Media Representation of Coronavirus in Romanian Online Press. National, European, and International Themes

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Abstract

Our research aims to discover how Romanian online press describes the coronavirus pandemic in terms of National, European, and International themes by examining online articles through a content analysis of three online newspapers. This initiative contributes to the study of media representation in a situation of global importance and effect. The study shows the media representation at the pandemic start, three days before Romania lockdown. The analysis reveals a strong representation in headlines and images in the National stream. We found that medicine was the main topic represented in Romanian online press, in both headlines and images, followed by themes including politics, internal affairs and socio-cultural subjects. Neutral images had the biggest ratio in the themes, comprising sketch of the virus, images with drugs, blood tests and people wearing masks.

Key words: media representation, online news, coronavirus representation, European themes, National themes.
J.E.L. classification: Z1

1. Introduction

Mass media and social media are great amplifiers of current topics, which can create a wave of both information or disinformation, can create panic, or can generate antagonist messages. Visual literacy and critical thinking are the key when decoding a large amount of data published in a short period of time.

Coronavirus subject is a mainstream preoccupation in the social context, not only locally, but at European and global level, as well. The information represented in media can influence people's daily lives activities, plans and recreational activities. We've created an online media representation analysis of how Coronavirus news are communicated in Romanian online newspapers, studying the news headlines and images and how the two are connected. We comprise in our paper concepts as sign, symbol, and representation (Borțun, 2001; Chiciudean & Halic, 2003, 2012; Hall, 2003, 2005) when assessing the images found in the online articles.

We follow in our research if the images and the headlines can be categorized under national, European, or global themes. We also inspect which of the categories has a greater presence, from medicine, politics, economics, socio-cultural, religion and what is the connection between the categories and themes. We expect that the results will show a greater mention on the national themes, rather than the global and European aspect. We presume that some domains as medicine and religion to be better represented on the national theme, as others as politics and economics on the European and Global theme.

2. The context of the current research

The first COVID-19 case worldwide was discovered in China in December 19th (Elflein, 2021). The current state of corona status as in March 31st, 2021 includes over 128.8 million cases worldwide, 2.8 million deaths worldwide and 103 million recoveries. As per Statista.com, the most impacted countries worldwide were United States, India, and Brazil (Elflein, 2021).

Going in further details, out of the 128.8 million cases worldwide, 41.5 million cases were in Europe. The first confirmed case in Europe was discovered in January 2020 in France. Our current numbers, as in March 31st, 2021, Russia (4,4mil), United Kingdom (4.2 mil), France (4.2 mil), Italy (3.3 mil) and Spain (3.2 mil) are occupying the highest ranks in number of cases, whilst Guernsey (821 cases), Feroe Islands (661 cases) and Vatican City (21 cases) are ranking the lowest. The pick of the virus spread was in the fall of 2020 (Stewart, 2021).

Romania recognized its first case in February 26th, 2020, the source of infections were people who returned from traveling abroad to infected countries, such as Italy, or being primary contacts for them. By end of March, the cases increased to be 200 cases confirmed per day. In the timeframe in which the data was gathered for our research in March 2020, Romania had around 150-200 total cases, more specifically, 95 cases were registered on March 13th, 123 cases were registered on March 14th, 139 cases were registered on March 15th, with an obvious high evolution to follow in the succeeded period (https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/country/romania/). The pick of the infections was registered in the fall of 2020. Most impacted cities were Bucharest, Suceava, Brașov, Argeș, Iași and Prahova, together representing close to half of the infected cases recognized nationally as December 2020. Romania ranks the 12th spot of Coronavirus Cases 0.98 mil cases (Stewart, 2021), 0.87 recovered people and 0.02 deaths as in April 5th, 2021 (https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/country/romania/). Romania's population, as per 2020 statistics, has 19.24 million people (O`Neill, 2021), which represents 9.88 female population and 9.35 male population (O`Neill, 2021). Total percentual cases in report with the population is 5%, recovery cases of 4.5% and 0.12% deaths. Bucharest as in March 2021 almost 150,000 cases (Sava, 2021).

3. Literature review

Since the pandemic start, at the end of 2019, online media helped amplify the news and deliver constant news regarding at interest topics as updates on cases, national government and internal affairs decision and worldwide news. This is the main reason we consider that the online press is playing a very important role in the main communication on the matter.

Lasswell's theory (1948) about the role of mass media is a starting point for our study. Mass media plays three important roles for the society: (1) the surveillance of the environment, (2) the correlation of the different components of the society in responding to the environment and (3) the transmission of societal heritage from generation to generation. The surveillance function is based on different/conflictual messages, transmitted by media journals (Gever and Coleman, 2017). Also, media is an important factor that contributes to the building of mental maps (Suchacek, 2014).

The importance of media surveillance function resides in the dynamism of the crises communication, as the trust in public authorities decreases in the same time with the evolution of the crisis, therefore the online press has one of the main roles in this situation (Moreno, Fuentes and Navarro, 2020). Chadha (2020) considers that this happens mostly because every Government is trying to protect its economy, social space, and political institutions in the crisis.

The messages can be altered by misinformation in any crucial moment, mostly during the pandemic. Misinformation may lead to the increase of racism, fear and could built an unconstructive behaviour of the population (Hopman, Allegranzi and Mehtar, 2020). Barua et al. (2020) discuss that general misinformation belief, conspiracy belief and religious misinformation belief are the main stimulus and the credibility evaluations represents the resilience strategy.

Due to the special context of communication, the media has a main role in the shaping of public opinion, on topics with such divergent points of view, in a period when all institutions, such as Government, religious institutions, press, financial institution are crucial in dissemination of

transparent information and be in support for the masses. In this case we need to know how media reflect the main themes, central topics discussed and their interlock.

In a study realized in Romania, in 2014, most of the press television debate subjects about national and European themes (Bîră & Chiciudean, 2015). Additionally, de Vreese (2001) mentions that media coverage on the European parliament elections differs between the European Union member states, the media attention is higher in case of national elections than the European Parliament elections. Most of the times, in European countries the national identity is the main identity that people empathise with. In general, the European themes appear only rarely in media (Suchacek, 2014). In another study about media representation in terms of national and European themes, we found that in Czech Republic and Slovakia, most of the campaign was dominated by National politics and domestic issues (Kovar and Kovar, 2012).

Identity refers to many aspects like social, economic, cultural, national, and political aspects (Jenkins, 2000). Usually, the community`s members identify themselves with some characteristics that depend on the membership to the group (Chiciudean & Halic, 2012). Apart from the actions of the national institutions and political movements, the European identity usually depends on the information that mass media spread (Bruter, 2003).

To sum up, we have discussed about media representation and the role of its surveillance function to conflictual media messages, the importance of the public institutions when communicating in a crisis type of social situation and how the national versus European identity aspect was approached in different studies.

4. Research methodology

Our research goal is to discover the themes and topics of the Coronavirus media representation in Romanian online newspaper during a global pandemic.

Our objectives include the followings:

O1: The evaluation of the theme representation in mass media about Coronavirus in Romanian online articles - National, European, and Global themes;

O2: The assessment of the most mentioned topic in the articles' headlines (Politics, Medicine, Economy etc.);

Q3: The assessment of the most mentioned topic in the articles' images (Politics, Medicine, Economy etc.);

O4: The connection between the headline of an article and the images represented there.

O5: The evaluation of the relation between topics and themes in the articles about Coronavirus.

To show how the media represented the new coronavirus pandemic, we've created a content analysis of three online newspapers in Romania, containing information from the three days before the Romanian lockdown started, in March 2020, days March 13th, March 14th and March 15th. The considered online newspapers are Digi 24, Antena 3 and Evenimentul zilei. We analysed 569 articles in the 3 days mentioned.

The newspapers selected were apparat of the top five most accessed online newspapers as per the Romanian Audience and Internet Traffic Study (https://www.brat.ro/sati). Also, they presented on the website a special Coronavirus section or tag which gathered all articles comprising this subject. To gather the information and analyse the data, we used the SPSS Program- Statistical Package for the Social Sciences. We've included 40 variables both scale and nominal values. We codified all the possible answers and added the code descriptions. The news identification were code, newspaper name, day of the article, name of the article and weblink.

We considered three components of the research: article components, topics of discussion and themes. We had two categories of data, related to the headline of the article, and related to the images in the article. We've divided the articles by topics of discussion, in 10 categories: medicine (medical effects, affected population, statistics and deaths), politics (political conflicts, decisions, changes), economy (jobs, economy, fiscal politics, banks), agriculture (agricultural policy, food reduction and crisis), socio-cultural issues (school system, humanitarian actions), religion, internal affairs (Ministry of Interior, police, law enforcement, fines, schedules of different entities), sports, mobility (public transportation, customs, airline companies, country transitions) and Other topics.

The three main themes we considered when analysing the articles are National themes, European themes, and International themes. The national included solely local topics and issues, the European we considered countries which are part of the Europe Continent. For the international theme we considered non-Romanian and non-European countries, with a worldwide distribution. We also have the combined categories National and European, National, and International, European and International, all themes.

We've tested 30 articles in order to update and confirm the data base, time in which we included the mobility domain, when we spotted the recurrence of the subject. To be mentioned that for consistency considerations we defined our own category streams, at times the newspaper would have a certain article in a different category than us, due to different definitions.

We refer in the article to the Coronavirus concept as all naming including Coronavirus, Covid, Covid19 and SARS-COV 2, having the same meaning in our research.

5. Findings

We will present further the quantitative results we retrieved from the data. We've corelated the three dimensions mentioned above, article components, topics of discussion and themes, how they are represented and interlinked with each other.

5.1. The evaluation of the theme representation in mass media about Coronavirus in Romanian online articles - National, European, and Global themes

The first objective referred to concluding how the themes identified where represented in the headlines and the images of the articles. As per expected, a stronger representation is on the National stream, both categories having the largest percentage on that. The headlines have a bigger representation with 55% of the total articles, whereas the images have a 44% representation on the National There. The European theme is the secondly most mentioned in the headlines and the third in images. Headlines mentioned rank the European theme as the secondly most frequent with 17%, at a short distance with the International theme with 16%.

Figure no. 1. Themes in headlines
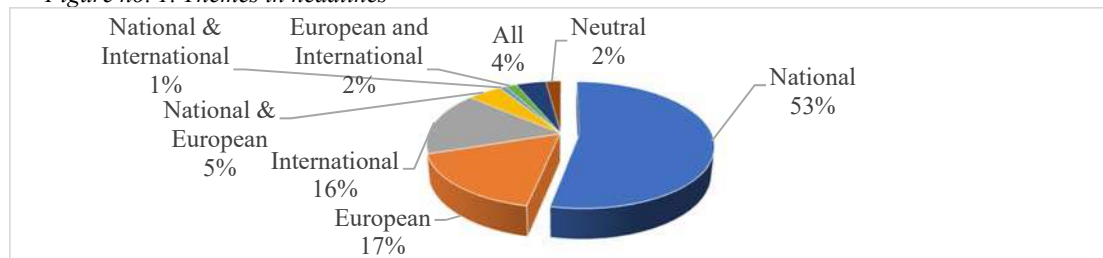
Source: Data analysis from all the articles

Figure no. 2. Themes in images
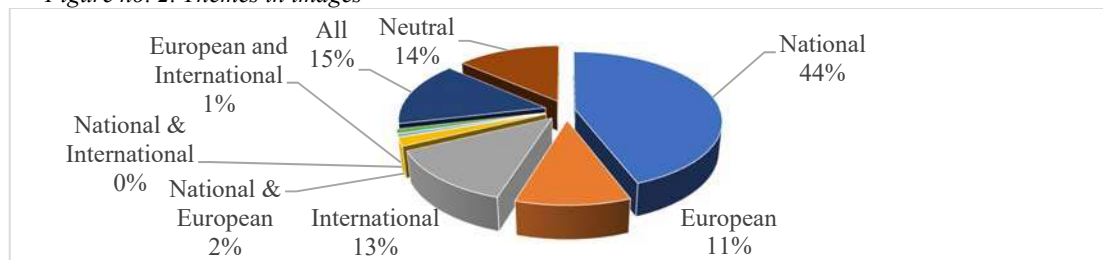
Source: Data analysis from all the articles

Images distribution per themes has different results on second and third places. We observe the "All themes" category ranks second with 15% and the "Neutral" on the third place with 14%. Images have too a short difference between the results of the International and European themes, International has 13% presence, whereas the European a 11% presence.

One explanation would be that images are used and reused for different types of article contents, that is why we can observe a greater number of neutral images as we do headlines. The headlines are meant to be very specific, as to describe better the content of the article, while the images only support the main idea. We can observe images with the coronavirus included on different themes, either if we talk about a local or an international story.

Figure no. 3. Examples of Neutral Images

Sources: https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/actualitate/duminica-au-fost-confirmate-16-cazuri-noi-de-coronavirus-in-romania-bilantul-total-a-ajuns-la-139-1275867 and
https://www.antena3.ro/coronavirus/95-romani-infectati-coronavirus-bebelus-bacau-femeie-dubai-562693.html

Another aspect that we observed was the most common references at international level were at USA, followed by China and at European level, first was Italy, second was Spain and the third was UK.

As a conclusion, we observe that the National theme has the biggest representation within both Images and Headlines streams, with over 40% of the articles. The second places is slightly different because of the increased number of not so explicit images categories where All themes, the headlines being most represented on the European stream. The third place includes International topics for Headlines and Neutral topics for Images.

The assessment of the most mentioned topic in the article's headlines (Politics, Medicine, Economy etc.)

As described in the Methodology section, we segmented the topics approached in the articles' titles and images into 10 main areas of interest, as: medicine, politics, economy, agriculture, socio-cultural issues, religion, internal affairs, sport, mobility, and Other topics. We had a total of 785 mentions in headlines on the selected topics and the Other domains, whereas a lower number of 644 of topics represented in images. The main reason for the increased difference is that the headline is more versatile and complex and gathered usually more than one topic. Only one topic is mentioned in 376 articles, 170 articles gather two of the topics and 23 articles mentioned 3 or more topics in the headline.

As expected, the Medicine ranks first place in the headline domains, as we face a pandemic medical issue and the sickness, recovery and death status of people were a priority subject. If we were to consider a more current time frame, as the Coronavirus pandemic became a top news subject, we estimate that the number of medical mentions would be even more increased. The medicine topic was spread upon all three themes, discussing global news as what China and Eastern countries are handling the crisis, as well as USA and European countries. Topics about the increasing in cases in Romania was a constant subject under this topic. Predictions about how the future will look like, as well as myths and hints of what to do and not to do to stay healthy, discussions about treatments and vaccines.

The secondly, the most mentioned subject in the headlines would be internal affairs, including news about law enforcement preparation, national orders of store schedules, internal decision to face the pandemic issue, the return of isolated Diaspora Romanians, Emergency state request by the parties.

The third most present item in the headlines is Politics, with 119 mentions, including cases of in office persons getting sick with Coronavirus, how the work of politicians was moved to online communication via video-conferencing, politics acts and decision, parties disputes regarding emergency battle plan for national safety and international politics.

The following topics ranked after 4th place were socio-cultural, economy, mobility and transportation, sports, religion, and agriculture, in that order.

Other topics mentioned in the headlines included food, scandals, public figures, media, travel, education related news and myths Covid19 related.

Table no. 1. Topics mentioned in the headlines of the articles

	Medicine	Internal affairs	Other topics	Politics	Socio-cultural	Economy	Mobility	Sport	Religion	Agriculture	Total
Headline	222	138	126	119	67	45	37	20	12	1	787

Source: Data analysis from all the articles

5.2. The assessment of the most mentioned topic in the article's images (Politics, Medicine, Economy etc.)

One of the articles analysed has no images, because it represents an editorial. Out of all, 490 have one topic of discussion, 71 of them have two topic of discussion and only 7 have 3 topics included.

The biggest representation, similar as in the case of the headlines, due to similar reasons, is the topic related to medicine (208), including images of abstracts of how the virus looks, syringes and test tubes, coronavirus tests, lab photos, medicine, medics in the hospital, paramedics in hazmat moving people to the hospital, streets getting sanitized, photos with the places where people get quarantined and people wearing masks. It is shown a strong connection between the headlines about medicine with the images that have the same topic, of 0.619 Pearson correlation, correlation significant statistic. As noted before, the pandemics represents a medical worldwide issue, fact for which both headlines and images go in this direction.

Table no. 2. Topics distribution in the images of the articles

	Medicine	Politics	Other topics	Socio-cultural	Internal affairs	Mobility	Economy	Sport	Religion	Agriculture	Total
Image	208	134	91	62	59	40	26	22	10	1	653

Source: Data analysis from all the articles

The second more present topic in the images found is the Politics domain (134). Almost all images are representing a local or international political image personality, other pictures include photos of conference rooms or voting papers. From the international politicians we can spot Donald Trump, Justin Trudeau, Boris Johnson, and Angela Merkel. The local politicians mentioned are Klaus Iohannis, Romania's president, Ludovic Orban, prime-minister, Dacian Cioloș, Member of the European Parliament since 2019.

Figure no. 4. Klaus Iohannis, Romanian president

Source: https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/actualitate/romania-intra-in-stare-de-urgenta-de-la-inceputul-saptamanii-viitoare-1275543

Figure no. 5. Donald Trump, USA president

Source: https://www.antena3.ro/coronavirus/donald-trump-stare-de-urgenta-statele-unite-ale-americii-coronavirus-562666.html

The third image category is socio-cultural, in 62 articles, including viral videos including public figures, entertainment location closed, as restaurants, malls, amusement parks, social actions, as the image of the Italians singing from their balconies to support each other. Starting 4th place, the next topics include, in order, the following: internal affairs, mobility and transportation, economy, sports, religion and agriculture.

Other domains include public figures pictures, media, travel, and food photos.

Regarding the images categories we discovered, screenshots from the politicians' Facebook or Twitter pages, which are now considered new sources of information for mass media and they are included in the articles, We, then, observe that different type of media blend together in order to offer information to the public, social media is now integrated in mass communication methods.

This connection between social media and mass media happens the other way around as well, as you can share the interested article via your personal social media accounts of the viewers, some publications giving this possibility.

5.3. The connection between the headline of an article and the images represented

We will discuss further the connections between the headlines of the articles and the images presented in the articles' corpus, based on the topics approached in each. We will approach the connection study below based on the most mentioned topics in the images stream.

As mentioned above, regarding the most common category of articles, Medicine, including medical issues, cases, deaths, medical effects of Covid19, there is a significant relation between the titles and the images represented there, founding a Pearson correlation of 0.619. In the research we noted 222 headline articles with Medicine topic and 208 with images in the same domain. Antena 3 had the most representation on the topic with 100 articles and 93 images, following EVZ and Digi 24. The topics and images related included daily status of the cases of infected people and deaths due to the virus, together with paramedics transporting people, hospitals, medics etc. Other category would be information about how the virus affects the physical state of a person or the population, myths and fake symptoms, we can see photos with people with masks and how lungs are affected.

The second most mentioned topic is Politics, including public institutions, political conflicts, parties, political decisions and changes, political games, we found a strong significant connection of 0.690 Pearson correlation. In this case, the higher number is represented by the images with 134, whereas the number of titles is 119. The biggest representation of politics is found in Digi 24 on both categories with 48 mentions in title and 63 images, followed by EVZ and then Antena 3. There are mentioned here news about the state of health of politicians or their families together with their images, how politics join the digital media communication trend, Parliament updates, press statement of political people. The explanation of the differences between images and titles would be that the image portraits the subject of the article text, which is differently represented in the title. The image can be of a politician and the text presented his point of view, whereas the title might say the actual subject.

For example, in the article below the title describes an internal decision of Great Britain, whereas the image portraits its prime minister, you can spot the connection if reading the article. The title is *London is preparing for war-like measures. The elderly will have to spend four months in solitary confinement. (Digi24, March 15th, FL0148).*

Figure no. 6. Article to show image vs headlines inconsistencies

Source: https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/externe/londra-pregateste-masuri-ca-in-vreme-de-razboi-persoanele-in-varsta-vor-trebui-sa-stea-patru-luni-in-izolare-1275637

The third category with most mentions is Internal affairs, we discovered a strong significant connection between articles title and images of 0.514 Pearson Correlation. We can note 138 titles and 59 images, with the biggest representation on Digi 24 with 51 mentions in headline and EVZ with 29 images. This category includes information about emergency state local and International and Internal affairs ministry decisions. The images include either the photo of the person who stated the press release or an image related to a very specific theme.

The socio-cultural category has a medium title versus image connection of 0.597 Pearson correlation. The number of mentions is very close, 62 for images and 67 for headlines, only 41 including both. This topic includes time-passing tips and tricks for lockdown activities, shopping malls and store schedules and amendments, amusement parks and pass-time locations news, jokes and pranks during pandemic, non-medical tips & myths that would prevent people from getting sick.

The fifth category with the most presence in images is mobility. The link between the headline remarks and the images mentioned is with a strong presence of 0.605 Pearson, statistically significant, meaning that the images used in the cases were relevant to the titles. The mobility category included mentions about terrestrial goods transportation and cargo movement during the lockdown, internal urban transportation topics, aerial and railway passenger transportation for work or vacation, as well as country transits and boarder regulations to country entries or exists, all National, European and International.

The following topic is economy, which 0.684 Pearson correlation between headlines and images, statistically valid, including topics as currency modification, credit payment postponement for unemployed or financially challenged people, unemployment and furlough and national economy pandemic impact.

Religion, sport, and agriculture are the least present in images. Even so, we noticed the strongest connections between headlines and images for these three categories, meaning the images selected were best suited for the topic presented in the headline, having the strongest connection on

agriculture, of 1,00 Pearson, due to the fact only one article mentioned this subject, following sports with 0.902 Pearson and then religion with 0.818.

To sum up, the most connected title to image topics were agriculture, sports, and religion, whilst the least ones were Internal affairs, followed by socio-cultural topic. One explanation we may advance would be that the first ones include very specific issues discussed with a limited range of possibilities, while the least are including various sphere of topics, that might use images from different categories. For the internal affairs, we can observe great number of photos from the medical and political range being included, as for the socio-cultural, we can see that multiple photos are from the mobility and the medical range. Overall, all categories have a medium to strong connection in between headlines and images, which show consistency from a text and visual representation perspective.

5.4. The evaluation of the relation between topics and themes in the articles about Coronavirus

We observed a significant correlation between images' themes and headlines' themes, which was a positive one, with 0,428 Pearson coefficient. This can translate to the fact that, most of the times, the theme of the headline was also the theme of the image. We believe that things happened in this way because most of the pictures emphasize the headline and try to draw the audience through the images impact. Excepted from this rule were neutral images, most of the time they represent a graphic draw about SARS-CoV-2, about blood test and about doctors.

National context hosted most of the topics discussed, including medicine, politics, economy, agriculture, socio-cultural problems, religion, and internal issues. We consider that this happened because people are interested in problems which directly affect their lives, health, interests, and their well-being. Politics has the best representation in National context, with 72,3%, followed by Internal affairs with 71% and religion with 50%. The agriculture was present only in National context.

Sports and mobility were discussed especially in European contexts. First topic discussed in European context was sports with 65%, mobility was the second with 24,3% and 21.2% from the European news was about socio-cultural topics. Topics related to sports comprised news about sport competitions, which were cancelled or postponed, like UEFA European championship. The mobility topic was represented through subjects like the difficulties of traveling for holidays, city breaks, business traveling, about postponed events (European music festival, concerts, galas etc.). Mobility also included goods exports and imports flows, which have been affected. Another important subject about mobility was the debate concerning the Brexit and the Romanians that returned to the country because of the governmental decisions of United Kingdom and because of the lack of jobs caused by pandemic context.

The International stream included topics as economy (22.2%), medicine (18,2%) and politics (17,6%). The news referred to the impact of Coronavirus on the global economy, global medical strategies and vaccines, and also political decisions made in China, Russia and in the United States of America.

Table no. 3. The connection between themes and topics (procentual)

Topic / Theme	Medicine	Politics	Economy	Agriculture	Socio-cultural	Religion	Internal	Sports	Mobility	Others
National	49,1%	72,3%	46,7%	100%	42,4%	50%	71%	15%	24,3%	51,6%
European	14,5%	5%	15,6%	0%	21,2%	16,7%	12,3%	65%	32,4%	15,9%
International	18,2%	17,6%	22,2%	0%	19,7%	16,7%	7,2%	15%	8,1%	19%

Source: Data analysis from all the articles

6. Conclusions

Media plays an important role in how people understand different subjects, governmental strategies, decisions about restrictions and plays a very important role in communicating the preventions measures in spreading the disease.

We discovered a strong theme representation in headlines and images on the National stream. Also, we observed that most of the articles had neutral images like coronavirus drawings, different from the topics of the themes.

Regarding the most mentioned topic in the article's headlines, the medicine topic was the main domain represented in Romanian online press. This was a natural consequence of the social context, the priority subject for the pandemical period. The second topic was internal affairs and the third was politics with references to politic acts and decisions in pandemic context. In images, the most represented theme was medicine. The second most represented theme in images was politics. On the third place were internal and socio-cultural themes representation of images. To sum up, the main topic based on number of mentions in articles was medicine, the second one was politics and the third was internal affairs.

In conclusion the National theme was the main theme represented in Romanian online press. On the second place, in terms of headlines was the European theme and in terms of images was International theme.

Some limitations worth mentioning are the repetitiveness of some articles across the three newspapers or reposed in different days, also the possible omission of the articles which were coronavirus related, but the newspapers didn't tag them under this category. As we mentioned in the methodology section, we followed the articles based on the Sections of Coronavirus or the tags applied to the articles within this category. Another limitation would be the short period of time, though it compensates with the increased number of articles included. The results may have suffered changes if a broader period had been analysed and a bigger number of newspapers had been included for better precision of the results.

As future research, our purpose is to reapply the analysis on the current social situation to discover how the media representation evolve within a year. We suggest the same online journals, from the period March 13th, 14th and 15th 2021. Consequently, we would compare the results from this study with the results from the new one, to discover the changes in media representation in the Romanian online press.

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