaning as for example "scandal in the street" or "scandal between x and y" or connected with an offensive behavior towards a group, gender, or mentality e.g. "sexual scandal", or damage to reputation. Therefore, we consider we can use it as a part of a fight paradigm even if the opponents are less visible as in other keywords like /fight/, /attack/, /struggle/.

The other two keywords we surveyed for investigating the notion of fight paradigm were /bomb/ and /exploziv/ (*explosive*). From a qualitative and semiotic point of view, the two words have different connotative fields: one connected with the usual common sense (a bomb presumes an attack) and the other with a figurative or symbolic sense in connection with political, social or mediatic events. In the general distribution for 2018, they represent: 21,54% for /bomb/ and 3% for /explosive/. But if we add these numbers to the previous headlines as being representative for fight paradigm, we will have a surprising 61% of the total.

The results are similar for 2019. The keyword /scandal/ is not any more used as a simple sensationalist headline, but belongs more to the conflictual paradigm, as most of the news pieces report on scandals between political opponents or in connection with an offensive social behaviour. In a general distribution of the keywords belonging to fight paradigm, the word /atac/ (*attack*) was used in almost half of the headlines, /scandal/ in 34% and /bomb/ and /explosive/ in the last 22%.

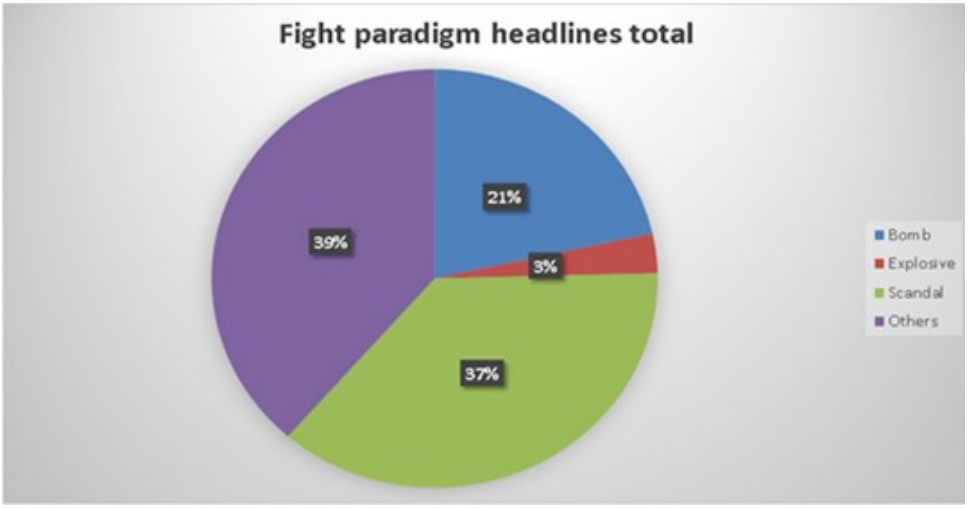


Fig.3: Fight paradigm headlines total 2018
Source: Authors' own conception

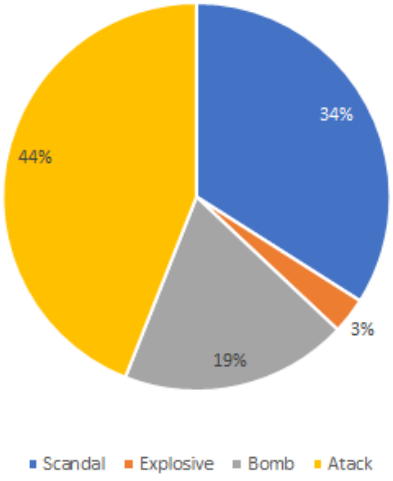


Fig.4: Fight paradigm headlines total 2019
Source: Authors' own conception

Catastrophism

In conducting our study, the keywords that we chose related to the concept of catastrophism are /disaster/, /bomb/ and /explosive/ and together they represent 35% of the total content analyzed for 2018 and 26% for 2019. In a few cases, they are related to real accidents or other kinds of disasters. However, most of them are a rather catastrophic manner to present trivial facts in social, political or mundane domains, that regard sensitive public issues such as health, wealth or education. Compared to sensationalism (28% for 2018 and 16% for 2019), the catastrophic narrative is being used at a higher rate.

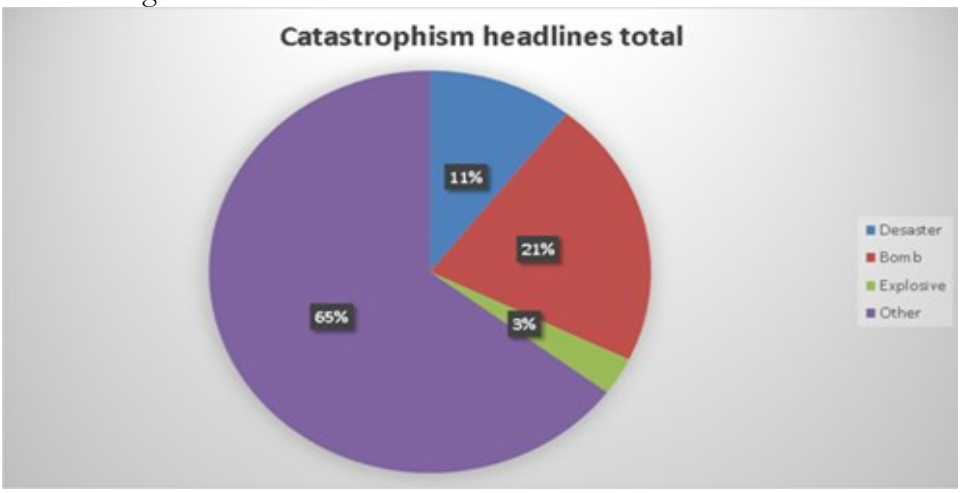


Fig.5: Catastrophism headlines total 2018
Source: Authors' own conception

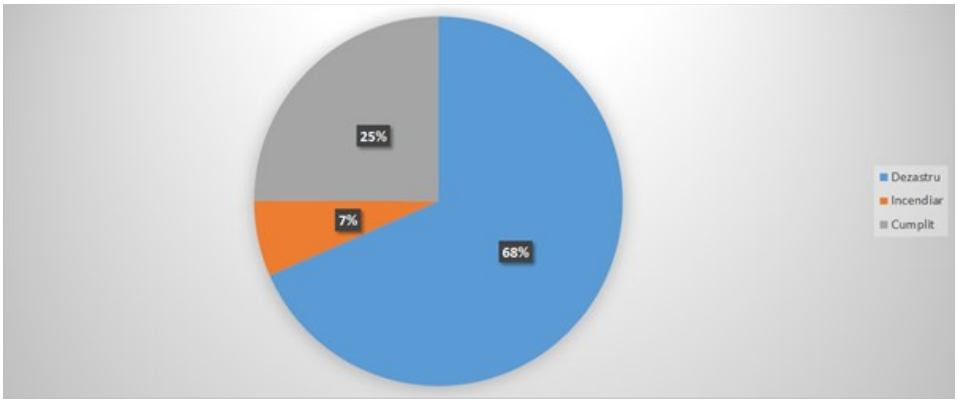


Fig. 6: Catastrophism headlines total 2019
Source: Authors' own conception

As the two figures show, in 2018, the main keyword was /bomb/, a term that can be regarded, as far as semantics is concerned, as being a transition from sensationalism to catastrophism. In Romanian, editors use the word *bomb* in headlines to attract their attention by stressing the urgency of the subject of the matter discussed. Thus, it is a term for classifying an event as incredible and/or threatening. In 2019, on the other hand, catastrophic headlines were dominated by the word /disaster/, which belongs, without a doubt, to a narrative of fear and pessimism.

Taking into consideration what we stated above, we think it is necessary to distinguish between sensationalism, as a general term, and catastrophism & fight paradigm - a specific clickbait narrative that is defined by presenting news using terms that provoke fear in different degrees. To be more exact, in our opinion, catastrophism refers to a media trend that encourages news editors to use presentational manners that alarm the public about situations and events that are not as dangerous or scandalous as they are described, whereas fight paradigm is creating false confrontations by use of conflictual language.

Fear is an effective tool to change attitudes and thus a common element in media and political and marketing campaigns from all over the world (Altheide & Michalowski, 1999; Parc, 2019). According to Walton (2007), "even appeals to emotion have argumentation schemes, and thus they have a "logic" or argumentation structure. Even an audience that responds to an emotional appeal to fear or pity (...) needs to be persuaded by orchestrating that appeal through forms of argumentation the audience can follow and respond to." Thus, fear appeals can persuade in two ways: (1) by promising what one can gain if one stays away from a particular situation or (2) by warning the public about what one can lose if one faces a particular event.

In our specific case - concerning strictly the way news items are presented in the digital sphere - alarming the public with powerful words, such as *alert, urgent, hell, war, scandal, fight* etc. works at both levels mentioned above. In other words, it makes the public curious about the danger that is ahead or the extremely negative event that has happened, so that they do not become a victim of it. Walton (2007) explains that the form of reasoning used in appeals to fear and pity is the so-called practical reasoning which is, simply put, the use of reason to decide how to act. In media landscape, fear appeal is sometimes combined with argumentation from negative consequences, which means that an "action should not be carried out because it is likely to have these bad consequences." (Walton, 2007, p. 33)

It is important to add that some of the semantics involved - especially the one related to the fight paradigm - also functions as an entertaining device, at least in Romanian society. To be more accurate, scandal in the general sense, and political scandal in particular has been a form of spectacle for a long time, be it in literature, television or real life. This easily explains why texts that refer to scandals make successful click-baits.

To resume, using alarming terms in news headlines and social media descriptions functions at two levels from a persuasive perspective: fear appeal (words like *disaster*, *red alert*, *war*, *tragedy, urgent*) or entertainment (words like *scandal*, *fight*, *bomb* - with the meaning of element of surprise).

3.2. Discussion

1. An inherent difficulty of such a research is to choose the right keywords for headlines and quotes. We chose these ones as being seemingly the most frequently used when we purchased a preliminary assessment of online media in a three days sample. When doing a full research for a period of three months if we used all derivatives from these keywords (e.g. explosion, explode) or the whole related words (e.g. disaster, catastrophe, tragedy) our research would expand beyond our limits for the present idea. Some larger studies in the future would be welcome to investigate the real expansion of the two media phenomena we discovered, catastrophism and the fight paradigm.

For sure a more focused analysis on larger samples in time can reveal the importance of these social and cultural trends. Another direction of study would be finding a correlation between the occurrence rate of this kind of titles in two different periods or in two different countries where the social climate is not the same.

2. The analysis we made was for a relatively short period of time in a country where the media reflects the troubles inside the society and numerous conflicts between different layers and powers of society, a period of conflicts between the central institutions of the state (presidency, Parliament, justice). It is difficult to say if the conflictual social state led to a relative predominance of keywords belonging to the fight paradigm or there are other reasons why this fight paradigm is so frequently used in online media. Our hypothesis is that there is a correlation between some predominant mentalities (like conflictual, oppositional attitudes among groups or towards institutions etc) and the keywords successfully used in online media. As we discussed in the introduction, headlines play a role of hook to lure and catch the attention of readers, to click, open and share. If this kind of keywords are so frequently used and they are shared on both public (aggregators) and

personal networks (Facebook, YouTube, etc) it means their use is lucrative and presumably profitable for the press institutions. On the other hand, we cannot ignore the role of online press as formators and modulators of public opinion and attitudes. In a society devised by different opinions such headlines may not just reflect but also stimulate conflictual mentalities and judgements. In clinical terms the overuse of fight paradigm keywords may reflect a lateral step from "normal" attitudes: the differences are enhanced; the tolerance is replaced by opposition and oppositions are presented as conflicts.

3. In the selected periods the relative low occurrence of sensationalistic keywords in comparison with the other two categories was quite surprising. This probably reflects a certain tension in social media and society. From an editorial point of view, the predominance of fight paradigm and disastrous keywords may lead to a simple conclusion: this kind of narrative is bringing more audience, clicks and incomes.

4. Our study shows an erosion of the interest for traditional sensationalistic headlines. It is probable that we are facing a demonetization and devaluation tendency after their large and frequent use in tabloid press and tabloidization in the years 2000. After an extensive use of such headlines that don't reflect the trivial content, readers became more suspicious and less disposed to believe and click to open the articles with such headlines.

5. The surprising occurrence of fight paradigm headlines is not related with simple tabloidization or sensationalism. We can consider it as a sign of media conflictualization which aligns to conflicts within our society. As conflictual words increase the gap between social groups, this conflictualization might be closer to the beginning of hate speech versus minorities, institutions, groups, etc.

4. Conclusions

Our study was performed for a relatively short period of time across 2018 and 2019. and consisted of monitoring a set of keywords related to the concepts of /sensationalism/, /fight paradigm/ and /catastrophism/. The results we obtained revealed a preponderance of fight paradigm and catastrophism headlines versus common sensationalistic ones. As the press migrates towards the fight paradigm and catastrophism, we can assume a narrative shift in Romanian online media. A legitimate question is: what are the factors that might have led to this new paradigm? We consider some possible theories:

Fight paradigm and catastrophism are used as a coping narrative

According to this theory, the aggressive turn of news narratives is merely an editorial strategy in order to generate more clicks. In other words, it has to do with the shift of power in digital media and the modified relationship between news institutions, audience and advertisers. Bob Garfield explains this relation in 'The Chaos Scenario' (Garfield, 2009), where he argues that the pressure for gaining the audience's attention in a content-supersaturated space is directly influencing the quality of the press, leading to further audience and hence advertiser defection. (Garfield 2009, p. 38) This state of affairs regarding media power is called chaos paradigm and explains the transformation of traditional media in terms of chaotic response to an overwhelming environment (Freedman, 2015).

Fight paradigm and catastrophism are a reflection of the society

Romania has been facing many social and political tensions in recent years, generated by its new political status as a member of EU and NATO on one side, and its communist past which strongly imprinted its mentality on some of society's layers, giving rise to antagonistic attitudes and options. Therefore, it is possible and quite probable that the conflictualization of the press - even if not totally - is caused by these internal issues. This idea is also supported by our second research on the topic - as shown in the case study - which reveals the fact that the most headlines containing words related to the idea of fighting and conflict regard political topics. Moreover, catastrophism showed to be more frequent among news that report social issues. So, we could state that social issues that come from tense, panic-filled environments are presented the same way by the media, presumably in order to make the audience identify more with the press material.

Fight paradigm and catastrophism are a blending in strategy

According to a study conducted by Reuters and Oxford University on Journalism, Media, and Technology trends, social media and news media are interfering with each other, which leads to the fact that, to most of the audience, it is of no importance whether a piece of information was published by a press institution or a peer. In addition, the study stresses the fact that most publishers are worried about their dependency on social platforms, and they are constantly developing new editorial and marketing strategies in order to make their content blend in more easily on such channels. In addition, according to Digital News Report 2018 (Newman et al., 2018), a study conducted by Reuters Institute and Oxford University, it seems that Romania has one of the most polarized online narratives. Romanian social

media is a place of aggressive advocacy rather than dialogue. The users are fierce, they do not refrain from hate speech and their interventions are frequently *ad hominem* attacks, regardless of the subject or person they are commenting on. Most social problems bring about antagonic groups of supporters that post more critical remarks and attacks than neutral information about the subject.

These two main ideas - 1) that news publishers have to thrive on social platforms and play by their rules; and 2) that Romanian social media is a space where conflict and hate speech are dominant - make us presume that the shift in media speech could be a blending in mechanism; that reporters follow users' way of expressing their attitudes and beliefs in order to fit in better among their usual posts and become, in a way, native social media content generators.

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