



ORIGINAL PAPER

Framing International Protests on Romanian News Portals

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Abstract

This Article outlines some of the contemporary approaches of the framing theory and argues on the fact that media usually conveys the protests as violent. Within the protest framing context by different media, the Article investigates how one mainstream Romanian news website (hotnews.ro) framed – both in terms of text and images – four different protest occasions: the Egyptian protests that took place in Tahrir square in Cairo, the protests that took place in Taksim square in Istanbul, the Indignants movement that took place in different countries, and the Indignants movement that led to Occupy Wall Street movement. The challenging question of the present study is: what kind of representations is mostly raised by the mainstream Romanian news websites with regard to international protests? The goal of the study is to go beyond the surface and underline the mechanics of media coverage of contemporary protests.

Keywords: social movements, news portals, online engagement, media coverage

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Framing International Protests on Romanian News Portals

Introduction

Computer mediated communication is a kind of communication that allows individuals to interact with each other through electronic devices. This type of communication is an alternative communication to face to face communication. Currently, the extended use of Internet, social network sites, podcasting, text messaging and Web logging (Kelsey and Amant, 2008) have led to their outstanding popularity. First and foremost, the Internet ensures the freedom of expression and free access to information, two fundamental conditions for a strong and healthy democracy. The Internet has become an important component of the existing relationship between politics, civil society and the individual. Taking into consideration the actual trends, Ingelhart (1997) believes that in the last decades we have witnessed an increase of the potential for people gathering in associations or civic movements compared to similar political actions. Other considerable studies demonstrate that the continuous use of the Internet in the civic scheme has led to the increase of the civic engagement, has stimulated the participation to important political events and has led to various social movements all around the world (Kahn and Kellner, 2003; Rasanen and Kouvo, 2007; Shah, Kwak and Holbert, 2001; Wellman, 2001). The new technologies of communication have become both channels of interaction between citizens, between citizens and the government, as well as means of active participation.

When it comes to the impact of the Internet on the political, there are two opposite theoretical flows. The first incorporates the views of the so-called “cyber-optimists” who favour the hypothesis according to which the new information technologies will transform the entire political system, making the direct, participatory and deliberative democracy possible (Morris, 1999; Grossman, 1996; Toffler and Toffler, 1995; Rheingold, 1993; Rheingold, 2002). Similar optimistic predictions have also appeared in France. Thus, according to Crouzet (2007), the Internet, because it allows social networking and the dissemination of information, could subsidise in time to the decline of what we call “mainstream media” and the emergence of a new power, the fifth power in the State, not unaptly called “people in touch” (Crouzet, 2007).

On the other hand, according to the already mentioned theories, the use of new communication technologies enables governments to constantly identify those citizens who wish to engage in the political life; the democratic deficit being a contemporary problematic issue for all the EU countries and especially for those societies where democracy is immature or suffers severe limitations (Lynch, 2003; Yu, 2004). Several scholars summons us about the dangers brought by the development of the new communication technologies in relation to democracy, civic engagement and freedom (Wilhelm, 2000; Wilhelm, 2004; Streck, 1998; Sunstein, 2001).

These two contemporary approaches used to explain the political impact of the use of the new communication technologies, known as “the thesis of engagement” or “the thesis of corroboration” were widely discussed and are still dominating the current literature (Foot and Schneider, 2002; Norris, 2000). The online engagement alone is able to amplify the traditional political participation, if we take into consideration that some of the costs that are associated to it are low enough if compared to the off-line participation (Brady, 1995; Verba, 1995). Therefore the individuals are being encouraged to participate to the online political process, increasing the diversity of the current social and political behaviours. However, Peter Dahlgren (2005) notes that, in spite of this undergoing process, the online political interactions (like democratic deliberation) still remain minimal compared to other internet uses such as consumerism, entertainment, chatting and non-political networking. Dahlgren (2005) states that: “the Internet has not made

much of a difference in the ideological political landscape, it has not helped mobilize more citizens to participate, nor has it altered the ways that politics gets done (Dahlgren, 2005: 154).

In the present article we seek to examine the representations of protests on news web pages in Romania (www.hotnews.ro), analysing which particular cases attract the journalistic interest and in what sense. The present research relies theoretically on the framing analysis approach, having as purpose to investigate how do online news media in the above mentioned country present the contemporary protests and social movements.

The contemporary economic crisis has had impact on almost all the people regardless of their occupation. The austerity measures often led to major public strikes all around the world (Mitu, 2011). In the past several years the word crisis has become a constant of our discourse. As a matter of fact, the recent economic crisis has affected each and every European country, the efficiency of the political system have influenced their political response and differs on each country based on their own political and media system. Economy is an important key to comprehend social behaviours, but as Marcel Merle stated, it would be a mistake to explain the current issues of the European Union (more Europe- less Europe), as problems caused only by the economic crisis. Lately, upon the introduction of austerity measures in many European countries and the unfolding of a multifarious crisis- social, political, and economic- we also witness an unprecedented wave of riots, protests, as well as the formation of new social movements. As noted in one of my previous studies, social movements began to exercise a special attraction for the specialists in social sciences in the last century. Since then scholars and students with different backgrounds have shifted their academic focus to the emergence of social movements. Along the years various theorists have tended to define and redefine social movements. The wide-ranging definitions and typologies of social movements that currently exist complicate the possibility to offer one single definition for this concept (Mitu, 2011). Manuel Castells (2003), defines social movements as “collective initiatives whose impact, in victory and defeat, transform society’s values and institutions” (2003: 31). Another scholar, Herbert Blumer (1993), states that social movements “can be viewed as collective enterprises to establish a new order of life. They have their inception in the condition of unrest, and derive their motive power on one hand from dissatisfaction with the current form of life, and on the other hand, from wishes and hopes for a new scheme or system of living” (Blumer, 1993: 199). Also Doug McAdam (1982) claims that social movements are “those organized efforts, on the part of excluded groups, to promote or resist changes in the structure of society that involve recourse to non-institutional forms of political participation” (McAdam, 1982: 25). Moreover, Sydney Tarrow (1994) offers a different view by stating that “rather than seeing social movements as expressions of extremism, violence, and deprivation, they are better defined as collective changes, based on common purposes and social solidarities, in sustained interaction with elites, opponents and authorities” (Tarrow, 1994: 4).

In Romania the Communist release was followed by the still unfinished transition period towards what everyone hopes to be democracy (Mitu, 2011). Having been used excessively during the last 23 years, this term – transition period – entails the switching of a society from the communist system to the capitalist one. Jean Francois Revel shows that „it is not enough for a post-communist nation to set itself free from the communist regime in order to get rid of communism; it also has to set itself free from the consequences of the communism” (Revel, 1993: 137). In Romania, as soon as they gained the power, the communists have destroyed the civil society, manipulating and indoctrinating the rest

Framing International Protests on Romanian News Portals

of the population, which was reduced to the mass state. The Communist regime was not accepting any form of free, uncontrolled association of the citizens. The lack of a long practiced civic spirit had deprived Romania of the only possible form of organized opposition, since the political and cultural elites were eliminated. The Romanian Post-communism is hard to describe. Romania as an ex-communist country strives to find its way to the capitalistic economic growth. This path is not at all easy, since this country has suffered some serious social turmoil too, due to austerity policies implemented by the democrat-liberal government in 2012. In Romania, as everywhere, the internet no longer acts only as a communication tool. The functionality of the internet ushered in the freedom of expression and freedom of the press (Stevenson, 2003). As in other EU countries, in Romania the internet use went beyond a common tool of communication to become an active and important political tool (Ferdinand, 2000). During the last decades, the Romanian society has known some important transformations, due to the emergence and development of the new information and communication technologies. For a long time after 1989, the Internet used to be an unknown term for most of Romanian people. The Internet began to be used in the '90, but not all Romanians had access to the Internet. Officially, Romania became connected to the Internet on the 26th of February 1993. That was the moment when the “.ro” domain was created, a domain that was internationally recognized by the Internet Assignment Numbers Authority. The Romanian Association of the Internet Service Providers became functional on the same date of Romania's connection to the Internet.

Today the Internet is used both in the urban areas and in the rural areas. The power of this digital medium is represented by its ability to integrate various media. During the '90s the development of the Internet in Romania had occurred very slowly, as the state's investments in this area were almost nonexistent. Although many projects aiming at the development of the informational sector were drafted, those projects were never achieved. Even if until 2001 the state's investments in the area of information technology were low, this was the time when the basis of the private IT sector was created, through the emergence of companies like SIVECO, SOFTWIN, SOFTNET etc. After 2001, the number of the Romanian Internet users has grown substantially. But there still is an inequality in terms of the Internet access. The total liberalization of the information and communication technologies in Romania starts to take place in 2003. The evolution of the number of users has known a timid growth during 1998- 2003 and a fast growth during 2003-2008 and is still growing.

Hypotheses

The notion of frame analysis has become a controversial issue of considerable debate and constant disagreement. The framing theory is central in the communication of collective action (Snow et al. 1986; Benford and Snow, 2000). Goffman was the first scholar who outlined the idea of framing in a media message. Goffman's frame analysis (1974) has generated much controversy, particularly when it comes to the influences of frames. Goffman's critics (Gonos, 1977; Sharron, 1981; Denzin and Keller, 1981) underline the static nature of the frame analysis, including feelings and also personal and interpersonal histories. Gitlin (1980) believes that frames are “principles of selection, emphasis and presentation composed of little tacit theories about what exists, what happens, and what matters” (Gitlin, 1980: 6). While Entman in his works acknowledges that “to frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition,

casual interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation” (Entman, 1993: 52). Gamson and Modigliani (1987) consider that frame is “a central organizing idea or story line that provides meaning to an unfolding strip of events weaving a connection among them. The frame suggests what the controversy is about, the essence of the issue” (Gamson and Modigliani, 1987: 143). Other scholars, like Chong and Druckman (2007) or Scheufele (1999), believe that the term “frame” is generally used in two general-accepted ways: a. frame in communication or the media frame- refers to words, images, phrases, and presentation styles that a speaker (e.g. a politician, a media outlet) uses when relaying information about an issue or event to an audience (Gamson and Modigliani, 1987, 1989). The chosen frame reveals what the speaker sees as relevant to the topic at hand (Chong and Druckman, 2007: 100); b. frame in thought or the individual frame – this frame refers to an individual’s cognitive understanding of a given situation (Goffman, 1974). Unlike frames in communication, which reflect a speaker’s emphasis, frames in thought refer to what an audience member believes to be the most salient aspect of an issue (Chong and Druckman, 2007: 100).

In short, frames guide people’s perception and representation of reality. Bertram Scheufele (2006) suggests that “ a frame can be looked at in three ways: (1) as a cognitive complex of issue-related schemata for different aspects of reality; (2) established in public, political or inter-media discourse; and (3) becoming manifest as a textual structure of messages such as press releases or newspaper Articles” (Scheufele, 2006: 66).

When it comes to social movements, Koopmans (2004: 25-26) argues that the mass media play a crucial (though understudied) role in the diffusion of protest in contemporary democracies. Gamson and Wolfsfeld (1993) suggest that media can serve social movements in three ways: a) mobilization of political support; b) legitimization (or validation) in the mainstream discourse, and c) to broaden the scope of conflicts. Many times the media coverage of social movements follows a specific strategy, which involves downgrading the aims and the dynamic of the protest and portraying them as a threat to the national good or international economy (Harlow and Johnson, 2011), emphasis on protesters’ violent actions; downgrading and delegitimation of the aims and reasons of the manifestation. Mainstream media often discredit and marginalize protest actions, with journalists relying on a Chan and Lee’s “protest paradigm” (1984) that focuses on tactics, spectacles, and dramatic actions, rather than the underlying the reasons and purpose of the protest (Chan and Lee, 1984; Gitlin, 1980). At the same time, protesters need to rely on the media if they want to reach the public and policy makers (Rucht, 1991). Chan and Lee (1984) protest paradigm shows that media tends to: support of the status quo and marginalization of groups that may challenge it; portray the protesters as an isolated minority characterized by overt deviant behaviour; ignore social movements that challenge governments’ policies. Some examples of negative media coverage through negative framing are: the press and television coverage of a mass demonstration against the Vietnam War in London (27th of October 1968); the U.S. mainstream newspapers’ coverage of social protests in the United States between 1967 and 2007; the national television coverage of Orange Revolution in Ukraine (2005); the coverage of the protests against the US invasion in Iraq (2003); the US media coverage of women’s movement in the United States from 1966 to 1986; the media coverage of the World Trade Organization protests in Seattle (1999) and the World Bank/ IMF protests in Washington, DC (2000). However, there are exceptions of media supporting collective actions, such as Georgia’s non-mainstream media who challenged the legitimacy of authoritarian government led by President Eduard Shevardnadze (Sulkanishvili, 2003) and the Serbian non-mainstream

Framing International Protests on Romanian News Portals

media (particularly Radio B 92) who supported the street protest and facilitated the regime change (Barker, 2008). Lately, people all around the world, have turned to online media and use social network websites like Facebook and Twitter to mobilize pro-democracy protests and start revolutions, illustrating how the Internet has become a key alternative media tool for activism (Kenix, 2009) and that is what led Harlow and Johnson (2011) to state that new media are creating a new protest paradigm.

Snow, Rochford, Worden and Benford (1986) consider framing very important when analysing protests because it helps to determine whether a movement will mobilize and how successful a protest action will be. Previous studies have shown that media coverage of social movements tended to frame various protest activities in negative ways. Within the protest framing context, the current research focuses on how one mainstream Romanian news site (hotnews.ro) framed- both in terms of text and images- four different international protest occasions: the Egyptian protests that took place in Tahrir square in Cairo, the protests that took place in Taksim square in Istanbul, the Indignants movement that took place in different countries and the Occupy Wall Street movements. The hypotheses of the present study are: 1. Given the fact that we examine mainstream media, we expect – according to critical protest theory – a rather negative overall representation of the movements the current research focuses on, mainly by the focus on violence caused by the protesters, both in terms of discourse and image, either still or motion; 2. Given the mainstream character of the examined media, we also expect the official sources to be the main sources of information regarding the protests; 3. Apart from the above, we expect the framing of the protests as illegal by the mainstream media; 4. Within the financial crisis context, we expect that media will also focus on the economic consequences of the protests, mainly in a negative way; 5. Another way of presenting the protests in a negative way is through downsizing the protest, i.e. through the reference to the size of the protest in a negative way.

Method

The research methodology used for the goals of the current research is quantitative content analysis, which was conducted with the use of a coding protocol. The data for the analysis were gathered from one news website (www.hotnews.ro). The specific news site was selected due to the fact that it is considered to be among the most popular one in Romania in terms of number of visits, hence it constitutes significant possible influencers of the public opinion on issues of public interest like protests, political, social or economic issues.

The selection of the Articles was made through research adapted to the peculiarities of the search engines and the archives of the different web pages that I examined. The keywords used for the site's search engine were "Taksim square", "Tahrir square", "Indignants" and "Occupy Wall Street", choosing afterwards the most relevant Articles to each protest.

The selection of the Articles was conducted mainly based on qualitative rather than quantitative criteria, due to the restrictions of the archives and the relevant search engines of the website. As far as protests are concerned, the media strategy has always rested on three basic pillars: obscuring, de-legitimization and assimilation of the protests. In a previous work I was arguing that the implementation of each one of these tactics depends on the phase that the movement is in. Usually, in its beginning stages the movement is ignored and goes unnoticed by the journalists.

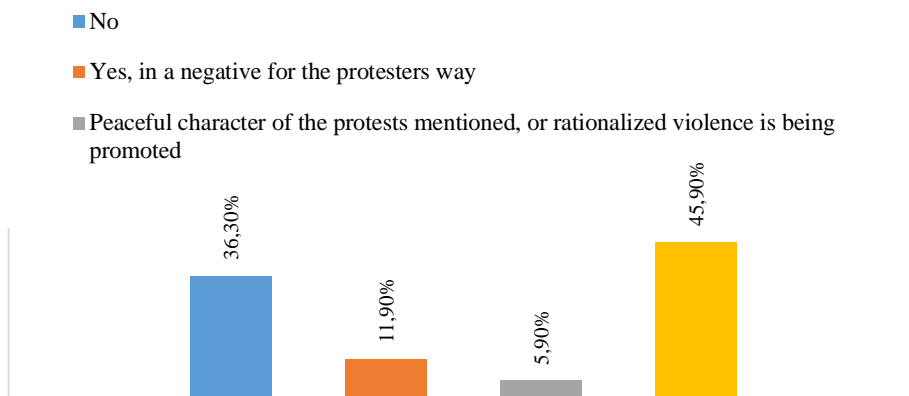
The media ignores it, arguing that it is not a legitimate movement, it lacks social relevance, it is not an official protest, their leaders are not officially recognized or authorized by the government, or it represents a threaten to the common good (Mitu, 2011). The sampling rationale chosen for this particular Article serves the goals of the current research, since the most relevant Articles are in most cases the ones published during the days each protest is taking place, providing an as extensive as possible report on the facts as they occur.

The coding unit was the Article. The Article has been used frequently as a coding unit by many communication researchers on social movements and protests (Dardis, 2006; Armstrong and Boyle, 2011; Xu, 2013), and this method can be more efficient in capturing the content and themes of the overall coverage. Articles were coded for the presence for or against the protesters, or absence of several frames (conflict, violence, downgrading, economic consequences, illegal character, human interest, devaluation of causes and aims, marginalization).

Results

The results show that when it comes to the coverage of protests media seems to be against violence. When we examined the focus on violence (in a negative way)- our data showed that we could partially accept our first research hypothesis, meaning that we found a rather negative overall representation of the examined movements mainly by the focus on violence caused by the protesters. The Articles we examined did focus on violence- especially through their discourse or pictures, but not in a negative sense for the protesters (Chart 1 and 2).

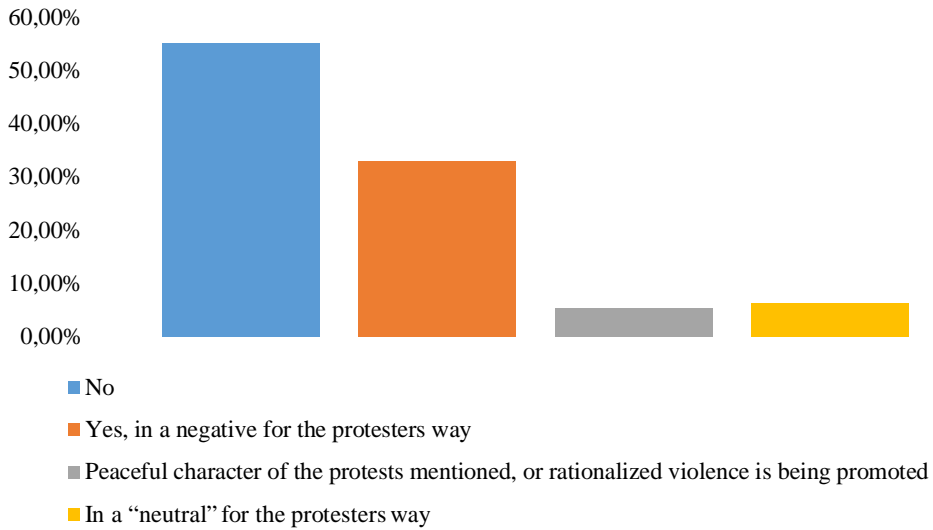
Chart 1. Violent acts in discourse



According to Chart 1, hotnews.ro (45.9%) focuses on issues of violence related to the protests through their discourse but in a neutral way for the protesters, whereas Chart 2 shows that 55.3% of the Articles did not depict violence in photos or videos, which creates a contradiction between text and images/videos.

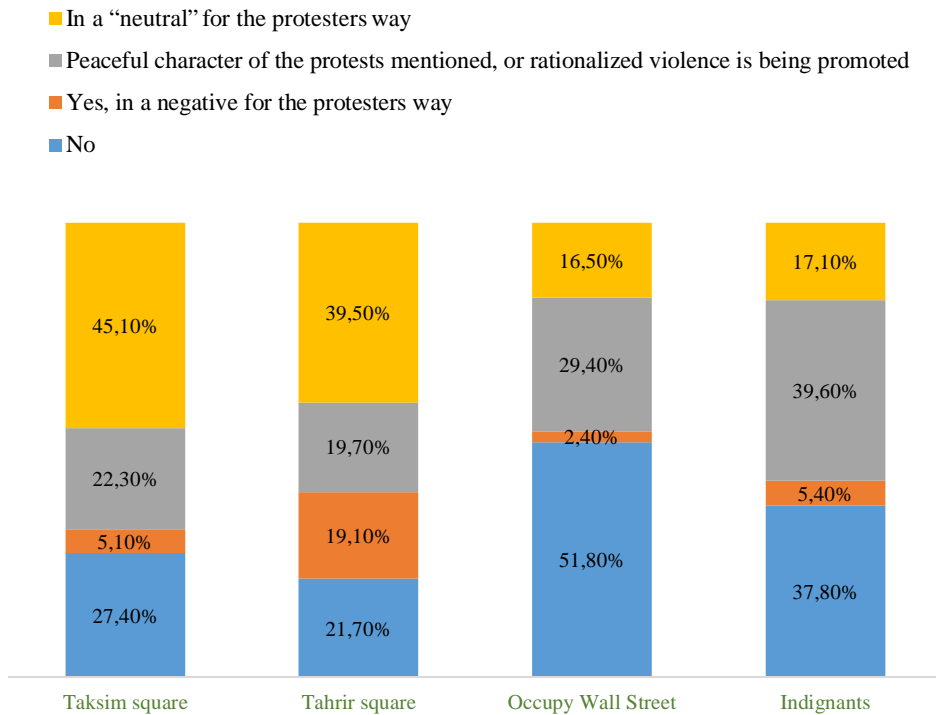
Framing International Protests on Romanian News Portals

Chart 2. Violent acts in photo/ video



It is also interesting to see how hotnews.ro focuses on issues of violence for each analysed protest in Chart 3.

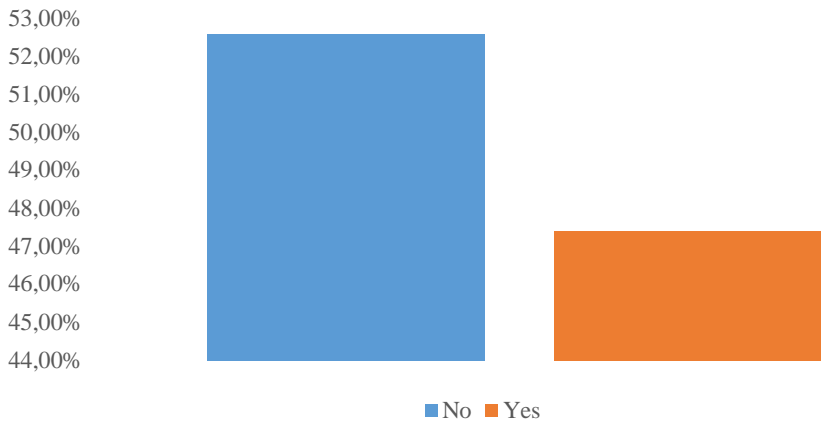
Chart 3: Violent acts in discourse for each protest



As far as the depiction – either through photos or through videos – of violence is concerned, through images and videos, one could again notice a lack of focus on violence of hotnews.ro. Despite that the majority of the Articles (55.3%) do not focus on violence, the Articles containing images or videos depicting violence show it mostly in a negative frame for the protests way (33%). The second research hypothesis – the use of official non-journalistic sources (governments, police etc.) in the majority of cases regarding the reports from the protests – hotnews.ro, do not seem to rely on official sources and that is lately a common practice for the journalists in Romania. According to Chart 4, hotnews.ro mentions official sources in the majority of the Articles (52.6%).

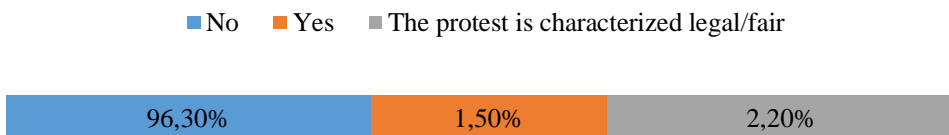
The inclusion of official sources in the reports has to do with the presentation of views of the officials on the protests, which in most cases are negative, since the protesters in most cases are against the political or economic elites.

Chart 4. Use of official sources



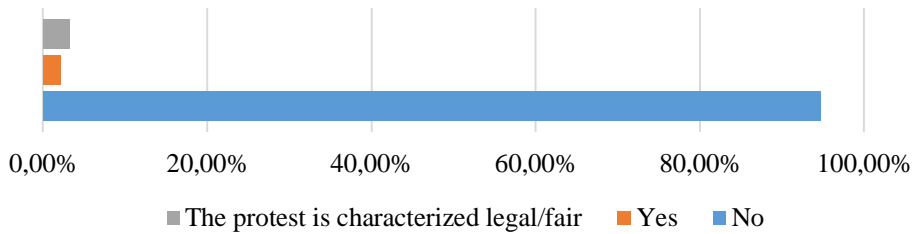
The mainstream news website hotnews.ro avoids considering the analysed protests as illegal. Still, on the other hand, they also avoid characterizing them as legal/fair, since this option received very low percentages too. Accordingly, we reject our third research hypothesis that stated that we expect the mainstream media to frame the protests as illegal (Chart 5 and 6), especially in a post-communist country as Romania where people’s mentality towards protests is still narrow. The Romanian people are still afraid to protest on things that concern them or their country although they agree with others who do so and admire other people who fight for their rights.

Chart 5. Illegal frame in discourse



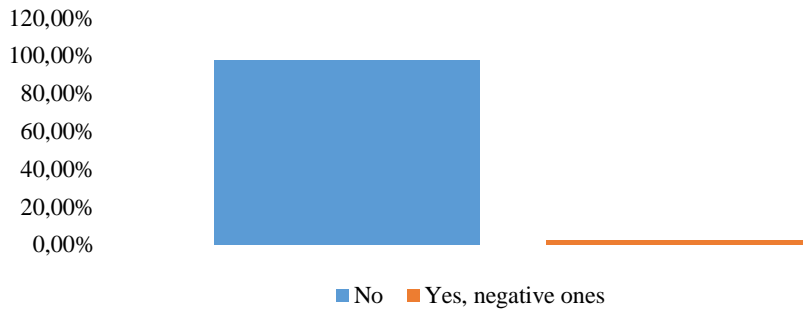
Framing International Protests on Romanian News Portals

Chart 6. Illegal frame in photo/ video



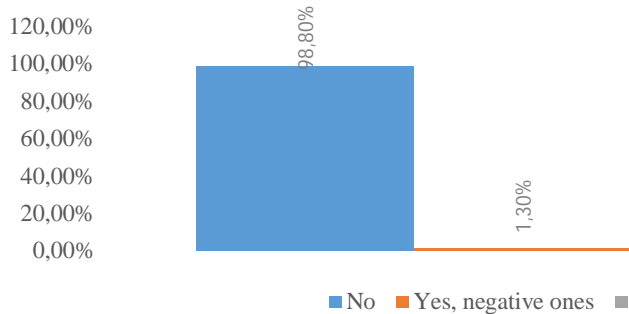
The economic crisis that has emerged in various countries worldwide and constitutes one of the reasons for the outburst of some of the protests we examined, is expected to play a significant role in the media coverage of the protests. Under this rationale, we expect the media to focus on the negative economic consequences of the analysed protests (Chart 7).

Chart 7. (Negative) economic consequences frame in discourse



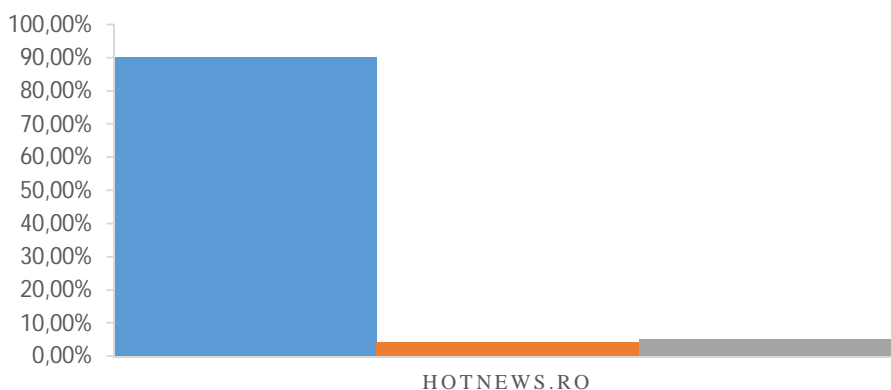
The collected data gave us a picture similar to the one of the “illegal frame”, meaning that, again, the journalists do not link the protests to any negative economic consequences. As shown in Charts 6 and 7, hotnews.ro avoids linking the protests to negative economic results of the countries in which these protests took place. Based on these results, we reject our fourth research hypothesis as the media did not focus on the economic consequences of the protests mainly in a negative way.

Chart 8. (Negative) economic consequences frame in photo/ video



Another important frame playing a significant role in the presentation of protests according to the critical protest paradigm is the marginalization frame. As Chart 8 shows, the news portal avoids marginalizing the protests. Hence they do not marginalize the protests in a negative way. On the contrary, there are few cases, where the protests are being marginalized in a positive way, in a sense that they try to resist against the corrupt and inhumane actions of the government. This kind of (positive) marginalization can be found in five percent of the Articles found on hotnews.ro. Based on the above mentioned results, we reject our fifth research hypothesis.

Chart 9. Marginalization frame in discourse



Discussion and conclusion

As outlined previously, the existing literature on topics regarding the connection and relevance of the Internet for the contemporary society emphasizes the increasing tension between the new communication technologies and the desire of the political sphere and economic sector to impose restrictions upon them (Bagdikian, 2004; Papacharissi, 2002; Papacharissi, 2004). On the other hand, the importance of the so-called new media for the modern states has been mentioned in numerous studies that analyse the contribution brought by the new communication technologies to the democratization of society (Dertouzos, 1997; Bennett and Fielding, 1997; Bimber, 2001). Mudhai (2003) asserts that these new information technologies are, in fact, a way to the “third way” for the democratization of the society. Scholars like Graber et al. (2004), Krueger (2002) or van Dijk (2000) talk about the potential of the Internet in promoting dynamic interpersonal and distinctive information who could reinvigorate the democratic process both on-line and off-line. The present Article examined the representations of protests on news web pages in Romania (www.hotnews.ro), analysing which particular cases attract the journalistic interest and in what sense. The research question of the present study was: what kind of representations is mostly raised by the mainstream Romanian news websites with regard to international protests? To answer that question we can easily notice from the above data that generally, protests are not presented in negative ways by the Romanian news portals like hotnews.ro, contrary to what Chan and Lee (1984) state when they have created the protest paradigm. Great emphasis is placed on the violence during the protests (even though this violence is usually not attributed to protesters) and on the situations that generated the protests. The journalistic discourse – in most of the cases – is positive

Framing International Protests on Romanian News Portals

towards the protesters but not always towards the protests as a whole. News items include a great number of positive references to the size of protests, journalists considering that a protest becomes important when many people are participating to it. An outstanding fact is that the results show that references to the illegal character of the protests, marginalization and economic consequences are almost absent from the news. Protests are usually presented as individual events, isolated from a broader socio-economic context. When protests are associated with the wider context, a great emphasis is placed on the conflict against the local government or the police. Protests are not depicted as social movements and readers are given a rather superficial impression of them. We can also notice the journalists' tendency to describe protests more by posting images or videos and less text in order not to influence the readers in interpreting the protests and allow them to see by themselves what is happening. The lack of an in-depth political discussion on the aims of the protests and the lack of references to the organizational structure of the movements allow the "convenient" adoption of a positive stance towards the analysed protests, which is actually superficial and not real. However, this study has its limits because it only examined one representative news portal and therefore the results cannot be generalized to all mainstream, alternative, or social media sources. Further studies should examine how much media coverage of the international protests influence protests in the countries in which the mainstream media covers them.

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