

Media and Political Information Environment in Romania

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The Romanian media landscape has undergone a dramatic transformation since 1989, following the fall of the communist regime. This pivotal moment in Romanian history not only marked the end of a totalitarian system but was also a new era for communication and public discourse. The first televised event of this democratic era was the revolution itself. Afterwards a multitude of news channels started to emerge in the Romanian TV. Among these were Antena 1, founded by Dan Voiculescu, a figure with roots in the former communist establishment, and ProTV, which took inspiration from American media models and quickly gained public trust.

Despite this revolution and the initial promise of a liberated media, the Romanian media landscape remains deeply intertwined with political interests. It is marked by issues such as media concentration, the fragmentation of the audience and discourse, a decline in the quality of journalism, inequality in representation and access, and the spread of misinformation. Despite these challenges and the help other countries received, Romania received very little funds from other countries for the development of its media outlets, limiting external support for fostering independent journalism. The methods by which Romanians consume news have also shifted; lately, digital media gained popularity, increasing with 25% compared to 2021, while the TV had a decline of 10% (Botan, 2024), indicating a dynamic but also potentially more complex information environment.

To understand the media's role, it is crucial to briefly consider the political context within which it operates. Romania has a semi-presidential political system featuring a dual authority structure with both a popularly elected president and a prime minister reliant on parliament. However, Romania's operates as a hybrid model. More critically, Romanian politics is often perceived to be driven by power-seeking and economic self-interest more than by ideology or policy goals. Political competition frequently revolves around gaining access to resources, a dynamic that has unfortunately led to high levels of corruption (Coman, & Gross, 2012). This political environment inevitably casts a long shadow over the media.

This essay explores the multifaceted challenges facing the Romanian media landscape. It will delve into how political information is supplied to the public, looking at the quality of news available, examine the impact of media concentration, analyze the interconnected issues of fragmentation and polarization, discuss the growing problem of relativism in news and the spread of disinformation, and finally, assess the degree of inequality that permeates the system.

Chapter 1: Supply of Political Information

The supply of political information in Romania has been characterized by an evolution since the 1989 revolution, which itself was a landmark event in media history. This event symbolized a dramatic shift from a information system controlled by the state to one with the potential for diversity. In the immediate aftermath, new media outlets emerged rapidly. ProTV, for instance, inspired by American media, quickly became a significant source of news, while Antena 1, founded by Dan Voiculescu, also established itself as a major player.

The traditional print media experienced its own issues. After the fall of communism, Romania's printed press had a chaotic but fast growth, a period freedom. However, this was followed by a decline in circulation and influence. While in the 1990s the written press was very popular and played a crucial role in shaping public discourse, by the 2000s it reached a decline in buyers (Coman, 2001). To monitor this sector, in 1989 the Romania Audit Bureau of Circulation (BRAT) was founded as a way to provide reliable circulation figures. It takes care of 14 national newspapers, 65 local and regional dailies, and 150 weekly and monthly publications (Ghinea, & Mungiu-Pippidi, 2010). Based on their circulation figures from that period, the top five national dailies were identified as Click, Libertatea, Adevarul, Cancan, and Jurnalul National (Ghinea, & Mungiu-Pippidi, 2010), showcasing a mix of tabloid and more traditional formats. A notable aspect of the print media landscape was that the ethnic minorities' newspaper were founded by the state and they were popular in Hungarian speaking counties (Coman, 2001), indicating a specific channel for supplying information to these communities.

Over time, media consumption habits have significantly altered the landscape of information supply. As Botan (2024) notes, media consumption in Romania is increasingly dominated by television and rapidly growing in digital and social media, while traditional outlets like radio and newspapers are in decline. Lately, digital media gained popularity, increasing with 25% compared to 2021, while the TV had a decline of 10% (Botan, 2024). Despite this decline,

broadcasted media, particularly television, remains a primary media outlet for a large segment of the population. However, digital media has seen a significant rise in popularity, especially due to urban youth using it as an information source (Preoteasa, Comanescu, Avadani, Vasilache, Dragomir, Thompson, & Tambini, 2010). The internet has grown faster than the ability of the advertising industry to keep up with it, with websites like HotNews.ro and EvZ.ro becoming popular online destinations for news (Preoteasa, Comanescu, Avadani, Vasilache, Dragomir, Thompson, & Tambini, 2010).

The digitization of political coverage in Romania exposed gaps, as internet campaigning and media operated outside traditional electoral laws. NGOs tried to extend pre-election silence to online platforms, highlighting the challenges in regulating this new supply chain. Despite legal bans, blogs published exit polls before polls closed, demonstrating the difficulty in controlling information flow in the digital age. While young or lesser-known candidates embraced social media and blogs during elections, many abandoned them afterward. Thus, while the internet offered new tools for political communication and the supply of political information, it did not reach many of the Romanian voters, who tends to be older and often offline (Preoteasa, Comanescu, Avadani, Vasilache, Dragomir, Thompson, & Tambini, 2010).

Furthermore, the interaction between different media platforms affects the supply and reach of information. A study by Dinu and her colleagues analyzed how social media activity influences TV audiences in Romania. It found that platforms like Facebook significantly boost viewership, with up to 57.8% of audience variation for channels like Antena 1 explained by social media. Romania TV saw the largest estimated financial gain, approximately 59,750 lei per day, due to this influence. The study also showed that nearly 40% of viewers engage with TV channels' social media daily, confirming a strong link between online presence and audience size (Dinu, MAREI, Vintila, & Ghinea, 2020). This shows that the supply of political information is increasing across more platforms.

Chapter 2: Quality of News

The quality of news in Romania is a matter of concern, affected by the close ties between political actors and journalism. As Coman and Gross (2012) observe, the media is a mirror of the political system, being dominated by close ties between the political actors and journalism.

Media serves as a tool for shaping alliances, while lacking in neutrality and independent journalists. This fundamental characteristic sets the stage for many issues.

One of the most critical problems is the perceived loss of credibility. Neamțu (2023) believes that Romanian media lost its credibility, something that happened as a result of lack of money and the discrediting of the profession. This decline can be seen in what Moraru described as a phenomenon happening in Romania called “the illusion of journalism,” through which the public doesn’t get relevant information, just press releases and accidents (Neamțu, 2023). This suggests a superficiality in news coverage. The fiscal crisis of 2008 made this phenomenon worse; media outlets were faced with the need to accept advertising and partnerships for political parties in order to survive. Because of that, we can see a growth in the publishing of opinions of the journalists more than the facts (Neamțu, 2023). This shift towards opinion-based content at the expense of factual reporting directly affects news quality.

Ghinea and Mungiu-Pippidi (2010) identify several problems regarding media outlets in Romania that impact quality: the personalization of the media, uncertain revenue and the lack of professional ethics. The personalization of media, where owners express their own biases overtly, such as stating “I don’t agree with this politician,” leads not only to fragmentation but also to a lack in objective news. The lack of professional ethics is a recurring theme; the same authors note that any ethical remark felt like a personal attack on the publisher, which led to a lack in media ethics. This environment makes it difficult to uphold journalistic standards. The weakness of regulatory bodies like the National Audiovisual Council (CAN) further complicates matters, as CAN proves to be weak as a result of nepotism and norms that tolerate the evasion of rules (Coman, & Gross, 2012).

The rise of digital media has introduced new challenges to news quality. While offering speed and accessibility, digitization changed journalism by prioritizing speed and convenience over investigative quality (Preoteasa et al., 2010). A significant problem associated with this shift is the rise of “herd journalism,” characterized by news that are being sent without an actual fact checking (Preoteasa et al., 2010), leading to the fast sharing of unverified information.

Trust in media is linked to its quality. Lunguleac-Bardasuc, Budac, and Ogorean (2021) have identified three types of trust in Romanian media: trust in the information, trust in the provider of the information, and trust in the medium that the information is being transmitted.

Reputation of the mass media is another important part of this framework. According to their research, the most trusted media outlets in Romania are ProTV, Digi 24, and Antena 1. However, Botan (2024) points out that trust in media, especially in the written press, is low, which reduces audience engagement with traditional journalism and pushes people toward digital platforms, despite their susceptibility to misinformation. This indicates a complex trust dynamic, where established brands may retain some trust while the overall ecosystem suffers.

Trofin (2015) argues that television in Romania, while still trusted, has seen its main function shift from informing citizens to promoting political and economic interests. He observes that most politicians have become media personalities, who prioritize how frequently they appear on the TV rather than political actions. This image centric nature of political communication shows that the TV doesn't reflect only the political life, but also it reshapes political identities, encouraging populist discourse rather than debates. Editorial independence in Romania has been weakened because of the mesh between political discourse and entertainment, along the increasing media ownership concentration, with television acting as a strategic tool for gaining influence, distorting the media agenda away from public interest.

Armanca and Gross (2020) paint a picture of a system where Romania's democratic development remains stained by the presence of persistent ethical crises and illiberal political discourses. They argue that despite formal democratic structures, the political and media systems have failed to embrace their social responsibilities, thing that led to the weakening of the democratic processes and compromising of media independence. Carey (1996) believed that television in post-communist Romania continues to be used to spread "small lies" that distort democratic development, while in the totalitarian regime it was used as a tool to spread "big lies." This perspective suggests that even with the end of state control, more subtle forms of manipulation persist, affecting the quality and integrity of news.

Chapter 3: Media Concentration

Media concentration is a defining characteristic of the Romanian media landscape, exerting significant influence over the availability and diversity of information. Ghinea and Mungiu-Pippidi (2010) showed in their study that when it comes to media concentration, there are five main ones in Romania. These concentrations are largely controlled by influential

businessmen, often with controversial backgrounds and close ties to political or economic power structures.

One of the key figures identified is Sorin Ovidiu Vantu, described as a controversial businessman who built his media empire by buying Realitatea TV and attracting many journalists with high pay. His entry into the media market signifies the trend of wealthy individuals leveraging media for influence.

Dinu Patriciu, noted as the richest person in Romania at the time, represented the first major media concentration when he bought Adevarul, owning the top circulation newspaper. This acquisition placed a significant portion of the print market under a single influential owner.

Adrian Sarbu, who created the first independent media in Romania, ProTV, eventually became part of this concentration landscape. ProTV's early success, built on an American model, made it a valuable asset.

Dan Voiculescu, who became rich by confiscating the shadow money of Nicolae Ceausescu and opened Antena 1, represents another major pole of media power. His political background and the origins of his wealth have been subjects of considerable public debate, highlighting the links between media ownership and past regimes or political interests.

Ringier, a Swiss company, is identified as the biggest foreign media competitor in Romania, owning papers like Evenimentul Zilei and Libertatea. While foreign ownership can sometimes bring diversity, Ringier's significant market share also contributes to the concentration.

George Constantin Paunescu is cited as the last media concentration, founding B1 and buying the TV station Evenimentul zilei (Ghinea & Mungiu-Pippidi, 2010).

In 2008 90% of the national newspapers were controlled by these six (Ghinea & Mungiu-Pippidi, 2010). Such a high level of control in the hands of a few individuals or entities inevitably raises concerns about pluralism, editorial independence, and the potential for coordinated influence on public opinion.

The power these men have manifested in direct confrontations, in 2004 a war starting between Sorin Ovidiu Vantu and Dan Voiculescu, each using his own outlets to attack the other.

They accused each other of illegal acts on their media outlets. This open conflict demonstrated how media platforms could be instrumentalized for personal or business rivalries. Their war ended when Traian Basescu was running for presidency, now the two of them having a common enemy (Ghinea & Mungiu-Pippidi, 2010).

Mungiu-Pippidi (2008), in her study on media politics in Europe, noted that in some Eastern European countries, media outlets came to be controlled by the government or by people that have a close link to political elites, which resulted in the manipulation of the public opinion. Furthermore, Stănuș (2006) observed that between 1990 and 2004, Romania experienced a shift from authoritarian legal mechanisms of media control to more subtle, non-authoritarian forms of influence, such as economic pressure and structural dependencies. While direct censorship decreased, media freedom was still constrained through indirect means, such as manipulation of legislation, selective enforcement, ownership concentration and financial pressure. Media concentration can be seen as one of these more subtle but highly effective mechanisms for exerting control over the information landscape. The concentration of media ownership in the hands of a few powerful individuals, many with explicit political or extensive business interests remains a critical issue impacting the diversity of political discourse in Romania.

Chapter 4: Fragmentation and Polarization

The Romanian media landscape is characterized not only by concentration but also by significant fragmentation and an increasing degree of political polarization. The personalization of media, as identified by Ghinea and Mungiu-Pippidi (2010), plays a crucial role in this dynamic. They observe that when it comes to personalization of the media, the people that owned the media outlets were expressing their own biases like “I don’t agree with this politician”, which led to fragmentation, since most journalists tried to create their own media to support their bias. This tendency for media to reflect owners' personal or political agendas contributes to a fragmented media environment where different outlets cater to specific viewpoints, rather than fostering a common public sphere. Because of this fragmentation, there was an uncertain revenue, since the top 12 Romanian media outlets could not reach the same audience as the top Poland one (Ghinea & Mungiu-Pippidi, 2010), indicating that a fragmented market can also be economically weaker.

New media is characterized by more information at a lower cost and direct political engagement, a significant downside being the creation of echo chambers that fuel the biases of people, without giving them an overview, which leads to cognitive bias. This environment means that individuals viewing only one political agenda fosters mistrust between groups that feel like their beliefs are not included. Such echo chambers are creating polarization, as they reinforce pre-existing beliefs and limit exposure to new perspectives.

Grecu and Chiriac (2024) directly link political polarization to the state of media freedom, finding that in Romania, political polarization is negatively related to media freedom after the collapse of the communism. This happened because the partnerships between media and political actors highlighted the importance of independent media.

Even changes within traditional media reflect these trends. Coman (2001) noted that after the 1990s, genres in the printed press shifted from serious political weeklies to sensational tabloids, mirroring the trends in other Eastern European countries. This shift can be interpreted as a form of fragmentation of public discourse.

The rise of nationalist populist parties further illustrates and intensifies these dynamics. The study “Electoral dynamics in the age of disinformation: Understanding Romanian voter support for nationalist populist parties in the 2024 elections” by Botan, Stefureac, and Stancea (2025) examines the rise of parties like AUR and SOS Romania, noting their growing support is linked to distrust in institutions, and exposure to disinformation. They are relying on social media for news support for these parties, especially since their voters often bypass mainstream and traditional media in favor of alternative sources. This bypassing of mainstream media contributes to fragmentation and fuels polarization by reinforcing the narratives of these often extremist parties. The misinformation and conspiracy theories propagated by such groups, as seen in the case of Calin Georgescu who used nonpolitical discourses on platforms like Tik-Tok to boost his algorithm and then spread content promoting anti-educational messages and encapsulation anti-western conspiracy theories (STĂNESCU, 2024), directly contribute to a polarized environment by amplifying divisive and often false narratives. This strategy, which initially boosted Georgescu in electoral polls highlights how media fragmentation (use of niche platforms) and polarization (spread of extremist views) are dangerously intertwined. The Romanian media landscape, therefore, struggles with a fractured public sphere where citizens are

increasingly bombarded by ideologies, often consuming information that confirms their biases rather than challenging them.

Chapter 5: Relativism in News

Romania, just like any other country, suffers from the fake news phenomenon. Euronews, for instance, published an article, urging people to be careful where they get their news from because recently a video, using the logo of the news station, falsely claimed that Romania was accusing France of interfering with the last elections. Such incidents destroy the trust in established media and demonstrate the audacity of disinformation campaigns.

The paper “Does fake news lead to more engaging effects on social media? Evidence from Romania” by Corbu, Bârgăoanu, Buturoiu, and Ștefăniță (2020) provides key insights. Their key finding is that only manipulated political content has measurable effects on both viral spread and persuasion. In contrast, fabricated news and satirical content show no significant effects. The study also emphasizes that “soft” manipulation, especially the one with negative connotation, makes news more viral and persuasive, while very false or humorous are less impactful. Negative news tend to spread more than positive news, the level of education did not impact the people that were spreading theme and the approval of the government only moderates persuasion when the news have a positive bias (Corbu et al., 2020).

The 2024 elections serve as a good example when it comes to disinformation and fake news in digital media in Romania. During this period, there were used advanced manipulation tactics such as: micro-targeted political messaging, astroturfing, issue framing via viral challenges and misinformation and conspiracy theories (STĂNESCU, 2024). Micro-targeting political messaging refers to tailored messages being given to a specific demographic of people in order to reinforce their biases, while astroturfing is the use of bots and fake accounts in order to grow a social media account. Issue framing via viral challenges was exemplified by candidates like Calin Georgescu, who used nonpolitical discourses on platforms like Tik-Tok in order to boost the algorithms and get his name higher in the searches. For the misinformation and conspiracy theories part, Calin Georgescu was spreading content promoting anti-educational messages and encapsulation anti-western conspiracy theories (STĂNESCU, 2024). This sophisticated strategy boosted Calin Georgescu so much he was the first in the electoral polls in 2024. However, exactly this kind of behavior was the reason why the first election got annulled

and he was not allowed to participate again, illustrating the real-world political consequences of such campaigns.

The study by Botan, Stefureac and Stancea (2025) on nationalist populist parties (AUR and SOS Romania) further highlights the link between disinformation and political dynamics. It found that their supporters often rely on social media, bypassing mainstream and traditional media in favor of alternative sources and that awareness of disinformation reduces the likelihood of voting for nationalist parties. While conspiracy theories are common among nationalist voters, they are not the only reason for voters to support AUR or SOS Romania.

The historical context also reveals a legacy of information manipulation. Barbulescu (1994) argued that in the early post-communist years authorities and key media institutions worked together to control political discourse and restrict access to accurate information, shaping a carefully made narrative that masked ongoing authoritarian tendencies. Propaganda and controlled imagery persisted, suggesting that the manipulation of information is not an entirely new phenomenon, but has perhaps evolved in its methods. Carey (1996) agreed on this, believing that post-communist television was used to spread "small lies" that distort democratic development, replacing the "big lies" of the totalitarian regime, thereby fostering public apathy through more subtle forms of mind control. Preoteasa et al. (2010) also acknowledged that although blogs could act as watchdogs, the internet also facilitated political misinformation and manipulation during elections.

In response to these challenges, there is a growing interest in technological solutions. Dinu, Fusu and Gifu (2023) conducted a study on how AI is able to recognize fake news, focusing on news in the Romanian language. They concluded that 93% of the fake news have been recognized by the machine learning and that believe that future research can combine text-based approaches with different contextual information.

Chapter 6: Degree of Inequality

Inequality manifests in various forms within the Romanian political media landscape, impacting who controls information, whose voices are heard, and who has access to diverse and reliable news. A fundamental aspect of this inequality is that the degree of inequality in Romanian political media comes from the fact that media outlets belong to people who are

reinforcing their own biases on the politics rather than to present facts. This ownership structure inherently creates an unequal information environment, where the perspectives and interests of a few powerful individuals can dominate public discourse.

Economic factors contribute significantly to this inequality. Romania received very little funds from other countries for the media outlets, limiting the potential for external support to foster a more diverse and independent media sector. This financial constraint is echoed in Botan's (2024) observation that the media system is economically fragile and heavily reliant on advertising, making it vulnerable to political and commercial pressures. Such vulnerability can lead to unequal coverage, where outlets may favor an agenda aligned with advertisers or political patrons, rather than serving the broader public interest. This reliance on advertising can also mean that media outlets are targeting demographics perceived as more valuable to advertisers, potentially neglecting the informational needs of less affluent or marginalized groups.

Inequality in representation is evident along ethnic lines. While the ethnic minorities' newspaper were founded by the state and they were prominent in Hungarian speaking counties (Coman, 2001), the broader picture regarding ethnic minorities, particularly the Roma community, is troubling. Mihăescu and Curcă (2024) conclude that the Romanian press continues to perpetuate negative stereotypes about Roma communities, contributing to their marginalization despite the existence of state institutions aimed at combating discrimination. They identify recurring narratives and rhetorical strategies in media coverage that reinforce prejudiced views, portraying Roma individuals as inherently linked to crime, poverty, or deviance. Unfortunately, the political media still has this kind of biases, attacking Roma politicians for being part of this ethnic group rather than their extreme political views. Such biased representation constitutes a significant form of inequality, denying Roma individuals fair portrayal.

Gender inequality is also an issue in both the political and media sphere. The framework of Gender and International Political Economy (GIPE) showcases the way gender is embedded in political and economic systems, often resulting in women being treated negatively and highlighting the importance of intersectionality (Rai, Shirin, 2013). Women in politics are usually looked over, in favour of their men counterparts, which results in gender inequality in the political system. On that note, Romania also suffers from gender inequality in the political field.

Furthermore, there is an inequality in access to and consumption of media, often delimited by demographics. Another difference regarding this would be the media channels. Young people tend to get their information through social media, while older people tend to watch the news on television. This digital divide means that different age groups inhabit distinct information ecosystems. Preoteasa et al. (2010) noted that the internet offered new tools for political communication but did not reach the typical Romanian voter, who tends to be older and offline. This creates an unequal political information landscape where certain groups of the population may be less exposed to new forms of political engagement. Those heavily reliant on social media are prone to the echo chambers and misinformation on these platforms, leading to an unequal understanding of complex issues. While people can learn from the media, it is important for them to take their news from different platforms and fact check them before, if possible. This multifaceted inequality undermines the media's potential to serve as a truly democratic space for all citizens.

Conclusion

To conclude, Romania needs stronger regulatory frameworks, investment in media literacy, support for independent journalism, and a concerted effort to make media ownership be part of no political party. Only then can the supply of political information become reliable, the quality of journalism be bettered and inequality be reduced in the public discourse. In an age where misinformation spreads faster than facts, Romania must prioritize the integrity of its media system to ensure a more informed, inclusive, and democratic society.

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