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Who is responsible for the team's results? Media framing of sports actors' responsibility in major sports competitions

Abstract

Media are no longer just a witness to sports events, facilitating our access to them, but have become the most powerful judging platform for sports competitions, serving as a guide for their interpretation and evaluation. The present study focuses on media framing of sports actors' responsibility when it comes to major sports competitions. Who is responsible for the team's performance and results?

In analysing media discourse, framing effects of sports events coverage will be examined from two inter-correlated dimensions, textually and visually. Based on an event-related corpus of on-line press articles from four national newspapers, this case study covers two major sports events: 2010 European Women's Handball Championship and 2011 World Women's Handball Championship.

The discursive analysis of the press articles shows that, if winning competitive settings favour the emergence of a *personification effect*, building up sports heroes on both textual and visual dimensions, the responsibility of failure is rather diffused towards a collective referent. However, the visual component of press articles, along with the indirect strategy of addressing the responsibility issue throughout reported speech techniques, works as an alternative to the personification effect.

Keywords: responsibility; visual framing; competitive situation; personification effect; media discourse.

1. Introduction

Today our sports experiences and social imaginary attached to this field are grounded in the general approach of sports as media product. Most of our sports experiences are, in fact, mediated ones, as the public visibility and accessibility towards sports actors and events is mainly provided by media. While gaining their centrality inside the world of sports, media ended up transforming that world (Whannel, 1992, p. 3) and speeding up its *commodification* process. Sharing the public dependency constrains, as well as the entertaining component, sports and media are "inextricably linked together in a symbiotic relationship" (Valgeirsson & Snyder, 1986, p. 131), which is best described by its commercial nature. Both sports and media build on attracting and retaining large audiences and, in so doing, they join their forces in providing us with a hybrid experience of sports events as both competition and entertaining shows.

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The sports-media dyad is defined by the reciprocity of the *structuring effect* (Bourdieu, 1998) that both social fields exert upon each other. In order to gain public visibility, sports events need to be “mediazable”, meeting the general condition of a media show and reflecting the “*spectacularization effect*” of media upon the sports ethos. This implies correlating the competitive content with a spectacular form in order to provide an attractive media product for the audience. The need to build up on the “fun factor” (Kellner, 2003, p. 3) of sports events converts them into one of the most popular genres of entraining shows and, thus, a valuable asset for media’s continuous chase for rating points. The boomerang effect of this structuring force of media upon the form and content of sports events was the “vortextual” character of mega-events (Whannel, 2002) like Olympic Games, Wolds Cups or World Championships. This refers to the rapid diffusion of all elements connected to an event towards a large and heterogeneous public and to the referential value of these events for the public agenda. Media are therefore the first actor affected by the *vortextual effect* of sports mega-events as they generate a reconfiguration of media’s agenda on both its form and content.

However, media are no longer just a passive witness of sports events, facilitating our access to them in terms of a simple reproduction act, but rather an active agent who provides us with a whole new experience of the sports event as media product. The actual sports event becomes the input for its media corollary version, which goes further from simply broadcasting the event to actually redefining it. Hence, the competitive act itself becomes the hard core of a wider construct covering pre and post-event aspects, contextual elements or backstage information, generating what can be called ad-hoc event-related media agendas.

Seen as the “ultimate meritocracy” (Bell, 2009, p. 54), sports are defined by their evaluative nature and, therefore, are object to a dominant evaluative approach. Who was the best? What explains one’s superiority over the other? What or who lies beyond sports success or failure?

Before our individual judgment call, when it comes to a sports event or actors, there is another filter that we cannot escape from if our sports experience is a mediated one: the media reconfiguration of the event, which covers a consistent interpretative component. Media do not simply reflect the competitive act, but rather “represent a version of it, a form of selective construction” (Whannel, 1985, p. 58). Therefore media act as a judging platform for sports competitions, praising winners and denouncing losers. The process of informing about and redefining the competitive act are overlapping and serve as the most accessible guide for sports events’ interpretation and evaluation. Therefore we can speak about a constant framing process of sports acts, which audiences cannot avoid if their sports experiences are, de facto, mediated ones.

The law of public visibility rules at every level of sports dynamics. In this context, media provide us with a general frame for judging the competitive responsibility, building up the first “public trial” of a sports act. The focus of this study is hence on media’s strategies of addressing the competitive events in terms of *responsibility*. Who is (made) responsible for the team’s performance and results? What are media’s tools for enforcing an attribution schema for the competitive outcome?

2. Sports events as object for media framing

As sports and the media are “engaged in a complicit, mutually dependent commercial relationship” (Nicholson, 2007, p. 208), sports competitions have gained their autonomy and

their own place on the celebrity market. Sports events have entered the transformative pressure of the *commodification* process, providing us with both the competition's tension, as well as the entertaining sports show. However, the mediated experience of a sports competition relies on a media framing process that redefines the actual sports act and brings out a hybrid media product which is meant not only to cover the informative needs of the audiences, but also a more silent interpretative dimension. In serving this latter purpose, journalists "are consequently pushed to engage in discursive practices that frame the action in terms of what their audiences expect and are instrumental in directing viewers toward specific understandings of the on-field action" (Desmarais & Bruce, 2010, p. 339).

Live broadcasting or press articles, all media products relate to a sports event by redefining it and providing us with a selective reconstruction of the actual event. What seems to be an objective report of the competitive act is, therefore, far from being a neutral representation. But why and how does this media framing work when it comes to sports events?

The interdisciplinary ground of framing conceptualization (Goffman, 1974; Gamson & Modigliani 1989; Entman, 1993; Scheufele, 1999; Reese, 2001; Shanto, 2005; de Vreese, 2005) makes it object to a *chameleonic theoretical use* and to a wider thematic addressability in terms of research fields. In speaking about sports events as media constructs, we are facing a "double life" (Kinder & Sanders, 1996) of the framing process, which is present in both media discourse, as well as the audiences' own way of redefining the events.

The main principle beyond the framing act involves stressing out or making silent aspects that social actors find more or less relevant in addressing a specific referent. Defined as "interpretative packages" (Gamson and Modigliani, 1989) or "schemes of interpretation" (Goffman, 1986), frames act as organizing and selective principles through which some aspects gain primacy over the other, building up an interpretation guide for the whole information context and content. We can therefore speak about a selective act driven by an *emphasis-exclusion principle* (Gitlin 1980: 7) or about a *present-saliency dyad* that shapes one's position towards an issue. All in all, framing means "to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating context" (Entman, 1993: 52) in order to bring out a particular evaluative position in defining a certain issues. This dialectics of discriminating aspects based on perceived relevance is, to some extent, implicit for any cognitive process of transmitting or receiving a message, due to our selective information management approach. However, intentionality can convert framing into a powerful tool of influence and persuasion, providing a specific way to understand an issue or an event that might serve one's interest.

In addressing the media framing, the present study will cover both *frame-building* and *frame-setting* aspects of the media discourse (de Vreese, 2005) in order to understand how media build up the responsibility map of a competitive situation and to discuss the consequences of media *attributional* position in terms of public praise or incrimination of sports actors when it comes to competitive outcomes. While presenting a sports event, media cannot escape addressing the responsibility issue, as defining the event implies referring to its causal resorts, moral judgments and to a corollary prescriptive approach (Entman, 1993) of sports actors' positions. But how explicit or salient are these aspects in media discourses?

Due to their gatekeeper position between the large audience which cannot have an unmediated access to a sports event and the event itself, the sports journalist is expected to "transmit information pertaining to the results of sports events, to provide behind the scenes information of particular teams or sporting events and to use his knowledge and background to give opinions which will help the public interpret the sports news" (Smith, 1976, p. 14).

There is a high level of consent on this symbolic superiority position of sports journalist which explains his involvement in building up interpretative guidelines for sports acts. This legitimating position is based on his access to actors and events that most of us cannot come across with, as well as on his expertise, which compensates for the audience's untrained manner of understanding the competitive technical and tactical dynamics beyond the sports show.

However, the most powerful effect of media framing comes from the fact that their intentionality is not actually explicit and, in most cases, the audience is not even aware of its presence and influence. Therefore this selective principle of bringing some things forward to the detriment of others "can be linked to the magician's sleight of hand-attention which is directed to one point so that people do not notice the manipulation that is going on at another point." (Tankard, 2006, p. 95).

Media play a central role in bringing sports actors under the spotlight and making them subject to public scrutiny, as media are the ones that hold the reins for both public visibility and sports events' framing. But why are media interested in addressing responsibility issues when it comes to sports events? What do media gain by activating this *attributional* component of framing sports events?

Responsibility is the outcome of a judgmental process that media have to involve in while redefining the sports event. A judgmental position is based on three main premises: a privileged access to information, which allows media to evaluate the causal resorts of sports outcomes, a normative reference, which is strongly related to the moral dimension of a judgment and a referential role of media in influencing individuals' positions towards a certain issue. Moreover, media's play in reaffirming the social norms and values provides a strong argument for their informal role as *moral instance* that audiences accept and relate to.

Judgmental call on who is responsible and how far goes his responsibility favours media's persuasive function over the informative one, consolidating their privileged position in grounding the dominant representation upon a certain event or issue. Responsibility judgments reach also an emotional trigger that makes the audiences take a side and, therefore, generate debate. Unlike informative media approaches of sports events, evaluative ones give people something to speak about, generating new media subjects.

Responsibility issues are also a perfect stage for conflictive regrouping of sports actors and for personalization, rising up heroes or "scapegoats". From the narrow field of *neo-television* (Casetti & Odin, 1990), to the wider one of *neo-media*, judgmental position is a resourceful approach in terms of audience interest. People seem to positively respond to critical positions, especially when they have that seductive conflicting premise for a future public polemic. Moreover, there is this generalized preference and need for a causal understanding of sports events. To what or to whom do we own the competitive success or failure? How can the competitive outcomes be explained? The responsibility component of media's discourses built around a sports event comes to address this comprehensive imperative of the public, providing it with an evaluative approach of the competitive situation.

The present study aims to analyze the framing mechanisms activated by media discourses in order to determine *what* or *who* is responsible for the outcomes of a competitive act. Yet, responsibility does not only cover a review of causal triggers, deciding upon one's area of responsibility, but is also important in framing the sports event itself. This is because sports competitions involve a wide set of aspects and actors that may influence the actual course of action and, therefore, besides identifying who can be made responsible for the outcome of a sports event, responsibility should be addressed in a more relative and relational way. Who

played the key role in turning the scales in one's favour? Whose contribution made the difference between the opponents? Who should be brought to the fore and made responsible for the competitive outcome, whether we speak of a positive or a negative one?

3. Event-related analysis of responsibility framing: the corpus of the study

International sports competitions constitute a resourceful context for analyzing the media framing of responsibility. Due to their symbolic value in terms of the *identitary capital* they capitalize on and to the high level of public visibility, these sports events manage to make their way up to the public agenda, and, implicitly on the media's agenda. Integral parts of nations' "*soft power*" (Nye, 2004) confrontations, sports competitions are staged as a global entertaining show. The overlapping of the *warrior* and the *entertaining ethos* respond to media's dominant infotainment orientation, while their "great potential in terms of narrative capacities" (Hilvoorde, Elling & Stokvis, 2010) is suitable for the emotional involvement that defines audiences' expectations towards media products/constructs.

The two sports events that the present study is focused on have a referential value for Romanian recent sports history. They are both related to the Romanian feminine handball field, which has been seen as one of the most competitive national sports teams in terms of international achievements. This performance criterion in selecting the two events is strongly related to their value in terms of public interest and media coverage. The higher the chances for ending the competition among the leading teams, the higher the public interest in that sports competition. Moreover, given the limited access to the event itself, most people are left with its mediated form, whether they look for a live broadcasting of the event or for a piece of information about its course and outcomes.

The 2010 European Women's Handball Championship (7-19.12.2010) and the 2011 World Women's Handball Championship (2-18.12.2011) are defined by a significant affective reaction of the Romanian public opinion. Similar in intensity, they differ in the nature of their resort: while the first one stands out as a *historic performance* – the first European medal in the team's track record and one of the fewest for Romanian sports teams, the second one was seen as one of the most *shameful competitive performances* in an international sports competition. It should be noted that the social definition of the two events is hardly dependent on the achievements' expectation level.

The analysis is built on these two event-related case studies, covering a corpus of 600 press articles, all of which have been selected from the on-line version of four national newspapers (two general newspapers – *Adevarul* and *Evenimentul Zilei* and two sports newspapers – *Gazeta Sporturilor* and *ProSport*¹). Given the fact that media's reconfiguration of a sports act follows a *tripartite structure* (Richardson, 2007): the competitive context as the setting of action, the competition itself and the outcome of the competition, the *time frame* of the selected articles was set to cover the period between the official conference² before the event and one week post-competition. This way the study addresses the extended representational dynamics built around a sports event, from the *pre-competition expectations*, that act as anchors in evaluating the team's performance, to the *retrospective analysis* of the event as a whole competitive unit. So, the time period included for 2010 European Women's Hand-

ball Championship was between 5.12.2010 and 24.12. 2010, while for the 2011 World Women's Handball Championship was between 25.11.2011 and 24.12.2011.

4. The methodological grounds of media responsibility framing of sports events

The study is structured on two levels of analysis: a *macro-dimension* that addresses the thematic framing of the event and a *micro-level analysis* that focuses on the actual content of the articles, laying stress on the responsibility framing strategies. On the first level we want to identify how media reconfigure the competition in terms of selected themes or *what the media are writing about*, as first framing tool of the sports act. After understanding the wider framework of the thematic selection, we will circumscribe the analysis of responsibility framing to the actual articles that have a direct evaluative purpose. These *evaluative articles* cover two main categories: an *ad-hoc evaluative* set of articles released shortly after the end of the game and a *post-event evaluative* set of articles that involve a more analytical approach and discussion of the game. It should be said that most ad-hoc evaluative articles combine the actual live texting of the game (a hybrid form of written text live broadcasting of the sports act) and the first evaluative comments regarding the game.

What we were interested in was to identify the media strategies of framing the responsibility of the competitive outcomes and for this purpose we took in consideration both the *textual*, as well as the *visual* component of the article, as they work together in building up the articles' message as a whole. Thus, the main framing mechanisms that were used as guidelines during the articles' analysis were: the thematic selection of the articles, the headlines, the main photo attached to the article, the selection of quotes, the selection of actors and the concluding statements of articles, whether they were at the beginning or at the end of the article. However, this was quite a flexible analysis guide, as any other inductive aspects that we considered to be relevant for the purpose of this study were added to provide us with a more comprehensive image of media's responsibility framing of sports events.

4.1. The macro dimension of media responsibility framing

Although most media framing analyses tend to favour the micro-level, based on a bottom-up approach of the corpus, what we want to do instead is to address the macro-dimension of the responsibility framing analysis per se, not just as a cumulative construct of gathering up the observations made on each article of the corpus. But what role does this macro-dimension play in understanding media responsibility framing?

First of all, the *thematic selection*, although is the first framing mechanism used in re-defining an event, it is also one of the most salient ones in terms of its intentionality. People are more attentive and reactive to *how* (thus to the micro-level dimension) media reflect an event rather than going for *what* media choose to speak/write about.

Secondly, only the thematic selection can provide us with the wider image over the framing of the whole event as a unit of action. By doing so, it raises the question of *the event-related responsibility*, as complementary construct to the sequential responsibility of each game taken individually. At the end of a sports competition this overall event-responsibility be-

comes the central criterion in evaluating sports actors' performance, while the sequential game by game responsibility becomes secondary in addressing the sports event.

The thematic media construction of the two competitions, the 2010 European Women's Handball Championship and the 2011 World Women's Handball Championship, are very similar, even though in terms of their social significance they had a converse effect: a historical success versus a historical failure. The algorithm of the thematic reconfiguration of the competition is based on a three-phase construct that we can find on both larger and smaller scale, as it follows: *pre-competition*, *actual competition*, *post-competition* phases on the larger scale of the event itself and *pre-game*, *actual game*, *post-game* phases on the smaller scale of every game act taken individually.

However, there are some overlapping phases that generate a hybrid category of *multi-thematic articles*. On the one hand, we have an overlap of similar phases between the larger and the smaller scale of the competition, which is the pre-competition phase with the pre-game phase of the first match, the actual competition phase with each actual game taken one by one and the post-competition with the post-game phase of the last match. We can also add an apparent disjunctive overlap of the larger scale and smaller scale overlap, as the actual competition phase covers all other small scale phases, because it integrates every game as an individual unit. On the other hand, on the smaller scale of the sports event, there is a recurrent overlapping process between the post-game phase of the previous match with the pre-game phase of the next match in line. This structure itself generates some sort of convergence in terms of thematic framing strategies.

The most important thematic framing strategy in addressing the responsibility issue of a sports competition is the use of *portrait articles*. During the pre-competition or pre-game phase their role is to bring forward those actors that are perceived to have a decisive contribution to the competitive performance of the team. Thus, they reveal the public expectations regarding who will be the first to bear the responsibility for the competitive outcomes. However, in the post-competition and post-game phase, portrait articles have a more explicit contribution in terms of responsibility attribution. If we were to compare the two sports events, there are more portrait articles for the successful competition than for the unsuccessful one. How can this be explained and which are the implications of this fact in terms of responsibility framing?

The evaluative function of the portrait articles and their use as responsibility framing strategy are rather related to positive outcomes. After a winning game, media tend to look for and, moreover, build up heroes, as this image of the sports actor fits the characteristics of the contemporary mediated *celebrity hero* (Boorstin, 1978). There is some kind of cyclical relation: heroes bring victories, as well as victories give rise to heroes. But why do media turn to this *personification effect* of responsibility when it comes to positive sports outcomes?

There are two complementary types of arguments in explaining media's position. The first one refers to the market logic and the wider *commodification process* that sports has been subject to. From this point of view, building up heroes and giving them the credit for a success means supplying the celebrity market with fresh new commodity and, moreover, exploiting the entertaining potential of the sports act as show and as one of the most prolific "creators of contemporary myths" (Tolleneer, 1986, p. 234). The second argument relates to a less commercial purpose, as heroes and their stories serve also important social functions such as providing us with *role-models*, principles and ideals to relate to (Klapp, 1962, 1964).

Due to the overlapping effect between the post-game phase of a match and the pre-game phase of the next match, the portrait articles end up playing a dual function: while attributing the responsibility to an actor, media also convert him in the key-person that the result of the next game depends on. So, not only does the new born or the reaffirmed hero bear responsibility over the present game outcome, but he becomes the decisive person in the upcoming game too.

To some extent, media end up generating expectations in terms of responsibility mapping of the next games. Looking on both small and large scale, we can identify: *potential heroes* who media propose in the pre-game/competition portrait articles and who do not confirm, *short-term heroes* who are attributed the responsibility for one game outcome and *event-crowned heroes* that post-competition portrait articles bring forward. For the 2010 European Women's Handball Championship only two of the short-term heroes have also become event crowned heroes, due to their constant and consistent contribution during the competition.

How does this thematic strategy of portrait articles work for negative outcomes and unsuccessful sports events? Looking at the dynamics of portrait articles in media's coverage of both sports events, it can be noticed that for the 2011 World Women's Handball Championship, there was a descendent curve, with some pre-competition potential heroes and few pre-game potential heroes proposed by the media until the Romanian team's chances for reaching a good result faded. Thus, it might be said that, on the thematic dimension, media used only the projective function of the portrait articles framing strategy when negative outcomes were at stake.

The second aspect that we find to be relevant for the macro-dimension of responsibility framing is the use of *reactive articles* as the main thematic category in media coverage of a sports competition. In terms of thematic approach of the responsibility issue, probably the most common association would be the journalist's analysis of the game, which is evaluative in nature and argumentative in structure. However, this is rather an *ideal type*, in webberian sense. The most prominent approach of the responsibility issue is related, for both competitions, with reactive articles, commuting the evaluative role to other actors besides the journalist himself. Moreover, there is a pattern of turning to these reactive articles by using them as the foundation for journalists' own evaluative position.

Most of the times, the reactive articles were "*one statement – one actor*" type of articles, presented as individual positions towards the responsibility issue. After a flash exposure of these reactive articles, which follow one another after a simple juxtaposition principle, there comes the journalists' analysis that integrates most or even all of them, generating what we can call a *collage article*. Who are the actors selected for the reactive articles? What are the other effects in terms of responsibility framing? How do these collage articles address the responsibility attribution issue? These questions would be better answered in the next section, because we need to refer to the content of the article, and, thus, to go to the micro dimension of our analysis.

4.2. The micro dimension of responsibility mapping of sports events

Due to the evaluative nature of competition itself, it is very difficult to find a pure descriptive or informative press material that covers the event. However, the evaluative component can vary significantly and along with it the responsibility framing of the competition's outcome. Before looking into some micro-dimension strategies of media responsibility attri-

bution, it should be reaffirmed that the aim of this study was not to identify and address an exhaustive set of media framing strategies, but rather to focus the discussion on those that are most prominent and consistent in media discourses addressing these two case studies. Therefore, in the next subsections we will cover the following strategies: the *polyphony strategy*, the *positivist argument strategy* and the *visual framing strategy*, each of them integrating several framing mechanisms.

4.2.1. Using polyphony to create the “pluralism of opinion” effect

This first media strategy of framing responsibility for competitive outcomes is strongly related to the macro-dimension strategy of using reactive articles in evaluating the responsibility issue. Media strategic use of polyphony brings out two important framing mechanisms that are meant to answer *who* are those who evaluate the competitive act and *how* their evaluation is presented in the articles. Thus, we are speaking about two complementary selective actions that media use in building up an evaluative position towards the competition: selection of actors/ sources and selection of quotes. Besides identifying the dynamics and triggers of the polyphony strategy, we will also address its effect for responsibility framing.

In terms of actors' selection we can identify three main categories: the front stage actors (players and coach), the institutional actors (representatives of the Romanian Handball Federation) and the expert type of actors (other coaches, former great handball players, handball club presidents etc.). Among the players, media favour the team's captain based on both her representative role, but also her conjoined expertise and experience power, as she was playing for one of the top handball club teams in Europe. However, it should be noted that her role is very important in the pre-competition phase and during the first games, her visibility facing a gradual decrease in favour of short term heroes and event-crowned heroes.

Another category of players that receive a greater public exposure is the injured player, media building up alternative narrative lines that cover her story. Moreover, injured players are integrated into a wider frame of *sacrifice* which is consistent with the symbolic value of sports competition as a “surrogate for war” (King, 2008). These actors are used to dramatize the competitive dynamics and to create a particular type of heroine who sacrifices herself for the good of the team, thus having a major contribution in terms of responsibility for the overall outcome. “*Thriller in tears! Paula Ungureanu was badly injured!*” (prosport.ro, 13.12.2010), “*Sorrow siblings: Oana Manea and Adina Fiera were injured*” (gsp.ro, 7.12.2012), “*Victory with sacrifice*” (adevarul.ro, 13.12.2010) are headlines that move the focus from the actual result to its *costs*. It is not the performance itself of the injured players that justifies their hero position, but rather their sacrifice that, based on a strong emotionally component, makes media overestimate their actual contribution and responsibility for the game result.

In the case of players' selection, when positive outcomes are at stake, there is a clear responsibility framing strategy, media bringing forwards the “voices” of those whom they find to have had a significant contribution to the competitive outcome. However, this responsibility relation is not so obvious when it comes to the coach and even when it comes to selecting players for negative outcomes. In the latter situations, media turn to an indirect way of responsibility attribution, by bringing the actors in the public eye and thus forcing them to refer to their part in the overall performance, but also to play the role of *responsibility setters*, providing us with their perspective upon the causes and the main actors responsible for

the games' results. The constant use of post-game interviews with the coach reflects this subtle responsibility framing strategy.

A significant part of the reactive articles are based on exposing a third person's opinion and evaluative position towards the competitive acts. To legitimize these positions, media turn to the *expert type of actors* whose opinions are expected to be easily accepted by the public, as their expertise has already been proven by their professional achievements. If we look closer to who was selected to provide this type of expert argument, we can notice that there is a dominant figure of a former coach of the Romanian team (Gheorghe Tadiçi) used by the media for two reasons: his uncontested expertise as coach, based on his results with both the national team and his club teams, but also his critical position towards the actual coach and the institutional actors, which brings along a constant conflictive potential that media try to speculate for infotainment reasons.

In pointing fingers towards an actor or another for the outcomes of a game, the use of experts' arguments is an effective strategy that, apparently, keeps the journalist backstage. Moreover, by presenting different actors' position towards the competitive performance (players, coach, institutional representative, experts), media gives the impression of a *deliberative space* that provides the audience with complementary interpretations and responsibility attribution logic.

Moving the focus from *who* the actors are, to *how* their arguments have been presented and integrated in media's discourses, we noticed a strategic use of the reported speech, due to its *authenticity effect*. Most reactive articles are "one statement – one actor" type, with a similar structure that involves a first paragraph of indirect reported speech in which the journalist selects and provides us with a short presentation of the actors' position and a second part of the article that covers the actual statement of the actor in a direct speech manner.

In using sports actors' statements, there are three framing mechanisms that media usually turn to: the actual selection of the statement, the selection of those aspects presented in the first paragraph – which has a conclusive role for the whole article – and the selection of the small fragment of statement used as headline and, thus, acting as the master frame of the article.

Most headlines from both competitions are built on this selective reporting speech mechanism: "*Vărzaru: 'The individualist manner of playing did not help us at all!'*" (adevarul.ro, 18.12.2010), "*Cristina Neagu: 'We have fought with all our heart!'*" (evz.ro, 19.12.2010), "*Tadiçi: 'Tolnai was sensational, but the defence did not help her at all!'*" (gsp.ro, 18.12.2010), "*Gațu: 'If we prove that we have learned from the defeat against Denmark, we will reach the semi-finals'*" (prosport.ro, 11.12.2010), "*Radu Voinea has analyzed Romania's performance: 'Significant lack of combativeness!'*" (gsp.ro, 6.12.2011), "*Ramona Farcău: 'We have tested different game formulas against Cuba'*" (adevarul.ro, 5.12.2011), "*Tadiçi blames Voinea: 'Five-six players should not have been part of the team for Brazil'*" (prosport.ro, 14.12.2011) etc. All these headlines are framing the responsibility for the competitive outcomes by turning to a selective use of the reported speech. This is how the persuasive function of the reported speech is being augmented, as the "less the volume of the quoted segment, the more the function of the quotation shifts from 'reliability function' to 'attitude function'" (Smirnova, 2009, p. 83).

4.2.2. *The incontestable power of the positivist argument*

Serving the same intention of objectifying the responsibility attribution as the expert argument, media rely on the positivist argument to provide a more measurable dimension of their evaluative position. But how does this argument work?

The positivist arguments respond to the public trust in the statistic proof and to the general illusion that “numbers don’t lie”. Therefore, journalists are seeking to reveal that numbers can provide a solid justification in the process of responsibility attribution. It is not only about the success rate of the attacks (e.g. “*Romanian team’s performance was strongly dependent [...] on Cristina Neagu, who made it to 11 goals*”- evz.ro, 16.12.2010; “*Romanian team [...] was the first to reach out more than 40 goals in the present edition of the European Championship*”- adevarul.ro, 12.12.2010, “*The efficacy of Romanian shoots was below 50%*”- evs.ro, 9.12.2011), the percentage of goals saved by the goalkeeper (e.g. “*Talida Tolnai was again incredible, fabulous, brilliant, with an unbelievable percentage of 53%!*” – gsp.ro, 20.12.2010, “*Romania looks worse than ever in defence: the World Championship numbers*”- prosport.ro, 10.12.2011) or the number of unforced mistakes made by the players (e.g. “[...] *Look: 24 technical unforced mistakes! It’s unbelievable! 14 goals received on fast breaks!*”- gsp.ro, 11.12.2011), but also about track record placement of the performance or failure (“*The tricolor handball players, the best result at a European competition*”- evs.ro, 20.12.2010, “*Romania has a 100.000 share bet of winning the World handball Championship*”- gsp.ro, 12.12.2011, “*Romania finished on 13rd position the World Championship. The poorest performance in the last 10 years*” – adevarul.ro , 12.12.2011). All these numbers bring credibility and accuracy to the media evaluative position and, to some extent, limit the problematisation and the perceived subjectivity of the responsibility discussion.

Another interesting aspect regarding the strategic use of the positivist argument for responsibility framing is media’s tendency to focus on individual statistics during the actual competition phase and on the team’s statistics in the post-competition game. This practice generates a *personification effect* that builds up heroes for positive outcomes and brings “scapegoats” forward when negative outcomes are at stake. Inside the time frame of the competition, most statistic arguments related to the team have a different function, as they are rather used in the pre-game phase. Their role is to anticipate the game evolution based on previous confrontations and on a rational comparison of the teams in terms of track record (e.g. “*Perfect balance for Romania-Serbia confrontations. If we take together all the games against the ex-Yugoslavia, Romania has played for 80 times against our neighbours [...], with a perfect balance of 36 wins for each team.*”- adevarul.ro, 12.12.2010). This is how expectations are rooted in statistic facts.

4.2.3. *The visual framing of responsibility*

Along with the headlines, although “less obtrusive and more easily taken-for-granted” (Messaris & Abraham, 2001, p. 216), the images attached to the articles provide a visual framing tool for responsibility issues. In addressing this aspect we focus the analysis upon a narrower corpus of articles that covers the ad-hoc evaluative position and the post-game evaluative analysis of the team’s performance, that is 80 articles out of 200. Only the main image of the article was included in the visual analysis of the responsibility framing. The elements that we took into consideration were the actors and the way they are represented. For the first dimen-

sion we looked for a pattern or a typology of actors that can be built in trying to explain the mechanism of actors' selection in the overall responsibility framing strategy.

In approaching the second aspect, we used a tripartite framing scheme (Dumitriu, 2012), built on the warrior and the spectacular ethos of the sports act: the *war framing*, the *show framing* and the hybrid construct of *war-show framing*. The *war framing* is defined by the focus on the confrontation between players, stressing out the physical contact and effort involved in the sports competition. The *show framing* is concerned with redefining the competition in terms of spectacle and thus, presenting celebration moments or media contexts of communication such as pre or post competition press conference, which respond to the infotainment function of the sports event as media object. Finally, the *war-show framing* combines the two dimensions of the social imaginary of sports events, presenting the competitive confrontation as show by using a dual visual structure with a close-up view on the game dynamics and the spectators in the background. The presence of the audience redefines the sports competition as show act, serving both competitive aims, but also entertaining ones (see sample pictures 1).

Sample pictures 1.

War framing example

Show framing example

War-Show framing example

In terms of actors' selection, we noticed that media favour war and war show framing build around a single player from the team. Therefore visual framing directs the attention and, implicitly the responsibility, towards players. But who were the actors that media brought forward? Were there different visual approaches of winning and losing competitive situations?

Most of the photos focus on a 1 to 1 confrontation situation in which our player is in attack, which leads to an overrepresentation of the offensive position of our team. The main effect of this dominant visual representation on the responsibility issue is the personalization of the entire confrontation between the two opponent teams. This approach is convergent with media's strategy of building up heroes, as, in many cases, the photo attached to the article plays a dual role: to recreate the competitive situation and to illustrate the image of the hero.

Due to the general preference for individual actors, we focused our attention to the "exceptions" in order to see if there is an arbitrary selection of actors or, on the contrary, the visual elements play a specific role in the overall framing of the competitive act. An interesting aspect that we noticed was that most of the images in which our team was in defence were used in articles referring to defeats. Thus, the defence position is, indirectly, associated with an inferiority status in terms of the symbolic power balance between the two teams and, also, as the Achilles' heel in explaining the negative outcomes. Strongly related to this observation is the fact that, unlike attack situations, which are generally focused on one player, defence ones are rather collective snapshots (see sample pictures 2), diffusing the responsibility from individual to the team.

Sample pictures 2.

Individual Framing example
(positive outcome, attack)

Collective framing example
(negative outcome, defence)

Another aspect related to this individual-collective dimension refers to the time-frame of the competition. The visual analysis shows that, although a minority, the images that bring forward the whole team or a significant part of the team are to be found in the pre-competition phase (mainly connected to pre-competition press conference context) and, for the successful competition, that is the 2010 European Championship, in the last competitive act and in the post-competition phase, testifying to the team's joy and to the celebration moments. The most consistent interval of the actual competition (game by game) is dominated by individual or pairs of players' images, redirecting the public to a more personalized representation of the competitive acts.

A similar dynamics in time can be noticed when analysing the three visual framings, as the *show* framing is mostly used in the pre-competition and post-competition phase. Moreover, the show framing was more frequent for the successful sport event, because it can better reflect both the emotional intensity and the spectacular dimension of the celebration moments. During the actual competition evolution, the show framing of the games was rather related to photos that were focused on the individual players emotional reactions of tension release (see sample pictures 3). This type of individual show framing can be found when defeats were at stake, acting as a way of stressing out the disappointment and sadness of the defeat. Show framing has a low evaluative potential for the post-game phase, but can activate this function in the post-competition phase.

Sample pictures 3.

Examples of individual players' emotional reactions

Despite this polarization effect of the show framing at the beginning and the end of a competition, we could not identify a clear pattern in using the war and the war show frame. The only observation that needs further attention and validation in other similar studies is that when difficult and decisive games are at stake (games defined by a high physical effort and tension generated by the small difference between the two opponents), media seem to favour war framing over the war show framing. This is because the war framing is focused on the intensity of the competitive act primarily as physical confrontation.

Finally, the last visual aspect that we want to address is the use of coach's photo mostly in articles related to defeats. By bringing the coach forward especially when addressing losing contexts, media end up adding a responsibility framing effect to the image. The public is given a strong orientation towards the coach as first person to be blamed for the negative outcome. Another element that strengthens this visual framing effect is the mere fact that photos of the coach are rather few in the media coverage of a sports event and thus, when they appear, the intentionality of the selection is easier to be identified than in the players' case.

4.2.4. Speaking out loud: the direct evaluation of the responsibility issue

Before discussing the issue of media's explicit approach of responsibility for the competitive outcomes, it should be mentioned that this section will not cover an in-depth discursive and argumentative analysis of media's evaluative discourse, but rather an overview of *how* media build up these positions.

A first observation refers to the fact that media's evaluative position tends to be more explicit and argumentative when it comes to defeats. Victories bring out a more consistent emotional discourse, favouring the impact of the game and its symbolic value, but, most of all, the rise of heroes and the dramatic stories of the sacrifices behind the achievement. Contrariwise, media adopt a more critical position towards defeats, looking for explanations and, moreover, for who is to be blamed for the negative outcome. The discourse is more rational, gathering data and arguments to sustain the journalists' position and discussing the impact of the result in terms of factual effects on the competitive evolution, on the ranking, the qualification for future competitions or on the overall track record of the team. Thus, it minimizes the emotional effect in favour of a more pragmatic approach.

The second aspect that we will discuss takes further the comparative analysis of media's explicit evaluative position towards successful versus unsuccessful competitive situations. Most arguments in explaining the team's success or great achievement at the end of the 2010 European Championship refer to attitudinal aspects such as "determination", "team cohesion", "willpower", "total engagement", "concentration" etc. Moreover, there is an interesting oscillation between bringing out heroes that had a decisive contribution to the final result and diffusing the responsibility to the collective team referent. In the post-competition phase, critical media analysis leaves room for infotainment interviews oriented towards the emotional impact and the personal significance that the achievement has upon individual actors, as well as towards backstage elements of the competition which is reframed as a heroic story.

The media coverage of the 2011 World Championship involved a more critical approach, which generated several evaluative analysis meant to lay stress on the causes of the team's failure. While during the actual competition phase media's position was rather built on statistic arguments and experts' own evaluations of the team's performance, in the post-competition phase a new category of articles came out: *the summative evaluative articles* (e.g. "*Prosport analysis! Romania looks worst than ever in defence: the World Championship*

numbers”- *prosport.ro*, 10.12.2011; “*A sharp analysis after the World Championship in Brazil: ‘It will be hard to go to the Olympic Games’*”- *prosport.ro*, 22.12.2011; “*The analysis of the World Championship in Brazil: We played with our hearts, but with our goal unprotected*”- *gsp.ro*, 15.12.2011), which extend the intermediary collage articles. The aim of these articles was to provide a structured analysis of the causes that led to the failure.

To some extent, they bring together all those post-game responsibility aspects, capitalizing on the statistic and expert arguments. From the poor performance of the goalkeeper, the low efficiency of the old generation players, the bad management of the games' ending, to the contested selection of players, the uninspired strategic approach of the game or the lack of physical training of the team, causes are listed and discussed in detail. Implicitly, for each cause there is a corollary responsibility attribution, whether it is the goalkeeper, a particular field player, the coach or the Romanian Handball Federation management. Despite the nominalization of actors responsible for the competitive outcome, this summative coverage of all possible causes of the team's failure has a reverse effect, as it ends up diffusing the responsibility between all the actors that were mentioned earlier. All in all, each actor has his share of responsibility and the actual existence of so many individual responsibility referents explains the team's failure, as cumulus of all these negative inputs.

5. Conclusion

This study focuses on the responsibility framing of sports competition. In so doing, it analyses the main media strategies used in building up an evaluative position towards the competitive situation and in deciding who is to be praised or blamed for the competitive outcomes. Based on two case studies, we identified the most prominent framing strategies that media turn to in addressing the responsibility issue of a sports event and provided a general two-dimension model of analysis that combines the macro-dimension of framing the event as a whole unit of action (selection of *what* to speak about in covering a sports event), with the micro-dimension of the framing mechanism (*how* media actually speak about the sports event).

The results stress out the convergence of the framing strategies on both the macro and the micro-dimension towards a *personification effect*, mostly directed to individual players. This effect is even more powerful when it comes to positive outcomes, as media focus on rising up heroes who can serve both evaluative purposes, in terms of responsibility attribution, as well as entertaining ones. This comes in line with the fact that the media coverage of positive outcomes is rather *emotional*, while the coverage of the negative one seems to be more *rational*, bringing out a more critical and argumentative discourse.

Rather than explicitly expressing their evaluative position towards a sports act, journalists build this responsibility mapping of the competitive situation by turning to more elusive framing strategies such as visual framing, thematic framing or polyphony framing strategy. This keeps the journalists in the background, while creating the impression of a deliberative approach. Moreover, in order to objectify and legitimize an evaluative position, media use the positivist argument and the expert opinions as main coordinates on which they end up building the summative (mostly retrospective) post-competition analysis. Thus, the focus is moved from the journalist to ‘other voices’ that are brought to express a certain view and provide a certain interpretative scheme for the sports act.

Media's intension to address causality as a composite construct (covering a wide spectrum of aspects that contribute to the outcome of a competitive act) has a reverse effect of diffusing the responsibility between all these possible factors and actors involved in explaining the competitive dynamics.

Although the study has pointed out the complex construct of responsibility framing, by referring and connecting complementary framing strategies and mechanisms, further research is needed in order to provide an in-depth analysis of each of these strategies and to test their overall impact on the public opinion.

Notes

¹ The URL for each newspaper included in the analysis : <http://www.adevarul.ro/>; <http://www.evz.ro/index.html>; <http://www.gsp.ro/>; <http://www.prosport.ro/>.

² There was an official conference organized by the Romanian Handball Federation before the Romanian handball team left for each major competition

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