

ROMANIAN ONLINE MEDIA HEADING TOWARDS A FIGHT PARADIGM: A QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS

Simona BADER, Corina SÎRB
West University of Timișoara, Romania

Abstract: A study we conducted in 2018 revealed that Romanian digital media is migrating towards catastrophism and fight paradigm, as far as its content is concerned. We made a quantitative analysis of almost a half a million headlines published in the first months of 2018 that showed the dominance of fight paradigm and catastrophic headlines versus common, old-school sensationalistic ones, appealing to excitement. We concluded that this tendency towards fight and catastrophism is a specific kind of sensationalism, that could either reflect the inner conflicts and tensions of the Romanian nowadays society or/and function as clickbait tactics to generate more views. The present paper is a follow-up to the above-mentioned study that has three main purposes: a) to observe and analyze the tendencies in digital media after one year; b) to see which areas of the society are more frequently presented as scandalous and dramatic by the media; and c) to see if there is a connection between this tendency and social and political events.

Keywords: fight paradigm, catastrophism, online media, clickbait journalism

1. Introduction

It was only natural that moving into the digital space would bring about a series of changes to the way journalism is made. In the introduction to Handbook of Global Online Journalism, Eugenia Sapiera and Andreas Veglis make an analogy between the extinction of dinosaurs and the transformation of traditional press in order to stress the idea that both phenomena are actually natural effects of evolution:

“just like dinosaurs, traditional journalism, and print journalism more particularly, dominated for over 300 years. Just like dinosaurs, it faced a (more or less) sudden threat: the rise of the Internet and digital content platforms; it has difficulties developing new functions to adapt to a changing environment; it faces prolonged stress due to a decrease in profits and an increasingly competitive environment. Will it survive or will it go the way of the dinosaurs?”. (Sapeira 2012, 20-21)

Later on, they make the case that one could perceive online journalism either as a species that has adapted to the new environment, by means of reinterpreting traditional journalism's ways, principles and values. or as the genesis of a brand new entity with its own traits and need to be treated accordingly. (Sapeira 2012, 22)

Whether it is an adapted species, a new kind of journalism or a mutant, it is hard to tell. But beyond this categorization, it remains clear that there is definitely a paradigm shift within Romanian online media. And we are not referring solely to changes regarding technical aspects, such as news formats, professional skills and speed of reporting, but to a shift regarding the type of discourse that is being used, namely a fight paradigm.

2. Conceptual clarifications

A study we conducted in 2018 analyzed the frequency of both sensationalistic and catastrophic titles and showed that, while searching for the most efficient ways to generate clicks, the general press is migrating from the standard tabloid style towards a specific kind of reporting: one that makes appeal to fear and resentment and presents common debates as fights, dialogues as attacks and opposite ideas as confrontations. 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 period: 1 January – 1 April 2018. The keywords we selected were: /bomb/, /disaster/, /sensational/, /scandal/, /explosive/, /hallucinatory/, /incredible/. They rendered a total number of headlines close to half a million.

Precisely, keywords related to fight, conflict and catastrophe added up to more than 60% headlines of the total, leaving traditional sensationalistic titles less than we would have expected. These surprising results directed our research towards the following main ideas:

1. There seems to be an erosion of interest for traditional sensationalistic headlines. The only one who resisted with approximative 20% is /incredible/, while the other two we choose as exemplary (/sensational/ and /hallucinating/) are less used. It is possible to face a demonetization and devaluation tendency after their large and frequent use in the years 2000. After an extensive use of such headlines on news pieces that don't report on trivial content, readers became more suspicious and less disposed to believe and click to open the articles.
2. 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 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 called *fight paradigm*.
3. Closely connected to this type of discourse, we found another narrative trend, that we referred to as *catastrophism* and which is characterized by presenting common facts and actions as dramas, unsolvable problems or imminent dangers.

In the former and present article concerning this subject, we made a qualitative and quantitative analysis of these two concepts. The results show an extremely high occurrence of these keywords among the headlines used by Romanian online media. Therefore, we proposed these two concepts among the operational concepts of press along with previous ones, such as sensationalism or clickbait journalism.

2.1 Possible explanations

As the press migrates towards 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 as a *coping mechanism*

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. (Des Freedman, 2015).

Fight paradigm and catastrophism as 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 is - even if not totally - 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 fight 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 tensed, 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 as 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 part 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.

On the other hand, according to Digital News Report 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 the subject or person they are commenting to. 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 - that news publishers have to thrive on social platforms and play by their rules; and 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.

2.2. Case study - Materials and methods

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 resulted in the previous study: fight paradigm, catastrophism and sensationalism. For *fight paradigm*, the selected keywords were /atac/ (*attack*), /scandal/ (*scandal*), /exploziv/ (*explosive*) and /bombă/ (*bomb*); for *catastrophism*, we analyzed headlines containing the words /incendiar/ (*inflammatory*), /dezastru/ (*disaster*) and /cumplit/ (*terrible*); As far as *sensationalism* is concerned, we considered the keywords /senzațional/ (*sensational*) and /incredibil/ (*incredible*). Due to objective reasons, the present study was made for a period of two months (1st of January to 1st of March 2019) comparatively with the previous one made for a period of three months. As a consequence of the previous study we included in this survey keywords which seemed to have a high occurrence in the media, namely /atac/ (*attack*) for fight paradigm and /cumplit/ (*terrible*) for catastrophism.

As method, we used the data provided by a professional monitoring agency of online media (Zelist Monitor) which offered both numeric and percentual rate of occurrence of the researched keywords. In the analysis of 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) trustful; b) to be read with attention and c) doubtful (to avoid) and d) not yet evaluated (N/A).

In the evaluation of 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 the evolution in comparison with 2018 study, we compared in terms of proportionality the outcomes of 2019 survey with those of the previous year.

2.3. Results

The keywords we analyzed appeared 336.548 times in different types of media, their distribution being shown in figure 1.

Fight paradigm

The keyword most frequently used in this period was /atac/ (*attack*), 103.789 times. This term was introduced because in the previous study we observed an increase in the number of headlines belonging to fight paradigm. On a simple reading of daily headlines used both in press and social media, this word appears frequently, creating the impression of an imminent danger, fight or an ongoing tension within society. Surprisingly, this keyword occurs with a 20% bigger frequency than the next monitorized keyword - /scandal/ and 50% more frequent than the first word with sensationalistic traits: /incredibil/ (*incredible*). The traditional keyword /senzațional/ (*sensational*) gathers only 6% of the apparitions of /atac/ (*attack*), which shows a huge

migration towards fight paradigm and conflictual headlines. From the total of apparitions, 43,6% were in online press, 27,7% on aggregators and the rest in social media (fig. 2).

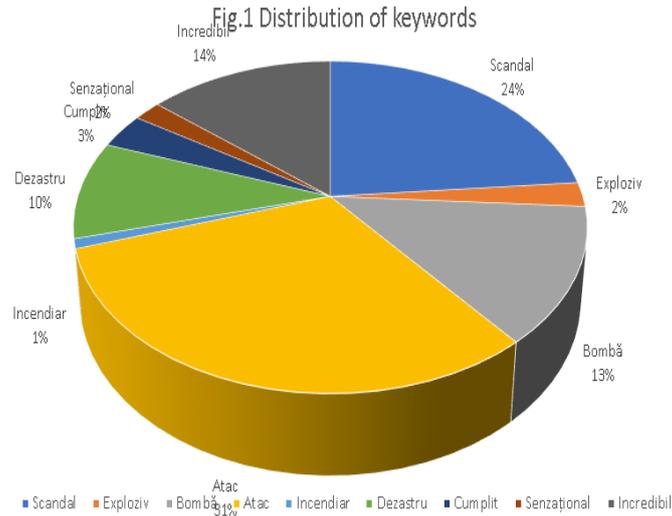


Fig. 1: Distribution of keywords

What is interesting, is that the type of channel that uses this keyword doesn't matter so much, almost half of them (704) having appeared in "trustful press", only 102 in "doubtful press" and a greater part in N/A (fig.3).

Numarul de aparitii pe tipul sursei:

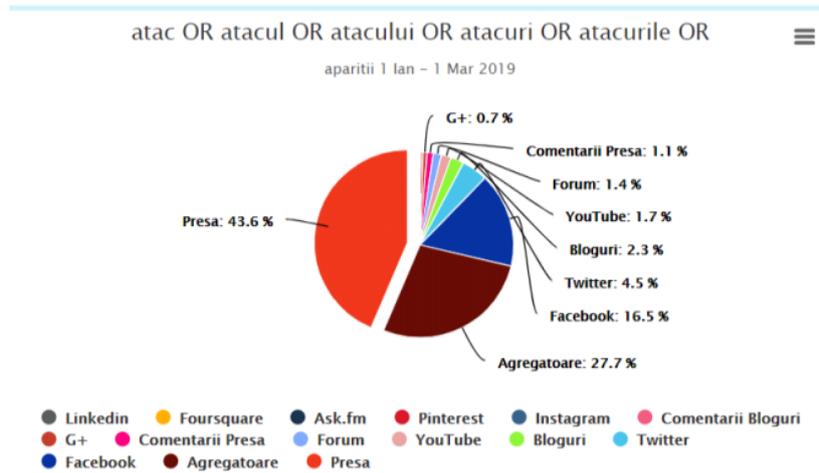


Fig.2: Number of apparitions on source type

Aparitii tipuri presa:

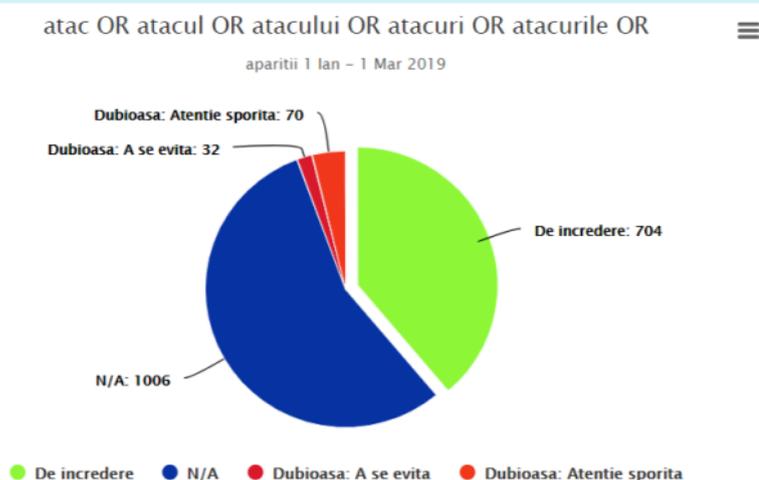


Fig.3: Occurrence (/atac/) on evaluated types of press

/Atac/ (*attack*) was also the most frequent word in the analysis of viewership, an indicator which shows the number of potential visitors who might see a certain message; the impact was 148.890 K. The geographic and demographic distributions show that more than 35% of those who have seen titles containing the term /atac/ (*attack*) are between 40 - 44 years old and almost a half of them are from Bucharest (fig.4).

The higher occurrence of /atac/ (*attack*) in online media shows some signs of the present communicational paradigm of society: people don't talk, don't debate, but rather attack each other and create conflicts. Randomly choosing a few titles appeared in the surveyed period (*Dancila, atac la Iohannis: Acest gest fara precedent denota o lipsa de responsabilitate* on <https://stirileprotv.ro/stiri/politic/dancila-atac-la-iohannis-acest-gest-fara-precedent-denota-o-lipsa-de-responsabilitate.html> or *Atacul la Pilonul II de pensii: PSD ne ia banii* on www.petreanu.ro, or *Iohannis condamna atacul Puterii asupra Justitiei si cere abrogarea OUG 7 "de indata"* on <https://www.realitatea.net/iohannis-condamna-atacul-puterii-asupra-justitiei--i-cere-abrogarea-oug-7-de-> or *Mircea Badea, atac dur la magistratii care au indraznit sa protesteze impotriva modificarilor din justitie* on www.bucurestiul.ro), one can see that regardless the issue, most of them have political connotations.

This reflects not only the social tensions, but also the conflict between parties and their supporters as if the whole society would be in a communicational impasse which leads to division and radicalization of positions. The social restlessness experienced by the excessive use of the keyword /atac/ might be easily assimilated to the idea of hate speech, because the attack presumes a conflict and hate.

The second word as occurrence in the surveyed period was /scandal/ (79.456), more than 20% less than in 2018 in the same period (106.189), with a prominent occurrence in the trustful and N/A press (fig. 5).

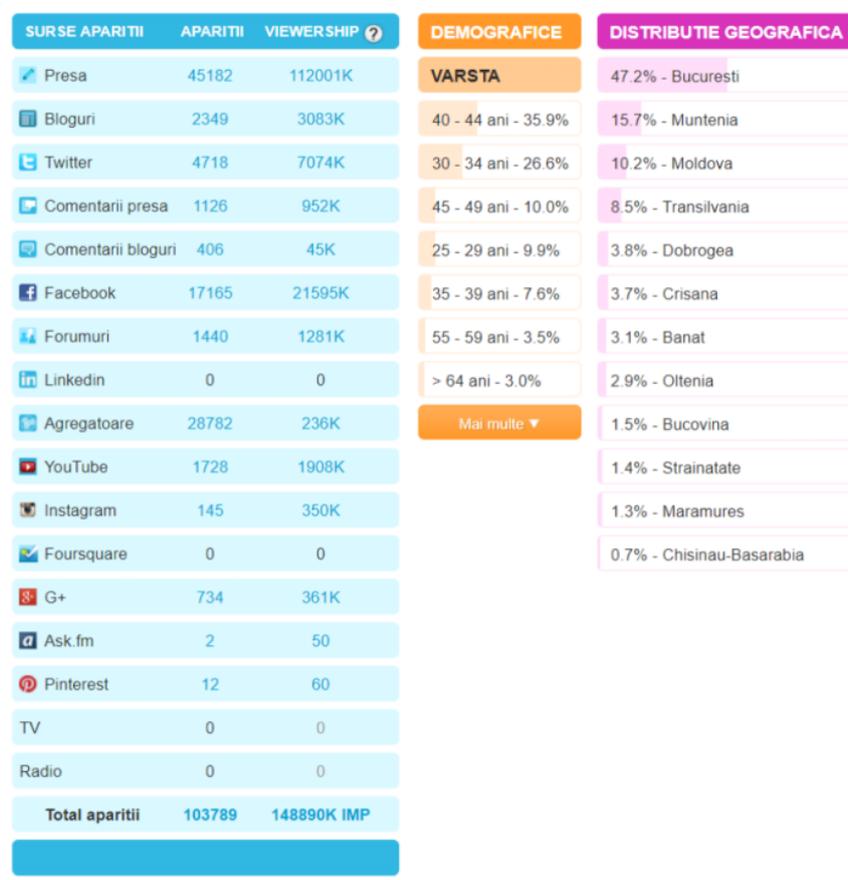


Fig.4: Viewership, demographic and geographic distribution

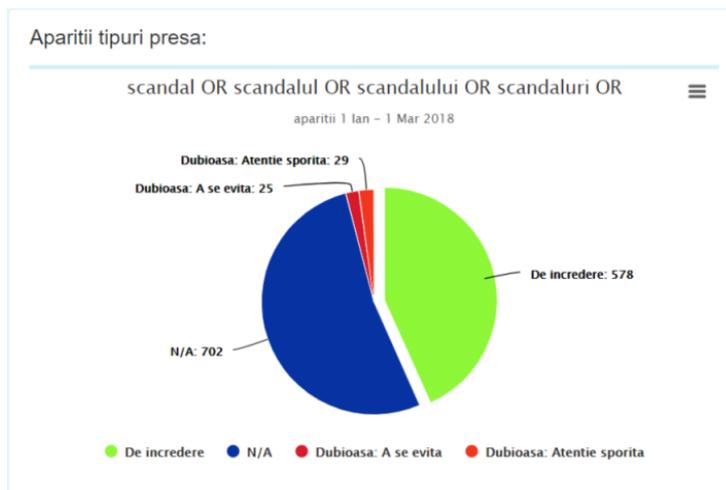


Fig. 5: Aparitions /scandal/ on evaluated types of press

The demographic analysis shows that most of the readers were from 40 - 44 years old and Bucharest prevales, the average age being higher than last year. As we noticed in the previous article, 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.

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 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 /exploziv/ in the last 22% (fig.6).

Catastrophism

The surveyed keywords for catastrophism in online media were /dezastru/ (*disaster*), /cumplit/ (*terrible*) and /incendiar/ (*inflammatory*). They represent 14% of the total survey and reflect a special social state: headlines containing catastrophic words related to a large realm of different social issues, like vaccination, flu, economic crisis, real estate market, which represent certain states and mentalities within society, connected with the idea of loss of control and helplessness („Accident cumplit intr-o scoala din Dambovita. O eleva, ranita” on www.realitatea.net, „Ecaterina Andronescu, acuzata ca "persista in dezastru" si da "o noua lovitura" invatamantului” on www.epochtimes-romania.com, „Ultima ora! Anunt incendiar al lui Tudorel Toader! Ce se intampla cu ordonanta care a aruncat in aer justitia” on www.capital.ro). The distribution of headlines that reflect the concept of catastrophism in the studied period is shown in fig. 7.

Sensationalism

The two words chosen for illustrating sensationalism were the traditional /incredibil/ (*incredible*) and /senzational/ (*sensational*). We gave up the keyword /halucinant/ (*hallucinating*), as the previous study showed its relative low occurrence (only 4%). /Incredible/ appeared 46.795 times which represents 14% of the total and /senzational/ represents only 2%, the same as last year. (fig. 8).

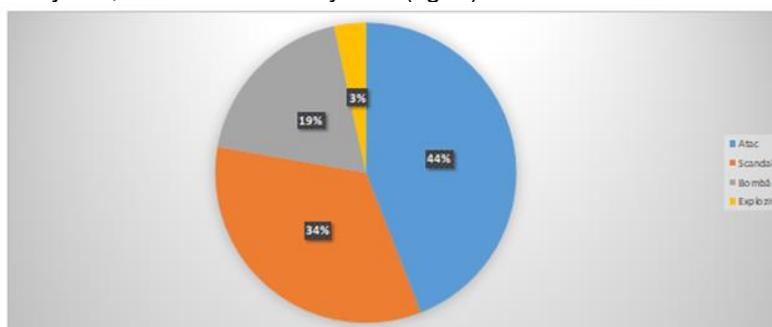


Fig.6: Fight paradigm headlines total

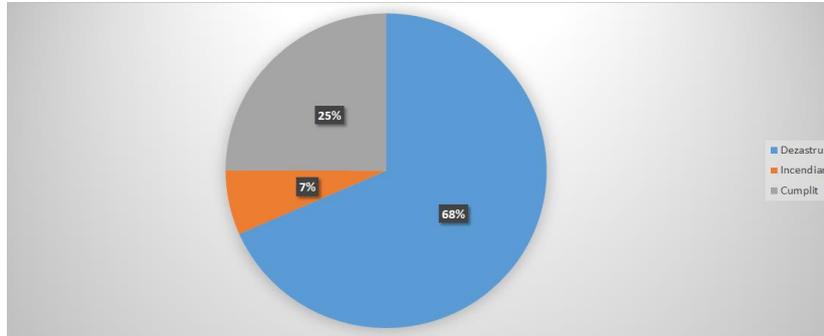


Fig. 7: Catastrophism headlines total

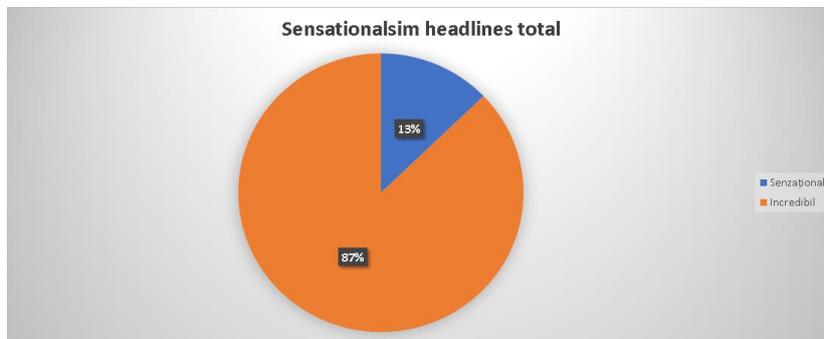


Fig. 8: Sensationalism headlines total

Noteworthy the keyword /incredibil/ appears in a significant proportion in the so-called “trustful press” (fig. 9).

Aparitii tipuri presa:

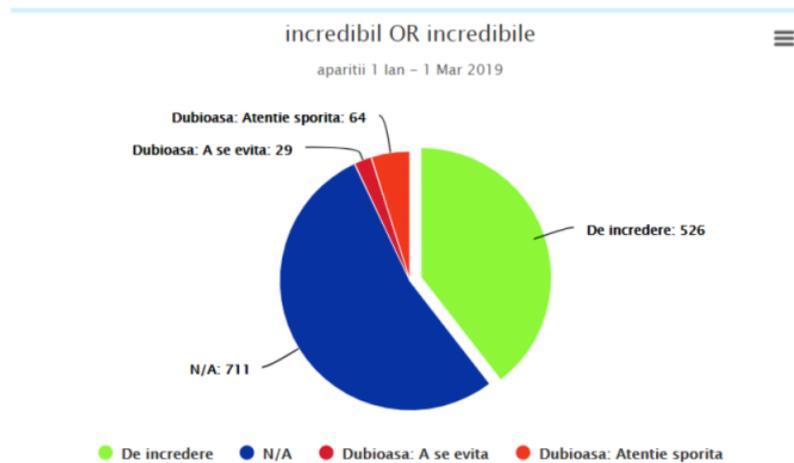


Fig. 9: Aparition of /incredibil/ in types of press

3. Discussions

This research raises a few methodological disputable problems:

1. The chosen of keywords and their unilateral attribution to one concept or another. E.g. the keyword /scandal/ was attributed to fight paradigm which can reduce its traditional sensationalistic meaning. The same for the keywords /bomb/ in a literal sense, related with explosion, terrorism etc (fortunately, in the studied period few such events were recorded).
2. Another problem is the constraint of limiting the research to only a selection of keywords (in this study we also took into consideration their derivatives) and ignoring other words from the same semiotic field (e.g. for fight paradigm words like *fight*, *battle*, *hit*, *destroy* etc), which reduces the total number of apparitions and may disturb the general distribution of occurrences in the studied period. However, it must be mentioned the fact that due to technical possibilities and the enormous number of data, we chose the headlines with the greatest numbers of apparitions as shown by the previous study.
3. An ideal research would be done by analyzing the distribution of the selected keywords on a determined period to show the relative percentage towards the totality of headlines. For a longer period as we have done (3, respective 2 months) this kind of approach is almost impossible, as the total numbers of headlines could reach millions. Therefore, we constitute a study cohort (a certain numbers of subjects chosen according to pre-stated criteria) consistent enough for the relevance of the study.
4. The present study has a consistent continuity with the 2018 study, but the methodology was not completed the same, regarding both the chosen keywords and the period. Ideally such a study should follow a totally identical methodology, but we made minimal changes to the selection of keywords, based solely on the results of the previous study, so we believe that for the ongoing research, the present analysis is consistent enough.
5. One question that can be considered is the period (randomly in the first months of the year) and location (in one country) of the study. This approach may lead to partial and well determined conclusions about a national online media but should be completed for a larger period and ideally, following the same methodology, in different countries. In this way, quantitative and qualitative conclusions might be drawn and serious and consistent methodology for press survey with its tendencies could result.

The second topic of discussion is about the outcomes and their interpretation, which requires a multi and interdisciplinary approach. The simple surprising rise in fight paradigm outcomes and the devaluation of sensationalistic headlines may have a number of explanations from communicational, social, political, psychological and historical points of view. The present research showed that “this happens” but to know why “this happens”, a serious interdisciplinary discussion would be desirable. We can make simple ascertainments (as in the first part of the paper and the following conclusions) which represent, in our opinion, not the end, but factual data for further investigations.

4. Conclusions

The present study connects with the previous one because together they can describe certain trends and trajectories in Romanian press.

Fight paradigm is dominating online media. Similar occurrence of fight paradigm and catastrophism terms compared to the previous research shows that it was not an isolated phenomenon, but it represents a different communication model, widely used by news publishers in online media.

The numbers show that there is a bigger usage of these terms when reporting political and social issues, which sustains the idea that these kinds of titles are not solely a clickbait tactic, but also reflect the tensions within society and the audience's attitude towards social and political topics.

Moreover, this paradigm is not connected only to tabloid media, as the study shows that "trustworthy" media channels are great producers and sources that disseminate this kind of narrative.

As far as making some predictions regarding what could follow from this narrative shift, we can already observe a few reactions both as far as the audience and the media industry are concerned:

1. Due to lack of trust in this kind of media, parts of the audience have started to migrate towards alternative sources of information that appeal to a more neutral vocabulary: bloggers, ex-journalists that now have personal web pages or social media accounts, informal opinion leaders.
2. As far as media professionals are concerned, there are more and more of them who do not want to be a part of this paradigm and are therefore searching for different business models, where clicks are not the only measure of quality: crowdsource funded publishing projects, independent journalistic initiatives.
3. If we consider fight paradigm and catastrophism as successors of sensationalism, it is not exaggerated to ask ourselves if supersaturation with this kind of speech may lead to a different kind of narrative in the near future. And if so, what will this new paradigm look like.

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