DOCTORAL THESIS

Challenges Associated with the Consumption of Political News
in the Media Landscape of Romania
- Summary –

Contemporary human society is organized around the acute need for information, which dictates the efficiency of interactions among all its structures and members, ensuring the smooth functioning of the societal framework. Responsible for the accessible flows of information within the public sphere, mass media institutions serve as crucial vectors in the construction of reality. The technological advancements of recent decades in communication media have led to the emergence of new sources and media content, reshaping the public's relationship with the surrounding world, as perceived through the mediation of the press. Within this broader context, the present work aims to analyze the specifics of media consumption, with particular attention given to political content, characterizing Romania in the 2020s. A deep understanding of the media consumption–political culture relationship can provide valuable insights, potentially translatable into effective public policies aimed at optimizing the informational value of media content in circulation, thus better addressing the public's need for information and action.

The need for information is one of the fundamental needs of the human being, with access to accurate and relevant information being essential for survival and development. Deeply rooted in human nature, this need has been significantly amplified in the digital age, when access to information has become easier and faster than ever (Van Dijck, 2013). The concept reflects the individual's intrinsic tendency to seek and process information to navigate and understand the surrounding world, and to make informed decisions (Wollmann et al., 2021).

Media plays a vital role in society, facilitating the circulation of information and contributing to the crystallization of public opinion. By their nature, mass communication channels are designed to serve large audiences, geographically dispersed, and with highly diverse expectations. Media functions as a "mirror" of society, with the power to shape and reflect cultural norms and values (Wagner, 2015). The umbrella term "media diversity" refers to the extent to which media reflect a variety of cultural, social, and political perspectives on issues and opinions through complex editorial content (Napoli, 2011), as well as to the multitude of channels and

platforms available for obtaining and distributing information, including audiovisual media, print press, the internet, and online social networks.

The concept of "media repertoires" refers to the entire range of media sources to which an individual is exposed (Schwarzenegger, 2020). The choice of media sources utilized by each individual becomes a component of their own identity DNA, situated at the intersection of personal preferences, the influence of social groups, the culture of belonging, and technological accessibility (Edgerly, 2015). The term "media repertoires" is closely related to another term from the same semantic area, "media diets" [used interchangeably by some authors with "media consumption" (Van Den Berg et al., 2007)], which refers to both the type of media content consumed and its quantity (Grusec & Hastings, 2015).

In modern society, political culture and political competencies are essential factors in the dynamics of citizens' interaction with the political system and democratic mechanisms. Political culture is understood as the set of values, beliefs, and attitudes of citizens toward the political sphere and their role in political leadership (Coxall et al., 2003). The concept of "political competencies" describes the knowledge and skills necessary for effective participation in political life (Haste & Bermudez, 2016). Political culture provides an interpretive framework for the realities of political life and guides individuals in their efforts to decipher the significance of the actions that constitute the act of governance. Recent studies (Kappus, 2023) highlight the importance of a well-articulated political culture and political competencies in strengthening democracy: historical narratives, civic identity, and education play an important role in the development of political competencies.

The notions of "disinformation" and "fake news", although often used interchangeably, describe distinct phenomena associated with the pathology of communication in the field of information dissemination. Disinformation refers to the deliberate spread of misleading or false information to alter public perception of a particular subject (Hasen, 2022). This phenomenon has gained unprecedented momentum in the digital communication era, with the diversity of sources and types of content, coupled with changes in media consumption behaviors, raising significant challenges regarding the effects of disinformation (Pawelec, 2022).

In line with the formulated theoretical framework, the general objective of this paper is *to identify potential variations in patterns of political news consumption, the factors that may influence these patterns, and the perceived effects from the perspective of citizens, media*

professionals, and political representatives in Romania. Derived from the general research rationale, five research objectives break down the general purpose into more detailed and manageable aspects, enabling the exploration and analysis of the presented topics.

Individuals' choices for media sources ("media repertoires") and content types ("media diets") take the form of an identity statement, shaped by the triad of personality traits, cultural and group influences, and access to communication technologies (Kurgat & Jerop, 2023). The behavior of active and selective engagement with media sources and resources is influenced by a multitude of factors such as age, gender, education level, and socio-professional status. The consequences of media consumption choices activate complex social mechanisms that shape public opinion and mediate the relationship with the governing structures of society (Hendrickx & Van Remoortere, 2023). In light of the consulted literature, the first research objective is O1. *Establishing the main patterns of news consumption in Romania*.

A characteristic of the new media system, the high degree of source fragmentation (Cleveland, 2022) can lead to reduced engagement of individuals' critical abilities to assess the truthfulness and relevance of information (Otieno, 2024), which may affect the understanding of current issues and hinder the smooth functioning of society (Fletcher & Nielsen, 2019). On the other hand, media source diversity can support the plurality of viewpoints (González-Bailón & Lelkes, 2023), encourages balanced reflection on socio-political realities, ensures broader social visibility (Loecherbach, 2023), and may reduce the risks of polarization (Bednar, 2021) and disinformation (Pathak & Spezzano, 2024). Supported by the theoretical foundation covered in the earlier sections of this paper, a second research objective is O2. *Identifying the main threats and opportunities related to media content consumption in Romania*.

Understood as a measure of political competence (Hölkeskamp, 2022) and a near-universal consensus on the legitimacy of governing structures (Sari & Prasetiyo, 2018), political culture and civic culture act as interfaces between citizens and the political environment. By mediating effective participation in democratic processes, the development of skills encompassed by political culture stimulates participatory behavior in civic aggregations that consolidate public opinion and safeguard the proper functioning of democracy (Swan, 2022). Mass communication institutions play a decisive role in transferring political realities from the political sphere to citizens, with multiple effects on how they interpret and engage with reality in all its dimensions (Knudsen et al., 2022). In accordance with the theoretical foundation related to this subject, the third research

objective is O3. *Identifying the most important effects of political news consumption patterns in Romania*.

In the current information era, participation in civic rituals and active engagement in political discourse can be jeopardized by a series of factors. The prevalence of sensationalist content (Grabe & Bucy, 2022), which emphasizes emotional appeal over information, not only fails to stimulate critical evaluation of political realities but can also lead to the rise of populist or extremist currents (Lim & Bentley, 2022), eroding trust in the political system (Graham & FitzGerald, 2024) and the media system (Laor & Galily, 2022). Such deviations from the hierarchy of relevance regarding current events and public interest can diminish the public's capacity to understand socio-political complexity (de Vries et al., 2022), reinforce cognitive biases (Strömbäck & Wikforss, 2022), encourage interpretive relativism (Soontjens, 2019), and intensify partisan discourse and societal polarization (Duncan, 2022). The operationalization of the theoretical information presented is reflected in the fourth research objective, O4. *Identifying the main risks associated with political news consumption in Romania*.

The proliferation of disinformation in recent years has exacerbated the cleavages between, on the one hand, the public and the press institutions (Curini et al., 2021), and on the other, between the public and the political environment (Wei & Huang, 2024). Echo chamber structures amplify the disinformation phenomenon (Avin et al., 2024), encouraging selective exposure (Guo et al., 2024) and adherence to partisan content (Ramírez-Dueñas & Vinuesa-Tejero, 2021). Along with news avoidance (Schäfer et al., 2024) and unequal distribution of political culture (Angelucci et al., 2024), these factors pose significant risks to the proper functioning of democratically organized societies: non-inclusive conflictual discourse and attitudes (De Keersmaecker & Schmid, 2023), discouragement of civic participation (Ohme et al., 2023), support for movements ideologically incompatible with democratic principles (Lim & Bentley, 2022), or political cynicism (Jones-Jang et al., 2021), which may deter participation in electoral processes (Haugsgjerd & Karlsen, 2024). In line with the theoretical framework associated with the disinformation phenomenon, the fifth research objective is O5. *Identifying the most relevant causes and key risks associated with disinformation following news consumption in Romania*.

For the current research, the first method employed, specific to the qualitative approach, is the sociological survey based on *in-depth, semi-structured interviews*, which combines a predetermined set of questions (organized as an interview guide) with the flexibility to explore

new topics in a dynamic manner, as they organically develop throughout the interviewing process. During the year 2021 (April – May), a total of 9 in-depth interviews were conducted with experts from Romania, followed by another set of 9 interviews carried out between June and August 2024. The first set of interviews (2021) involved discussions with 5 journalists and 4 politicians. The participating journalists represented four media institutions with diverse orientations from the liberal, neutral, and conservative media spectrum. The set of interviews conducted in 2024 included 5 journalists associated with liberal and neutral media outlets and 4 public communication experts, 1 man and 3 women, all apolitical, working in various public institutions in Romania.

The second qualitative research method used in this study is the *focus group*, defined as a form of structured discussion within a small group of participants (6-12), guided by a moderator, and used to gather detailed information about individual experiences, perceptions, motivations, attitudes, and behavioral responses concerning the sociological investigation's theme. During 2021 (April – May), two focus groups were conducted, one with young people aged 18 to 25 and another with adults over 55 years old (elderly). These were followed by two more focus groups between July and August 2024 with other groups of citizens, in similar age segments, 18-25 years and over 55 years.

According to a preliminary conclusion regarding news consumption patterns in Romania, television remains the most widely used source of information, especially among older individuals and those with lower levels of education. This audience's preference for televised content is attributed to its easy accessibility and content variety. Television consumption tends to be a passive form of media use, often simultaneous with other household activities, frequently functioning as a "background companion," with entertainment content predominating. Younger people, particularly those from urban areas with higher education, prefer online sources, displaying a strong inclination toward social media platforms.

Concerning potential threats and opportunities related to the existence of multiple sources and diets for political news consumption in Romania, there is a noticeable decline in the standards of traditional journalism, alongside an increasing trivialization of content, dominated by banality and sensationalism. The general public's consumption model in Romania indicates a decreasing interest in substantive content such as hard news, paired with a growing appetite for light, entertainment-oriented content. This trend may weaken the capacity to understand and interpret social and political realities, as well as participation in public-interest matters. Another threat, also

5

linked to difficulties in grasping the complexity of contemporary issues, is the polarization of individuals, who tend to adopt selective exposure behaviors, engaging only with media messages that confirm pre-existing beliefs, while avoiding argument-based debates. Polarization can lead to the creation of parallel perceptual realities, contributing to societal fragmentation and complicating constructive dialogue between groups with differing political opinions.

The high perceived level of political polarization causes individuals to avoid consuming political news to maintain social harmony, as engaging in political debates poses a risk of deteriorating interpersonal relationships due to ideological clashes. The general low level of trust in media institutions, which are seen as lacking objectivity in their reporting and inclined toward conflict-driven narratives, contributes to a behavioral tendency to avoid political news. This avoidance can lead to a chronic disinterest in politics within society and affect the general level of political knowledge, which in turn drives disinterest in active political and civic participation, potentially undermining the conduct and legitimacy of electoral processes. Additionally, avoiding hard news can make the public more vulnerable to populism, extremism, or even radicalization by keeping political knowledge at a low level, thus increasing susceptibility to simplistic, anti-system narratives.

The conclusions regarding the main causes and effects of disinformation point to the existence of a political agenda centered on discrediting opposing actors and factions, which leads to the use of false narratives that can undermine trust in public institutions and political formations. The mentioned decline in journalistic standards—through multiple sensationalist practices in messaging, political partisanship, and partial, inaccurate, or false reporting—results in diminished trust in traditional media, with attention shifting toward online media. Low trust in the political sphere can reduce attention to real political news and favor the preference for false or conspiratorial content, which can cause serious disruptions to electoral organization and legitimacy, susceptibility to anti-system narratives, destabilization of governance, distorted perceptions of geopolitical realities, and political and civic disengagement.

The originality of the present research lies in the dual and comparative investigation of the perceptions of multiple groups, including ordinary citizens (young people aged 18-25 and seniors aged 55+), journalists, politicians, and public communication experts in Romania in 2021 and 2024. In terms of media consumption patterns and preferences for information, the 2024 data show an increase in audience fragmentation, amid the consolidation of digital media consumption, with

heightened attention to more accessible content. Visual and interactive formats of entertainment-type information are preferred, especially among young people, who demonstrate fluency and comfort in using digital technologies, as well as tendencies toward escapism and relaxation. Among seniors, there is a noticeable increase in the integration of new media into their lives, although television remains an important source for them. The need for political content remains low among both generations, with young people showing some increased attention to international issues, and seniors focusing on political news reflecting social and economic themes.

The main arguments guiding the low consumption of political content for both generations remain the abundance and repetitiveness of the messages, as well as a sense of disconnection between civil society and the political environment, with growing fears regarding ideological polarization and disinformation, especially online. From the perspective of media diversity, the 2024 findings show that concerns remain among both generations about the need for media education and the promotion of media pluralism, while worries about media ownership concentration, the political polarization of media institutions, biased discourse, manipulative practices, and content trivialization are intensifying. The most significant risks associated with the dissemination and consumption of political news include persistently low trust in media and political institutions, as well as increasing concerns about ideological polarization and the spread of populist and extremist rhetoric. The trend of avoiding political news is more pronounced in 2024, coinciding with growing disinterest in political and civic engagement, which is paradoxical for a year marked by all types of elections.

In conclusion, this paper aimed to explore the main media consumption patterns in Romania and their relationship with political attitudes and behaviors. The obtained data provide a picture of a society deeply engaged with communication technologies and adopting diverse consumption diets. The nature of consumption and the flow of information in the Romanian public sphere affect all sectors of society, with an impact on the very democratic organization of the country. Through the conclusions offered by this study, we hope to have contributed valuable scientific insights into understanding and interpreting the phenomenology associated with the complex process of social communication in Romania.

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