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## **Media Coverage in Times of Crisis. Intermedia Agenda-setting of COVID-19 – related Topics<sup>1</sup>**

### **Abstract**

In times of crisis, the media play a crucial role in offering people information and updates related to the ongoing events. Thus, the media implicitly shape public opinion on the issues they cover and, as a result, influence public attitudes and behaviors. In this context, this paper aims at analyzing the media coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, by means of quantitative content analysis ( $N=1511$ ) conducted on both television and online news stories released during March 18-31 2020, this study sheds light on the agenda-setting effects of the media and the phenomenon known as intermedia agenda-setting. Main results show that, in spring 2020, both television and online news stories extensively covered COVID-19 topics, focusing on domestic issues such as decisions taken by the authorities in order to manage the pandemic, effects of the virus, and statistics. Furthermore, results show a relatively high intermedia agenda-setting effect within the Romanian media environment. Content published online (either in the form of social media content or online stories) is frequently “borrowed” and cited in both online and television news stories, leading us to the idea that digital media might have become mainstream information sources.

**Keywords:** COVID-19 pandemic, media coverage, media visibility, media prominence, intermedia agenda-setting

### **Introduction**

The current COVID-19 pandemic represents an unprecedented crisis in recent history, being often referred to as “sanitary crisis” (Maffesoli, 2020), “public health emergency” (Cruz et al., 2021), or “natural disaster” (Seddighi, 2020). Mainly because of its huge proportions and its potential to fundamentally challenge all aspects of life, pandemic-related issues were highly covered by the media worldwide (Jia & Lu, 2021). Specifically, starting from February-March 2020, both legacy and digital media extensively covered topics related to the

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COVID-19 pandemic (Ferraresi, 2020). In spring 2020, the media coverage of the pandemic was focused on the number of new cases and deaths associated with the disease and on the rules and restrictions imposed by the authorities to limit the spread of the virus (including nationwide lockdowns imposed in almost each country all over the world). In Romania, the nationwide lockdown was imposed on March 25, 2020. At that time, over 400,000 COVID-19 cases and over 18,000 deaths due to the disease were officially registered worldwide. The total number of COVID-19 cases in Romania was 762 and there were registered 11 deaths due to the disease (World Health Organization, 2020).

The importance of this study resides in the fact that the way the media cover public interest issues has a significant impact on the perceptions of those issues among the audience (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Especially during times of crisis, when people's need for orientation is high (i.e., when they face a relevant issue about which they are uncertain), people use the media in order to gain access to social reality (Camaj & Weaver, 2013; McCombs & Weaver, 1973; Weaver, 1980). Furthermore, the media have the ability to "reach people at the grassroots" (Medina et al., 2021, p. 1), in the sense that the media have the power to disseminate crucial information about several topics, mainly about those with which people do not have first-hand experience. In what regards the COVID-19 pandemic, the media (irrespective of its form) represented the main information sources (at least at the beginning of the pandemic when there were not so many people who experienced the disease) (Poirier et al., 2020).

In this context, it becomes important to analyze the way the media report on COVID-19 issues because it reflects into how people might understand and further develop certain opinions, attitudes, and behaviors related to the pandemic. In other words, a thorough analysis of the media coverage on the COVID-19 issues might explain several public attitudes and behaviors such as people's level of compliance with the measures taken by the authorities to limit the spread of the virus, their level of trust in institutions and people in charge with managing the pandemic, their level of vaccine acceptance, etc. (for an overview regarding the similarities between the Romanian media and the public agenda in the COVID-19 context, see Buturoiu & Gavrilesu, 2021).

Given this background, this analysis, the first in Romania so far, aims at revealing the media coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic during a peak-event period (i.e., the nationwide lockdown in March 2020) by specifically looking at both television and online news stories, in an attempt to shed more light into the agenda-setting effects of the media and into the phenomenon known as intermedia agenda-setting. Precisely, the purpose of this study is to explore (1) the most visible topics on the agenda of both television and online news outlets; (2) the prominence of the topics related to the COVID-19 pandemic on television and online news sources; (3) the main topics associated with the COVID-19 pandemic on both television and online media agenda and (4) the degree of reciprocity (intermedia agenda-setting) between the television and the online news agenda during a peak-event period.

## Literature review

The COVID-19 pandemic has dramatically changed the way people perceive access to news, causing many individuals to view the media as a beacon of light in times of crisis and, simultaneously, as a main source of information. The need for orientation (NFO), the psychological concept that refers to the tendency of people to create a "map" of their world, based

on the information they receive from others (acquaintances or the media), in order to become familiar with their “surroundings” (McCombs et al., 2014), has greatly increased in this period, mainly because of the high level of uncertainty regarding the evolution of the pandemic, as well as the extremely high relevance of this topic. Prior research studies (McCombs & Stroud, 2014) show that individuals with a high need for orientation are those who have a prominent level of uncertainty and consider the news media relevant enough to clarify their doubts.

Given the novelty of the pandemic, its impact on everyone’s lives, and the information overload (Melinat et al., 2014) regarding this topic, people have placed special attention on the COVID-19 related topics covered by the media, and each of these news items has represented a new piece of the “puzzle” they were trying to solve in their minds in order to orient themselves. At the same time, previous studies (Camaj, 2019) have shown that the people’s information processing is influenced by two different types of objectives: *the accuracy goals* (those that meet the need to reach the correct conclusions) or *the directional goals* (those that meet the need to reach the preferred conclusions). In other words, some individuals tend to rely on the accuracy and correctness of information presented by the media in order to form their own opinions about a topic, while others are mainly engaged in selective exposure, which leads to confirmation bias. Therefore, the agenda-setting effects of the media depend on how people evaluate the information received based on their goals: the more objective individuals are in their evaluations, the higher their reluctance to receive information is. On the other hand, if people choose to expose themselves to information in a selective way, using only those sources of information that confirm their expectations and present that part of the reality they resonate with, the impact of the media agenda on public perception is much stronger.

Especially during times of crisis, such as the current COVID-19 pandemic, the media coverage is even more important, as it may be one of the main factors in “the transmission process of infectious disease” (Feng et al., 2020, p. 3619). The media have the power to disseminate, in an accessible language, crucial information about the severity of the disease, how it can spread, the effectiveness of vaccines, the relevance of preventive measures, etc. As a result, many people learn, from what media reports about COVID-19, how to protect themselves and those around them, which suggests that, during a public health crisis, the impact of the media on adopting a health-oriented behavior is crucial.

Previous studies (Searles & Smith, 2016) have also emphasized that there is a mutual influence between the public and the media agenda, which is highlighted by the fact that the issues perceived as important by the audience are those the media covered more. In the case of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is possible that discussions on this topic would have stood out regardless of media coverage (Wanta & Alkazemi, 2018) and people would have filled information gaps through social media discussions.

As a news source, the social media platforms tend to change the conventional ways of disseminating information, characterized by public passivity. Instead, they allow people to connect with each other, to form personal networks, and to share their messages without restrictions (Wang, 2016). In times of crisis, the behavior of users of social media platforms can be analyzed both from the perspective of emotional involvement of each individual, and through the collective efforts they provide to better understand and manage the difficult situation.

Prior research (Smith et al., 2018) suggests that people tend to perceive themselves either as moderators who advocate on behalf of those directly affected by the crisis situation, argu-

ing, at the same time, for policy changes (*agenda-setting coping behavior*), or as supporters for those who need to adapt to their lives after the crisis (*resilience coping behavior*), or as hope givers (*positive thinking coping behavior*). However, the influence of the media on the public agenda can be diminished when the message is channeled through social media, due to the echo chambers that are formed within the online support groups for a certain cause (for example, pro- or anti-vaccination), as the information distributed there aims exclusively at the interests of the group, ignoring the need for correct information.

Given the rise of digital media and the growing importance of online platforms in promoting issues of general public concern, the concept of intermedia agenda-setting no longer refers only to the journalistic co-orientation in order to “legitimate news decisions” (Krämer et al., 2008, p. 1), but also to the influence of online communities, considering their potential to reach significant audiences. Thus, the social networking sites could become “important intermedia agenda-setting agents” (Groshek & Clough Groshek, 2013, p. 17), especially due to their feature of easily sharing stories and announcing news as soon as they occur. In fact, the breaking news genre has acquired broader meanings in the current news media landscape, as it is no longer an exclusive matter for television, radio, or other legacy media, but can also be reported by opinion leaders, public figures, or any user on social media platforms. In other words, journalists “have to share their role as information gatekeepers” (Harder et al., 2017, p. 277) with people who formerly represented their audience, but now they have the opportunity to create and distribute their own content via blogs or social media.

In this context, some researchers (Nowak, 2016) talk about a hybridization of media systems, considering, mainly, the changing role of the audience, i.e., the transformation of the users of media content into its “producers”. Gruszczynski and Wagner (2017) have even proposed a new concept to explain the transfer of issue salience between different actors present in the digital media environment – the theory of *agenda-uptake*, offering an abstract framework to define the dynamics between “the agendas of different types of news media and the issues agendas of their audience” (Gruszczynski & Wagner, 2017, p. 397).

Regarding the degree of reciprocity between legacy media (i.e., television, printed newspapers, radio) and online news media, some studies (Conway et al. 2015, p. 363) show that there is a “symbiotic relationship” between the online platforms’ feeds and traditional news, as they influence and support each other in transmitting messages to a wider audience. Thus, citizens can become news producers and those who set the agenda, while journalists follow what is published on social media in order to quickly identify the newsworthy stories (Moy et al., 2016).

From the perspective of agenda-setting effects, the social media issue agenda is influenced, on the one hand, by users’ interest in particular issues (even if they are not on the media agenda), and, on the other hand, by their need to socialize and to exchange information with similar people about the main events of the day (Slavniã, 2016). In addition, studies show that citizens are incidentally exposed to information when using social media, considering that “for every ten posts one scrolls through on News Feed, at least one contains hard-news content” (Feezell, 2018, p. 484), while other researchers (Maier, 2010) have argued that the online news are highly comparable with those found in conventional media.

In order to determine whether or not there is an influence between online media and television (as legacy news outlet) agenda, we advance two research questions referring to the most visible and prominent topics that the two different types of news media covered during a peak-event period (i.e., the nationwide lockdown in Romania in March 2020).

**RQ1:** Which are the most visible topics on the agenda of the analyzed TV and online news sources during the analyzed timeframe?

**RQ2:** How prominent are the topics related to the COVID-19 pandemic on the analyzed TV and online news sources?

Media coverage has a crucial role in mitigating the spread of COVID-19 disease, by disseminating accurate and timely information to the general public about the severity of this crisis in order to avoid panic and to prevent possible conspiracy theories. In fact, previous studies (An & Gower, 2009; Coombs, 2006) have already emphasized the great influence of news coverage on individuals' perceptions and behaviors in times of a crisis. However, in terms of the news sharing on social media during the current pandemic, a recent research (Hanet et al., 2021) shows that the public and media agenda do not correlate: very few topics published by news media on Twitter can also be found in citizens' posts. On the other hand, the online communities' response to breaking news is much stronger, and their tendency to distribute and comment on those key events is significantly higher compared to the regular news (non-breaking news).

Although online social networks give people access to a huge amount of information, the social media issue agenda is both limited and comprehensive (McCombs et al., 2014): individuals easily lose interest in serious topics, but at the same time they need to have real-time access to important information in order to comment or share the news on their own networks. In terms of public health matters, the media coverage is even more important as both digital and legacy media could "reflect, amplify or influence" (Dunn et al., 2017, p. 3040) the public perception about the effectiveness of preventive measures in order to combat the spread of the COVID-19 disease or their attitudes towards COVID-19 vaccination. Given that news is characterized by the fact that it defines issues, identifies potential causes and suggests solutions, media coverage of a topic (especially when it is one that has implications for many people) often facilitates the shaping of opinions or evaluative beliefs (Lee et al., 2020), which can later affect their behavior. From this perspective, the media can be perceived as a social institution (Medina et al., 2021) with a significant role in forming perceptions or norms in a society.

Considering the role of the media in disseminating crisis-relevant information and the importance of this news to an extremely wide audience, whose opinions can be more easily shaped due to a high need for orientation, the following research question aims at exploring the main COVID-19 topics that both television and online news stories referred to at the beginning of the nationwide lockdown in Romania:

**RQ3:** Which are the main topics associated with the COVID-19 pandemic on the agenda of the analyzed TV and online news sources during the analyzed timeframe?

Because social networking sites are more likely to influence traditional media after the occurrence of breaking news (Su & Borah, 2019), it is expected that the transfer of information from online news media to television will be more intense during a peak-event period. In addition, citizens' discussions on social media platforms like Twitter or Facebook have the potential to build a unique agenda, leading traditional media to dedicate articles or special reports to those topics debated in the digital environment. Therefore, the agenda-setting theory no longer focuses only on the media influence on audiences, but it also analyzes how, in certain circumstances, citizens' detailed reports on certain topics or events can shape and define the media agenda, introducing a "reinvigorated conception of intermedia agenda setting" (Groshek

& Clough Groshek, 2013, p. 17). Moreover, in light of the pandemic, social media platforms can play an important role in “boosting” efforts of government authorities (Limaye et al., 2020), by promptly disseminating accurate and accessible information in order to prevent the spread of COVID-19 disease and to eliminate the sources of disinformation.

In this context, this study aims at revealing the media coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic, considering the importance of the topics discussed in the public sphere in the context of a public health crisis, with a significant impact on people’s lives. Due to the fact that we are talking about a critical event that involves the dissemination of a very large amount of information and generates attention in both digital and legacy media, the coverage on this topic has a significant potential to influence public opinion. Considering the rise of social media and its increasing impact on mainstream journalism (Newman, 2009), it is worth investigating whether the social sharing of the media agenda determines an intermedia agenda-setting effect between the television and the online news agenda. Therefore, the last research question for this study is the following:

**RQ4:** How frequently are COVID-19-related news stories transferred from one media agenda to another and what is the direction of this transfer?

## Method

For the purpose of this paper, we conducted a quantitative content analysis on both television and online news stories released between March 18-31 2020, a peak-event period surrounding the nationwide lockdown in Romania, imposed on March 25, 2020. Specifically, we content analyzed all prime-time television news stories aired on PRO TV, Antena 1 and TVR 1. PRO TV and Antena 1 are the first two television outlets in terms of audience reach according to [www.paginademedia.ro](http://www.paginademedia.ro) for March-April 2020 and the national public television (TVR 1) ( $N=666$ ).

Also, we content analyzed online news stories published in the Coronavirus section on [adevarul.ro](http://adevarul.ro) (quality online newspaper) and [libertatea.ro](http://libertatea.ro) (popular online newspaper). These online news outlets are listed as the first two news outlets in terms of unique users according to BRAT-SATI statistics for March and April 2020<sup>2</sup>. The overall news population (approximate value) in the analyzed period was  $N=4321$  ( $N=1920$  on [adevarul.ro](http://adevarul.ro) and  $N=2401$  on [libertatea.ro](http://libertatea.ro)). Population of news stories in the Coronavirus section was  $N=3381$  ( $N=1654$  on [adevarul.ro](http://adevarul.ro) and  $N=1727$  on [libertatea.ro](http://libertatea.ro)). We applied a random sampling procedure. After sampling, the total number of online news stories in the analyzed period was  $N=845$  ( $N=413$  on [adevarul.ro](http://adevarul.ro) and  $N=432$  on [libertatea.ro](http://libertatea.ro)).

The unit of analysis was the news story. Each news story was coded using a content analysis grid and a coding book. Intercoder reliability was measured for key variables in the study, and ranged from .626 to .991 for the online coding and from .786 to .960 for television news coding.

*General visibility of COVID-19-related topics* was measured as percentage of all news identified in the analyzed period on each type of media outlet.

*Topics of news stories* were coded with reference to one in four categories as follows: “national-related news topics”, “both national and international-related news topics”, “international-related news topics”, “unidentified”.

*Prominence of news stories* was measured differently, according to each news media outlet. For television news stories, prominence was measured with reference to the average du-



ration of the news story (measured in number of seconds). For online news stories, prominence was measured with reference to the average number of words allocated for each news story and to the average number of comments following each news story (only the news stories from *adevarul.ro* were followed by comments).

*Most prominent topics of the news stories* were coded by assigning each news story one or more topics from a series of 21 possible topics, including various aspects of the current pandemic such as statistics related to the COVID-19 pandemic, decisions/ positions adopted by the authorities in order to manage the pandemic, different manifestations/ symptoms/ treatment related to the disease, main effects of the pandemic, vaccination, disinformation related to the pandemic, and other topics. The 21 topics were further rearranged in 7 clusters: (1) statistics and situations (statistics from Romania, statistics from other countries, the situation in Romanian hospitals); (2) decisions of authorities (decisions taken by the authorities, measures taken to limit the spread of the virus, the position of the World Health Organization, the position of the Government, the position of the Strategic Communication Group, sanctions granted for non-compliance with the measures imposed by the authorities); (3) manifestations or treatment related to the disease (manifestations of the disease, particular case/ cases of people who got the disease, symptoms, forms of the disease, treatment); (4) effects of the virus (effects of the virus on the economy in general, effects of the virus on a specific economic sector, effects of the virus on ordinary people, COVID-19 pandemic as an opportunity, protests against the rules imposed by the authorities); (5) disinformation (fake news regarding the pandemic); (6) COVID-19 vaccination and (7) other topics.

*Intermedia agenda-setting* was measured by looking at the explicitly mentioned references to other news sources in a certain news story. If there was an explicit reference/ or more explicit references to another news story/ to other news stories, this accounted for the presence of an intermedia agenda-setting effect. If one or more certain explicit references to another source of information were mentioned, they were further coded in order to identify the type of the cited source (television, print newspapers, radio, online sources or social media content) and the direction of news transfer.

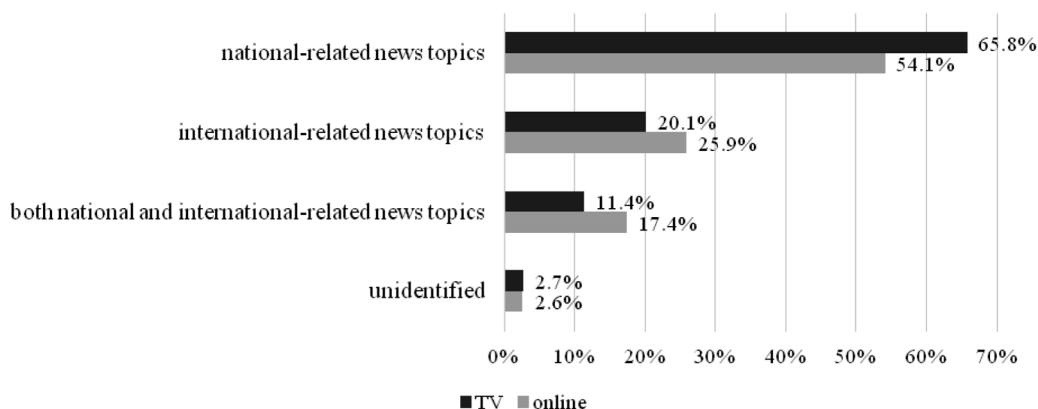
## Findings

With regards to the most visible topics on the agenda of the analyzed television and online news sources, main findings show that, during March 18-31, 2020, television news stories covered COVID-19-related topics in a very large proportion, accounting for 99,01% of the total number of news stories broadcast in the period. At the same time, 78,24% of the total number of online news stories released in the same period on the two online news outlets were related to COVID-19 topics. On a general level, these results show that both television and online media outlets were overwhelmed with COVID-19-related topics in that specific period of March 18-31, 2020, precisely characterized as a peak-event period mainly due to its proximity to the nationwide lockdown in Romania imposed on March 25, 2020.

Main results reveal that national-related news topics were the most prominent types of topics in both the television and online news stories (over 50% of the total news stories dealt with domestic topics), while international-related news stories occupied the second position (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Most prominent types of topics in the analyzed television and online news stories (March 18-31, 2020)

### Television and online news topics, March 18-31, 2020



Media's preference towards dealing with domestic issues is not surprising, especially in the context of the current sanitary crisis and because of the fact that, at the beginning of the pandemic in Romania (in March 2020), media dealt almost exclusively with such topics (as seen from the visibility of topics) emphasizing various aspects that might be of interest for the Romanian audience, such as the numbers of infections and deaths, the measures taken to prevent the spread of the virus, etc.

Results show that the three analyzed television channels dealt almost exclusively (99,01%) with topics related to the COVID-19 pandemic; therefore, given the fact that the news about COVID-19 topics were so visible on the media agenda, it is rather difficult to assess their prominence compared to the other news stories on the agenda within the analyzed timeframe. The average number of seconds allocated for each news story is around 147 seconds, accounting for over 2 minutes/ news story. The news stories broadcast on PRO TV are longer (178 seconds) than those broadcast on Antena 1 (155 seconds) and TVR 1 (133 seconds). For these results, we do not have a reference point, as there is no other similar study conducted so far, in order to allow for comparisons.

In the online media environment, almost 80% (78,24%) of the analyzed news stories released during March 18-31, 2020 dealt with COVID-19-related topics. The average number of comments for the news stories on *adevarul.ro* was 8, leading us to the idea that, at least for the analyzed news stories on *adevarul.ro*, there is low prominence compared, for example, to the comments for the news stories related to the refugee crisis on *adevarul.ro*, for which the average number of comments per news story was 19<sup>3</sup>. This result might be linked to the fact that people tend to get the news from a certain source and then further discuss it on alternative channels such as digital platforms or instant messaging apps rather than on the official page of the news outlet.

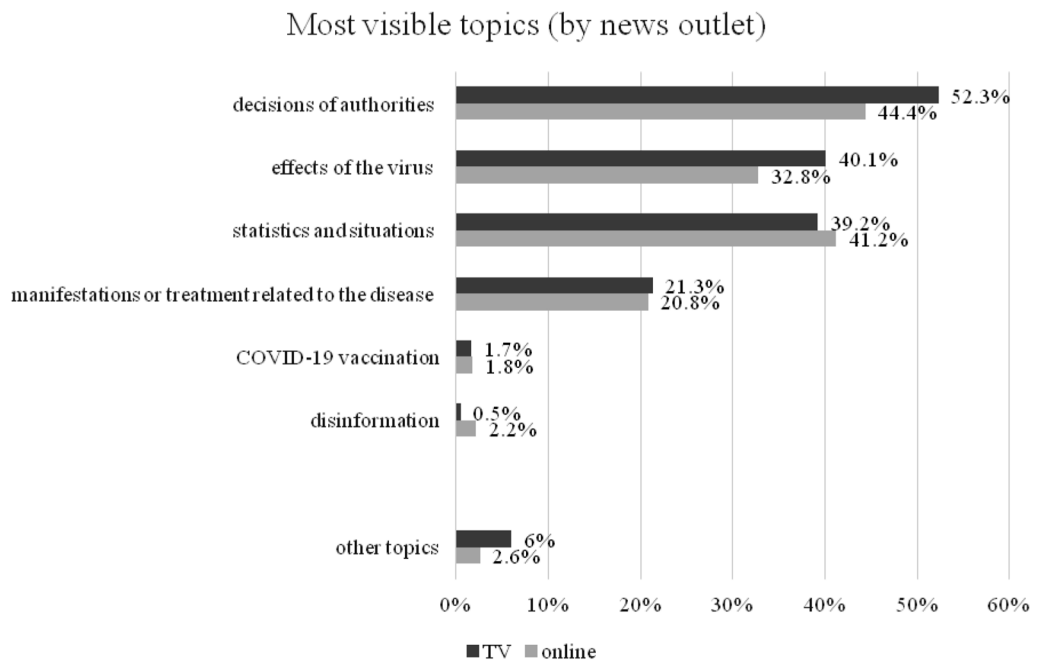
On the other hand, the news stories released by *libertatea.ro* are closed to comments and, as a result, we cannot refer to them. The average number of words for the analyzed news stories on *adevarul.ro* was 438, while the average number of words for the analyzed news stories on *libertatea.ro* was 409. In other words, the news stories released by *adevarul.ro* are



longer than those released by *libertatea.ro*, and this result might be explained with reference to the specificity of the news outlet – i.e., longer news stories are more prevalent in quality online newspapers compared with popular ones (which seem to prefer shorter stories, according to the characteristics of their readership) (Boukes et al., 2020).

In terms of the most visible topics by news outlet, results show that both television and online news stories referred mainly to topics regarding decisions taken by the authorities in order to manage the pandemic (including general measures taken to limit the spread of the virus), effects of the virus on the economy in general, certain economic sectors, and ordinary people (including particular cases of people who got the disease), and situation in hospitals as well as statistics from both Romania and other countries. COVID-19 vaccination and disinformation regarding the pandemic were the least mentioned topics on both types of media agendas (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Most visible topics in the analyzed television and online news stories (March 18-31, 2020)



These results show media's preference towards covering "hot" topics that are context-dependent (i.e., with reference to that specific period in March 2020, surrounding the nationwide lockdown in Romania), while letting apart other topics such as COVID-19 vaccination which has become more relevant in December 2020, when the first vaccines have become available and widely used all over the world. These results confirm that the media tackled mostly those topics related to that specific moment of the pandemic, when people did not know about the virus, about its effects, and about the possible ways to overcome the crisis situation. In this respect, media might have had a crucial role in orienting people's opinions and attitudes. This is in line with the articulation function of the media (Noelle-Neumann 1973/2004) and to the need for orientation (McCombs & Weaver, 1973; Weaver, 1980).

Especially in crisis situations, when they face relevant topics (as the COVID-19 one), people tend to follow the media to get to know about what is happening and reduce their levels of uncertainty.

In terms of most prominent topics in the analyzed news stories, results show that both television and online news covered topics that are less visible on their agenda (i.e., COVID-19 vaccination and disinformation) by allocating them either more space in the news bulletin (for televised stories), or covering them in-depth (stories related to vaccination and disinformation are longer than all the other stories covering COVID-19-related topics) (Figure 3 and Figure 4).

Figure 3: Prominence of topics in television news stories, in the analyzed period. For television news stories, prominence was measured with respect to the average number of seconds/ story.

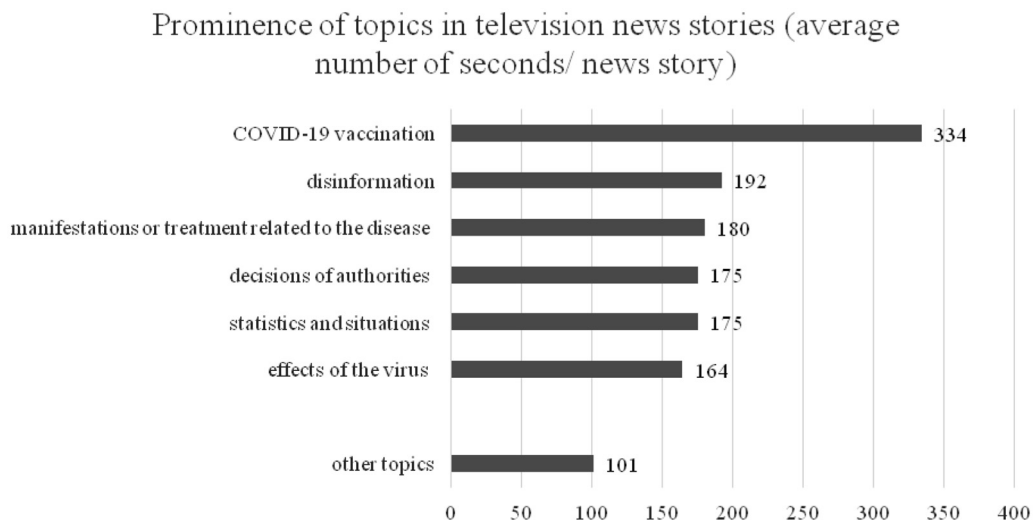
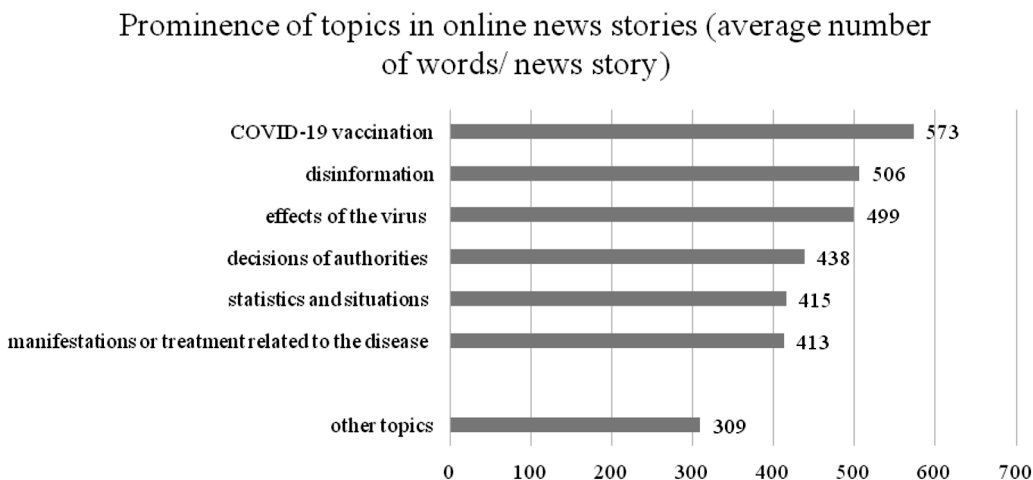
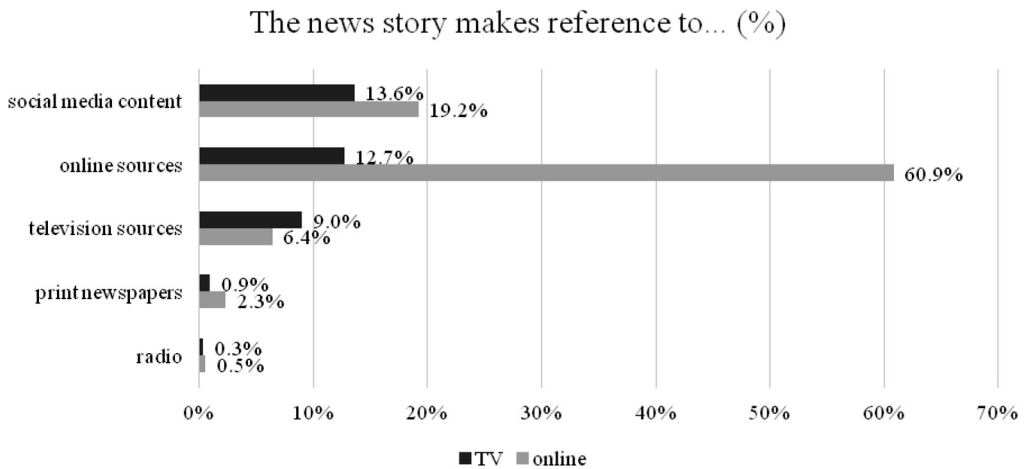


Figure 4: Prominence of topics in online news stories, in the analyzed period. For online news stories, prominence was measured with respect to the average number of words/ story.



Another important part of this research is dedicated to the phenomenon of intermedia agenda-setting. By looking at those news stories explicitly citing other media sources, including legacy media (television, print newspapers, and radio), social media and online sources, results show that content published on social media is a frequently mentioned source in the analyzed television news stories, followed by references to online sources and television sources. For the analyzed online news stories, we can see that they make references most frequently to online sources, followed by social media content and television sources (Figure 5).

Figure 5: Intermedia agenda-setting for the analyzed television and online news stories (March 18-31, 2020) (some of the news stories make references to more than one type of source)



Content published online (either in the form of social media content or not) is frequently “borrowed” and cited in both online and television news stories. This is an interesting result, letting us assume that digital media content does play a significant role in the dynamics of the Romanian media environment. One possible explanation is related to the growing use of digital media content for information purposes. More and more people use social media and online news to get their information from and, therefore, citing such sources might ensure a better access to the public.

As the public have become increasingly selective and there is a high audience fragmentation within the current media environment, the “traditional” agenda-setting power of legacy media (television, print newspapers, and radio) seems to have been transferred to digital media (social media, online sources) that are now “mainstream” sources. At the same time, the information is available almost instantaneously in the digital media environment, and, therefore, in most situations, news stories are first released in the online media environment and then further retrieved and amplified by other, more “traditional” news outlets.

These results show a relatively high intermedia agenda-setting effect within the Romanian media environment. This tendency to “borrow” news stories from other media outlets is not new and might be the result of multiple factors. One of them is related to the pressure to cover, almost instantly, the most important aspects related to an event; as a result, journalists tend to search for inspiration and ideas in other news sources. Another factor might be attributed to the above-mentioned idea regarding the fact that the digital media environment enables an almost instantaneous type of reporting (i.e., one that is very close to the event),

compared to prime-time television news stories that report events that happened during the day, being rather far from the ongoing event. For some “hot” topics, their television news coverage comes after the digital media have already published a lot of content. Last but not least, within the current media environment, highly dominated by various forms of disinformation and other potential “polluters”, other news media sources might be cited as a proof to ensure that the topic has been covered elsewhere as well and that the news story could be properly documented.

## Discussion

The present research represents, to the best of our knowledge, the first approach in Romania so far aiming at uncovering the media coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic during a peak-event period (i.e., the nationwide lockdown in March 2020). Main results show both television and online media’s preference towards covering “hot” events that are context-dependent (Aldoory & Grunig, 2012; Pang et al., 2014; Ungar, 1998). The importance of the media in orienting people’s opinions and attitudes is crucial in such periods of crisis, as other studies (Abdullah et al., 2020) have already shown, highlighting the fact that the effect of news dissemination about the COVID-19 pandemic can be manifested not only on individuals’ health, but also on an economic, behavioral, or psychological level.

As some researchers have pointed out, the COVID-19 pandemic is also “a crisis of information” (David & Sommerlad, 2020, p. 7), because people did not know much about the virus or the lockdown’s implications on the economy and on their daily lives, which has led to an overabundance of news generating opinions or emotions, as well as a lot of disinformation. Most individuals expected the media to answer their questions related to the evolution of the pandemic, the measures they must take to protect themselves or their loved ones, or about the impact that restrictions and social distancing will have on their personal and professional lives. Thus, all the news related to the COVID-19 pandemic could become a trigger (Ermolaev et al., 2020) for panic, anxiety, or mental disorders, worsening individuals’ pre-existing concerns or causing new ones (i.e., fear of transmitting the virus to their family and friends, fear of living in isolation for lengthy periods of time, fear of job loss, etc.).

From this point of view, the present study aimed to shed light on the particular situation of the Romanian media coverage at the beginning of the pandemic, by presenting the most visible topics in a period characterized by a high need for orientation, given those unforeseen and unprecedented events. Results show that both television and online news stories referred mainly to topics regarding decisions taken by the authorities in order to manage the pandemic, to effects of the virus on the economy and how it affects ordinary people (including particular cases of people who got the disease), as well as the situation in hospitals or statistics available at a national or global level.

On the other hand, COVID-19 vaccination and disinformation regarding the pandemic were the least mentioned topics on both types of media agendas, even though the media coverage of these topics would have had important effects in terms of improving people’s health literacy and preventing possible anti-vaccination content, especially on social media. In fact, studies (Puri et al., 2020) show that the vaccine hesitancy is largely attributed to false or misleading information about COVID-19 on social media, which can be generated by both human and non-human accounts. It is possible that the lack of media interest in addressing these

issues at the beginning of the pandemic in Romania may be one of the reasons why a large part of the country's population is still reluctant to get vaccinated (39.4 percent of Romanians do not intend to take the COVID-19 vaccine in 2021<sup>4</sup>).

This research was also based on the investigation of the intermedia agenda-setting phenomenon in the Romanian media environment, referring to the way in which online and legacy media influence each other in terms of prioritizing certain issues during a peak-event period. Results show that content published on social media is frequently mentioned as a source of information in the analyzed television news stories, followed by references to online sources and television sources. Because digital actors do not have the same institutional constraints as traditional media when disseminating news, their reactions can often be faster, which determines the journalists from legacy media organizations to cite them or to “borrow” their ideas. However, as other studies have already shown, it is possible that, even if traditional media platforms react more slowly to covering a news story, “their subsequent impact may be larger” (Harder et al., 2017, p. 288).

Taking into account the general context of this sanitary crisis that has immediate and significant consequences on people's lives, they tend to look for the most convenient source of information, which can provide them “insider information” and a way to “check in with family or friends” (Austin et al., 2012, p. 197). Online social networks respond to this particular need of individuals and have the potential, at least during an ongoing pandemic, to influence and determine news coverage of traditional media, as shown by a previous study (Valenzuela et al., 2017) on agenda-setting function of social media among television news professionals, during the first week following a natural disaster.

Being aware of the impact of online news, easily quantifiable depending on the number of shares, likes or comments, journalists can be inspired by the topics presented in social media, which amplifies the effect of the intermedia agenda-setting between the two types of media. Therefore, the role of social media in shaping public opinion seems to be important in the event of a crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic, which should lead to increased responsibilities for online content producers, given the rapid spread of information on these platforms and its potential influence on people's behavior and actions.

## Conclusion

This study aims to investigate the media coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic, shedding light, at the same time, on the agenda-setting effects and the phenomenon known as intermedia agenda-setting in the Romanian media environment. As several authors (Haimet al., 2018; Nowak, 2016) have already shown, the agenda-setting theory is being challenged by the significant growth of online news outlets, by the audiences that are both media users and producers, and by the more dynamic and faster flow of information and news provided by digital media. In this context, the content published online (either in the form of social media content or not) is frequently “borrowed” and cited in both online and television news stories, which leads to the idea that the power of legacy media has been transferred, at least in the early part of the COVID-19 pandemic, to digital media that have become mainstream.

At the same time, it is important to keep in mind that traditional media can amplify the effects of agenda-setting through social media, bringing online topics to the attention of a larger audience, which is often different from the public who uses online social networks to

get information. Last but not least, given the huge amount of information that can be transmitted via social media and the high potential for spreading disinformation on these platforms, it is important that online content producers carefully check each piece of information before disseminating it, and preferably cite other sources that may support the objectivity of that specific news story.

As any other social sciences study, this comes with some limitations. First, results are bound to the national context and, therefore, cannot be generalized to other media environments where the agenda-setting roles might be distributed in order ways. Second, results are mainly descriptive and we cannot assume any causation between the variables included in the present study. Despite these limitations, this study can be a good starting point for discussion and further research on the significant role of the media in shaping the public agenda and how it can subsequently be reflected in some public attitudes and actions. Within the current pandemic context, the analysis of media coverage is even more important due to the fact that the way the media report on COVID-19 issues might offer important insights into how people might understand and further develop certain opinions, attitudes, and behaviors such as compliance with the rules imposed by the authorities in order to stop the spread of the disease, trust in authorities, and even vaccine acceptance.

## Notes

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<sup>2</sup> According to [www.brat.ro/sati](http://www.brat.ro/sati) for March-April 2020.

<sup>3</sup> Results from the content analysis conducted with reference to the refugee crisis are available in Buturoiu et al. (2017) and Corbu et al. (2017).

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.strategicthinking.ro/february-2021-public-perception-of-vaccination-romanians-confidence-in-the-anti-covid19-vaccination/>.

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