THE INTERPLAY BETWEEN SOCIAL MOVEMENTS AND MEDIA: FROM CREATIVE WAYS TO GRAB MEDIA ATTENTION TO SPREADING FAKE NEWS

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Abstract: Throughout this study we have attempted to identify how the media approached the protests from the period 2017-2019, protests which showed a massive change for the better concerning Romanian civic engagement and shaped a culture of protest characterized by a highly creative and humorful approach. In order to attract the attention of mass-media and to maximize the impact of their actions, protesters made use of modern communication tools and resorted to intricate choreographies and symbols. Social media played an important role in the organization and promotion of the protests, facilitating the transmission of information and acting like a catalyst of the popular discontent.
Keywords: mass-media, social movement, social media, fake news, partisanship, propaganda.

Media plays a very important role in social protests, because the bigger the coverage the protests get, the better the chances are that the demands reach a large number of supporters and, eventually, manage to influence political decisions. "Mass-media coverage influences the nature, form, and development of social movements, as well as the ability of these movements to reach their goals"[1]. Thus, protesters will always resort to new means of attracting the interest of mass-media. The strategies used in these cases can be extremely diverse, ranging from violent actions to creative and surprising methods or finding public figures, with great visibility, to support their cause: "The interplay between social movements and the mass media results in a dialectic of escalation in which dissidents feel pressed to amp up their tactics. Escalation is both a reaction to the ability of social movement opponents to adapt to previous tactics as well as the result of the mass media's unquenchable penchant for novelty"[2].

Drawing the Media's Attention

Present-day protests "include large public rallies and marches, occupation of symbolic or strategic sites,

provocative verbal and visual rhetoric, and more mainstream lobbying and electioneering. But every group seeks creative variations of these basic tactics"[3]. For example, the #rezist protests from 2017 managed to attract an impressive number of participants, in a colossal show with choreography, props, lights, a script and high-quality visuals[4]. Although the protests went on to late hours of the night, in a very cold period of the year, with temperatures below zero, snowfalls and even blizzards sometimes, hundreds of thousands of people who protested outside, discovered new "ways to perform their political and social desires"[5]. Because "performance involves the suspension of other forms of direct communication and relies on symbolic and ephemeral gestures to create an impact"[6], the fact that the commentators were using this word to describe the setup and the choreography, the protesters came up with, is not random. The demonstrators have used new means of political expression, they have created memorable moments that have stayed alive in the public conscience, long after the street ceased to shout out its grievances.

The most broadcast moments, organized by the protesters, took place in the evenings, usually in the interval between 9 and 10 p.m. and involved a peaceful manifestation of complaints, that brought about a vast public support and a positive reflection through media.

The moments that became emblematic for these protests were the simultaneous turning on of the mobile phone flashlights at 9 p.m. and singing the national anthem (February 5, 2017), creating a giant national flag (February 12, 2017) and the European Union flag (February 26, 2017) by simultaneously turning on flashlights and holding colored pieces of paper over them. These memorable images became viral and endowed the protests with a very special splendor. These elaborate choreographies have been orchestrated through social media "each protester knew from Facebook where they needed to stand (and were even advised about an app – Flashlight – they could download which would enable their smartphone screens to display a particular color)"[7].

Choosing the location for protests can be also considered a tactic. Prior to 2017, when people wanted to protest in Bucharest, they went to University Square, the Ground Zero of freedom, "which became established as an almost hallowed site of protest"[8]. For the anti-corruption protests that took place between 2017 and 2019, also known as the #rezist protests, the protesters refrained from using the "ceremonial space" represented by University Square and chose Victoria Square, the square outside Government headquarters, that has thus transformed into a "civic place of direct confrontation with the Power"[9]. Protesters did not use University Square because, in spite of its significant, symbolic importance, it has a narrow and irregular shape. Instead, they chose a much more giving space, that could offer them greater visibility and a stronger impact. Choosing this location can be also interpreted as the protestors´ wish to stand face to face with the cause of their discontent, because "their protest was directly against the government and to have maximum effect it needed to take place in front of the government's headquarters"[10], as well as their intention to get a better media coverage of their actions, creating memorable images that became viral through new media.

Mainstream Media: from Partisanship to Propaganda

The national as well as international media have extensively covered the anti-corruption protests. Romania had a great media coverage in international press with Reuters, AFP, Associated Press, BBC, Euronews, CNN, Deutsche Welle, Le Monde, The New York Times, Washington Post etc. reporting about the protests. Moreover, some commentators pointed out a change in the way Romania was perceived overseas "and many believe the powerful #rezist imagery is responsible for this. The glow of protesters' flashlights in the darkness is like a call for attention right before the rest of the world goes to sleep"[11]. If the international media had predominantly positive comments about the events, regarding the protests as an example of solidarity in the fight against corruption, the national media took on partisan positions.

In the beginning, the majority of the national press institutions ignored the protests. Eventually, as the protests expanded, some media institutions choose to openly criticise the protests and the protesters, while others were highly appreciative. At first, most of the national media outlets ignored the protests but eventually, after they reached a greater magnitude and intensity, the media covered them differently. The mediatic approach was very subjective and biased, as the press chose to openly partisan either against the protesters or clearly supporting them. The fact that important press outlets chose a biased position, as Boykoff explains, is due to the norms and values that guide the activity of journalists: the preference for dramatic situations, but also because tribulations, misfortunes and individual victories are important in news production[12]. In addition, we have fragmentation norms, that take news out of context and the tendency reporters have, to mostly rely on the authorities as sources of information. These norms and values that shape the production of journalistic news are interrelated and, when put into practice, result in biased coverage.

Assuming an editorial line reflects in the selection of covered subjects, the used tone and the perspective from which the subject is approached but should not lead to ethical slippages. But when the editorial line is biased, we no longer speak of a slippage, but of an assumed direction. Some press outlets, like TV stations Digi24,

Realitatea TV or PRO TV supported the protesters and focused on the people in the streets, on the voices of the protesters explaining why they were outside, using drone filmed footage to show the magnitude of the protests. Government aligned-media, however, like TV stations Antena 3 and Romania TV, the newspaper "Jurnalul National" or the news site DC News, tried to discredit the protests by categorizing them as an attempted coup d'état and shed an unfavorable light on the protesters, accusing them of being a menace to national security or of being paid to protest. When filming the protesters, these media outlets made use of close-ups, in order to show that the protests are smaller than expected.

The Motivational Role of Social Media

Social media played a significant role in the organization and promotion of the protests, facilitating the transmission of information and acting like a catalyst of the popular discontent towards the legislative initiative of the government. With the protests in Romania, social media had a motivational role. "In order to get people on the streets both processes are needed: part of the population should not only be convinced of the rightness of the objectives of the action but should also be encouraged to take action"[13]. In Romania, the most relevant social media tools are Facebook and blogs. Facebook is, by far, Romanians favorite social media outlet, with 11 million registered users in December 2019, according to zelist.ro. The protesters, mostly young people, have used social media intensively. Images and messages from the protests, that have become viral, have confirmed once again the effectiveness of social media in social mobilization. Aside from the incontestable role that social media played in the quick mobilization of a large number of people, it also facilitated a "collective brainstorming" that involved art professionals, as well as the "corporate creatives"[14]. Social media played an extremely important role in the geographical diffusion of protests: "It is, however, generally accepted that the mass media are an outstanding means for the geographical diffusion of protest. Through the news coverage actions become visible and can be copied. The media are responsible for a contamination from a distance"[15]. Intense media coverage of the protests through social media increased the number of protestants from one day to the next and the protests spread in different cities in the country and abroad. The Facebook page #Rezist Diaspora mentions the name of 81 cities from 36 countries in which the Romanians protested against the corruption in Romania.

Among the 81 cities we noted some that host large Romanian communities, like Barcelona, Madrid, München, Hamburg, Rome, Paris, London, but solidarity demonstrations from Addis Ababa, French Guiana, Yokohama or even the Antarctic were truly surprising.

Despite the undisputed advantages regarding the dissemination of information and the catalyzing of reactions, social media cannot undermine the beneficial position held by traditional media, as the latter enjoys a greater influence and is capable of providing a greater visibility to social movements. The protesters "understood that social media is not enough, and that live and extensive TV coverage of the protests can easily multiply the number of protesters"[16]. According to a study carried out by IRES on March 6-8, 2017 with 980 people, 78% of the protesters used television and Facebook to inform themselves about the protests. The protesters' favourite TV station was Digi24 (51%), followed by Realitatea TV (15%) and PRO TV (9,5%). 37% of the protestants used online platforms in order to obtain information. Facebook has been used by 75% of the Romanians to communicate about the protest. Other communication tools, used by the Romanians, were mobile phones (76%) and WhatsApp (36%)[17].

The "Fake News" Phenomenon

Confronted with the large number of protesters in the streets, the ruling party tried to counterattack, claiming that these protests were not spontaneous and that behind them lay occult interests, thus making them illegitimate. Among the strategies used "to discredit the protesters, their intentions and the good faith thereof"[18] was also resorting to fake news. Recent studies draw attention to the restrictive and inappropriate meaning in which the term "fake news" is commonly used[19], so we specify that we understand by these not only truthless or false texts, but text deliberately designed to mislead the public[20].

According to Bararos, the recipients of the fake news were not the protesters, but the people who did not participate in protests[21], in other words the PSD supporters and voters, as well as people from social categories that were too difficult to mobilise for the support of civic causes, like senior citizens or people from rural areas etc. These people had to be convinced that the protests did not have the magnitude they pretended to have and that they were orchestrated by occult forces from outside the country, fighting against the national interest. The first attempt to discredit the protests was based on the claim that the protesters received payments from the American billionaire George Soros. Thousands of statements have been made, thousands of on-air hours at government-affiliated TV stations were broadcasted and there were thousands of Facebook posts supporting this claim, however no evidence whatsoever was provided, to back up this claim. The information emerged for the first time at a TV station (RomaniaTV), when the talk show host of the show Romania 60, Denisa Pascu, claimed that, according to some sources, the protesters have received money from an NGO belonging to the billionaire George Soros.

Without indicating the source of this information, the talk show host further stated, with great precision, the amounts of money the protesters received: "Each adult received 100 Lei, the children and young people received 50 Lei and those accompanied by dogs received a 30 Lei bonus". This information was immediately picked up by the PSD-affiliated media, like the TV station Antena 3 and the news site DC News. The protesters countered this piece of fake news through "a very Romanian, intelligent and sharp humour"[22] and, starting with the next day, brought pets and new slogans that made fun of the insinuation about the money from Soros: "Soros, if you see this, still haven't got the money", "30 Lei for a dog, 50 Lei for a child, 150 Lei for a bear, 500 Lei for a giraffe" or "500 Lei for a unicorn".

This first attempt with Soros and the paid pets' participation failed lamentably and those who supported this claim were ridiculed. After this failure, the representatives of the executive political party concentrated on two lines of attack: involvement of multinational companies and making the public aware of the possible danger of a Romania destroyed by the divisive protests, as it was the case in the Ukraine[23]. The attack on the multinationals started in the first days of protest and were initiated by no other than the president of the ruling party (PSD). The evidence presented by the PSD representatives was based on three pieces of fake news[24]. The first fake news piece emerged on the site of a weekly financial paper, Capital.ro and read "Big companies force their employees to protest against Dragnea and Trump". The next day, this piece of news was declared fake and deleted from the site, as it did not agree with the principles and objectives the journalists behind this publication stood for: a correct information of the public, the checking of all sources and publishing the point-of-view of all concerned parties. The Capital.ro journalists then presented their apologies for the unfortunate misleading of the public[25]. This particular news was however picked up by the government-affiliated media, with TV stations RomaniaTV and Antena 3 intensively promoting the idea that the multinationals were giving their employees days off from work, thus enabling them to attend the protests.

The second fake news article was written by a well-known Romanian journalist, Dan Andronic, and posted on a site with the same name (danandronic.net). The article carried the title "Romanians must know the truth! Here's why the multinationals dragged their employees out on the streets" and gave the impression that it would reveal the secret behind the protests[26]. The journalist, however, denied on Facebook ever having written this article and that the ideas in it belonged to him. Moreover, he showed that said site did not belong to him, but to an advertising agency that had acquired several online domains, carrying the names of well-known journalists[27].

The third article, entitled "Riot at Yazaki! Employees are forced to protest against the Government", was published in the local press, in the online paper PH-online[28]. The anonymous article was based on anonymous sources, claiming that the employees of this company were forced to protest against the Government by threatening them with salary penalties or even discharge. The Yazaki company, an automotive components manufacturer, refuted these claims on its official Facebook page, considering them to be "unfounded and disparaging", stating that they respect the opinions and beliefs of their employees without trying to influence them in any way.

As it can be observed, the scenario in these cases was the following: the information emerged at first published by three (obscure) online papers, then it was picked up by the mainstream media, citing them without verifying the sources for credibility and launching ample debates around these pieces of fake news. PSD politicians would later incorporate these pieces of information in their public speeches, relying on the press articles as proof.

Conclusions

Until 2012, protest movements in Romania were reduced to a few hundred participants who took to the streets, most of the times under orders, in order to represent individual demands like salary increase or better work conditions. However, in recent years, the protest has radically changed, as Romanians have learned about the participatory civic duty, thus organising ample movements for causes that do not affect them individually, but with the purpose of defending common principles and values.

Young people who participate at anti-corruption protests from 2017-2019 demonstrated that they fully understand the mechanism of a functioning rule of law but also the necessity "to invest in their civic education, because information is a weapon that can quickly be loaded and fired into social media"[29]. In order to attract the attention of mass-media and to maximize the impact of their actions, protesters made use of modern communication tools and resorted to intricate choreographies and symbols. Social media played an important role in the organization and promotion of the protests, facilitating the transmission of information and acting like a catalyst of the popular discontent.

The intense media coverage of the protests, in the national as well as international press, brought about the support of EU officials, who were concerned by the actions of the Government, but also global attention, as many considered the peaceful and creative character of these protests to be a source of inspiration.

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5. Paun, "Romanian Protests".

6. Paun, "Romanian Protests".

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8. Ciobanu and Light, "A New Geography", 63.

9. Vintila Mihailescu, "Zgomotul si Vocea. Cine sunteti Voi sa treceti peste Noi?", in *#Rezist: proteste impotriva OUG 13/2017* (Bucuresti: Curtea Veche Publishing, 2017), 14.

10. Ciobanu and Light, "A New Geography", 64.

11. Paun, "Romanian Protests".

12. Boykoff, "Framing Dissent", 205.

13. Stefaan Walgrave and Jan Manssens, "The Making of The White March: The Mass Media as a Mobilizing Alternative to Movement Organizations", *Mobilization: An International Quarterly*. Vol. 5, No. 2 (2000): 217-239.

14. Mihailescu, "Zgomotul si Vocea", 16.

15. Walgrave and Manssens, "The Making of The White March".

16. Cosmin Pojoranu, "The Unexpected Romanians: Fighting Civic Apathy with Civic Energy", in *#rezist – Romania's 2017 anti-corruption protests: causes, development and implications*, ed. Ana Adi and Darren G. Lilleker (Berlin: Quadriga University of Applied Sciences, 2017), 47.

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21. Barbaros, "Fake News Claims", 73-74.

22. Stela Giurgeanu, "Demonstratiile din Romania au dus cultura protestului la alt nivel" - interviu cu jurnalistul Nicolas Don, *Dilema veche*. no. 678/16-22 February 2017. Online: https://dilemaveche.ro/sectiune/societate/articol/demonstratiile-din-romania-au-dus-cultura-protestului-la-alt-nivel-interviu-cu-jurnalistul-nicolas-don%20. Accessed February 2021.

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