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Media Diasporactivism and Diasporapathy in the News Community**

Abstract

The present study focuses on the thematization of *the new Romanian diaspora's* experiences through the spectacular mechanisms of the media and on the subsequent production of active moral feelings, which intensify critical expressions and justificatory demands within various audiences – designated by the concept of “news community”. Generically, the term “diasporapathy” is used to characterize putative members of a diaspora who do not respond to the appeals of “diasporactivists”. This study is based on an anti-essentialist methodology (S. Fish, R. Brubaker, B. Anderson) and on L. Boltanski, L. Thevenot and L. Chouliaraki's model of analyzing “distant” moral interpellations and the transfer of moral causes into “news speech”.

In speech interactions – in the sample drawn from internet discussion forums – we observe how this diasporic experience is used as a category of practice in order to articulate new claims and projects, apart from activating the “ideal diaspora” *versus* “diasporapathetic” behaviors in order to remake an ideal Romanian-ness within the new European area.

Key words: Romanian diaspora, media rhetoric, moral emotions, news community, distant suffering

Rezumat

Cercetarea abordează modul în care tematizarea experiențelor *noii diasporă românești*, prin mecanismele spectaculare specifice media, produce sentimente active din punct de vedere moral, intensificând astfel expresiile critice și cerințele justificative ale diverselor publicuri – desemnate prin conceptul de „comunitate de știri”. Într-un sens generic, termenul „diasporapatie” este utilizat pentru a caracteriza comportamentul acelor membri ai diasporăi care „nu răspund” chemărilor „diasporactiviștilor”. Cercetarea este realizată pe baza unei metodologii antiesențialiste (S. Fish, R. Brubaker, B. Anderson,) și a modelului lui L. Boltanski, L. Thevenot și L. Chouliaraki de analiză a interpelărilor morale „la distanță” și transpunerea în „discursul știrilor” a cauzelor morale.

În cadrul interacțiunilor discursive – vizibile în eșantionul extras din forumurile de discuții de pe internet – se observă cum această experiență diasporică este utilizată ca o categorie a practicii pentru a articula noi poziționări și proiecte, și nu doar pentru a activa comportamentul „diasporic ideal” *versus* „diasporapatic” în tentativa de a realiza un *remake* al unei românități ideale în noul spațiu european.

Cuvinte-cheie: diaspora românească; retorica mediatică; comunitate de știri; emoții morale; distanță morală

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1. Diasporic public and moral rhetoric

The present study focuses on the thematization of “the new Romanian diaspora’s” experiences through the spectacular mechanisms of the media and on the subsequent production of active moral feelings, which intensify critical expressions and justificatory demands within various audiences – designated by the concept of “news community”. The publicized waves of dismay and compassion regarding the *diaspora experience* of the “new European citizens” resonate in a moral panic whose inflated pathos urges sociological research to analyze how media frames manage to convert this new kind of intra-European emigration into “political messages”. Before reaching this stage (the alert regarding the existence of power structures; the claim of certain status competences), the information regarding the social situation – the joys and sorrows of these people – passes through a proto-political form, such as *ethical interpellations*. Thus, a pragmatic analysis on the construction and the exposure of active publics within the *ethical grammar* of the public scene becomes necessary.

As an introductory example of what we understand by “interpellation” and “ethical grammar”, we will take the case of two moral emotions: mercy and compassion. In order to become both moral and political feelings, they must be discursively “stimulated” – they must support the identification with the suffering one by eliminating the distance between the stage and the viewer. An interesting argument, that justifies such spectacularizations of the news in various media receptor communities, is to be found in Boltanski’s studies. In *Distant Suffering* (Boltanski, 1999) he proves that, if such a show is not articulated in a discourse about the “causes” – of the suffering endured by a person, a group or a community, for example – then the sympathy can easily dissolve either into a feeling of terror (therefore of rejection) or into selfishness (“What about us? Who takes care of us?”) and indifference (the receptor of the news might think “Well, they kind of deserve it.”) In his later studies, he denounces the use of humanitarian arguments as a “façade for dissimulating political actions” – for instance referring to suffering as a universal moral cause (Boltanski, 2000).

This research aims at the theoretical clarification of the conceptual framework employed in a previous study (Perpelea, 2012) where we have analyzed how media act as a “symbolic power agent” in order to create a stage for the manifestation of a “public shaped around a series of diasporic interrogations”. Unlike the previous research, where we have used the term “diasporic”, we will employ here a clear anti-essentialist approach, considering the suggestions of R. Brubaker’s analyses. The American sociologist criticizes “groupism”¹ – the substantial approach of “national identity” – and applies a similar function to the term “diaspora”. Following an analytical reconstruction through diaspora’s lexical field, we reach the following meanings: “abstract nouns designating a condition (diasporicity or diasporism), a process (diasporization, de-diasporization and re-diasporization), even a field of inquiry (diasporology or diasporistics). There is the adjective ‘diasporist’, designating a stance or position in a field of debate or struggle” (Brubaker, 2004, p. 4).

The terminology used in the title of this article is also inspired by Brubaker’s study, but the terms have a much more generic meaning: “diasporapathy – to characterize putative members of a diaspora who do not respond to the appeals of diasporactivists” (Brubaker, 2005, p. 14).

In this context, we will study the concept of “news community” and expand the categories that concern the construction of media information. Therefore, we must mention that, from an empirical point of view, different exemplifications were chosen. They cover a triple function: of supporting the cumulative capacity of the theoretical model; of offering “empirical

coverage” for a wider range of moral emotions; of refining the illustration of how the three moral topics (denunciative, sentimental and aesthetic) balance each other out. The examples will be offered in a corpus of media information about the Romanian diaspora. The term “media” was broadened through a conventional process; thus, we have included print and TV, as well as websites, forums and web 2.0 social networks where various audiences interpret the information passed to them through media formats.

We have to mention that the use of the term “corpus” does not imply the methodological intention of conducting a content analysis – this perspective would be somehow inappropriate for a study regarding the presence/absence of certain moral categories in the communicational space. Thus, the design of this corpus does not require a “subsampling” similar to a biunivocal network of mini-maps in a hypothetical real phenomenon, but a set of “news” typical for a specific reception situation: that in which the related phenomena are assigned meaning not after having been seen, but *by the act* of being seen.

Any form of *moral interpellation* figure (sheer emphasis, feeling, ‘taking to heart’, daily shared indignation, publicly expressed denunciation, alerting the authorities and the civic organizations, instigation to boycott, resorting to supererogatory actions etc.) transcends geographic and cultural boundaries insofar as it points out moral deficiencies and global inequalities. From this assumption we can draw the research questions:

How do the media *accelerate the dissemination of ethical interpellations*? Which media devices contribute to the creation of a *community of glances* (based on a silent public agreement translated in “I see what you see”) where a ritual of (mis)interpretations may take place?

2. “Proper distance”. Moral engagement systems in mediapolis

The proponents of media austerity find by the minute new examples to demonize mass-media. We have the right, though, to be outmoded and ask ourselves in a Kantian manner if the media might not contribute to the achievement of an “open mentality”. In *Media and Morality*, Roger Silverstone proves that the crucial moral challenge of the new media landscape – that he calls “mediapolis” – is if this is capable to change the way we conceive social relations to what is different from us, to *the Other*. Silverstone coined the ethical policy by which “otherness” is seen in its own terms by the term of “proper distance”.²

Print, television and internet features are all part of the public space mechanisms that manage the visibility of people and communities who, in their turn, receive a benefit or live a physical or moral discomfort caused by explicitly assuming a risk situation. To which extent is this management guided by an ethics of care?

The Romanian *diasporic community* – or “the new Romanian diaspora”, in the terms used by C. Beciu (2012) – is a relevant example to analyze this issue. The behavior of Romanian citizens, who left to work abroad, in the EU, has a unsettling representation in the media. A somehow cynical assumption is that this collective emotion holds the function of legitimizing a certain “moral distance”, that is the proto-political form generating political indifference. Along the exemplifications offered in this text, we will find arguments to show that invoking moral difference is a strategy to justify passivity. Could this be their moment of “slight” responsibility?

Silverstone’s hypothesis – the “proper distance” – implies a *European panculturalism* where the prescription of *accepting the other without effort* is deeply rooted and allows us to

employ the expression “eyes shut, eyes open” – a structural metaphor defining the field of tolerance – not as a skillful handling of ethical distance (*improper distance*, in Silverstone’s terms), but as an opening of those identity borders allowing individuals and communities to become aware of the moral joy and suffering of others. This rather optimistic view is also reflected in the methodological approach, which implies giving up the epistemic delights of a ritual lament regarding the media culture’s tendency to “mine” the paths that would allow the public space to develop a healthy democracy. Due to the complexity of this debate, we will only choose to present it synthetically, by selecting a couple of representative authors.

According to P. Dahlgren, the new televisual genres and *new media* create the circumstances for a *jump-start political participation*, as they have built in a model of civic culture where six subtle dimensions – values, affinities, knowledge, practices, identity and discussion – interact in a “dynamic circuit” (Dahlgren, 2003, p. 156). Dahlgren’s model is adopted by J. Jones (2005, p. 192) who shows how *New Political Television* (NPTV) and various forms of engagement through interactive technologies play the role of instigating to discursive activities, as they “supply” the audience with values such as honesty or responsibility overseen in a way that can lead to a healthy rumination (*mulled over*). Nevertheless, as Jones mentions, the question that remains is whether such “textual commitments” are isomorphic with a “political commitment”. Certainly, contemporary politics is “ruminated” in the everyday imaginary under a textual form, but it would constitute a great misstep to neglect the identification of electioneering politics and law-making process with political participation through passionate TV engagement.

Yet, how can we avoid understanding active viewing as a simple substitute for a non-contextual political behavior? One solution is conceptual complexification. In the present example, we can employ the term “mediation”. We will define *mediation* as the process of unifying the frame of a happy or unhappy action (risk condition, suffering) with the debate setting, thus the two originally different states becoming a unique situation. In order to clearly perceive the methodological purpose of this concept, we will take a step back in order to review a certain aspect of the *public* (audience).

The classical meaning of the terms “public” or “publicity” exclude from the area of possible exemplifications certain groups, forms of communication or participation channels. Most sociologists consider the main dimension of the ideal-type of “public” to be the effort of searching for a common, integrative discourse. However, there are authors who wonder whether certain “publics” can prove to be irrational or even hateful (Dayan, 2006).

This definition of the *concept of mediation* allows us to classify as “publics” even those social groups that represent the others as permanent “strangers” or act in the spirit of an irrational bias. Hence Sonia Livingstone’s call to consider the “public” as an adjective rather than a noun: “to say or to do things in public, to do public things, to display relations in public – elements that distinguish “public” from “private”, but that impose, however, less stringent requirements when it comes to identify the “public” (Livingstone, 2004, p. 33).

In these terms, we can build an analytical framework in which the coordination of public opinion “voices” can be analyzed starting with the requirements of action and engagement practices. In this context, we will lay out an analysis based on the distinction between dispute and social peace.³ Public operationalization of vigilante figures (public denunciations, indignation transferred into public interpellations) is achieved in the frame of *dispute practice*.

Romanian armchair viewers watch, from their homes, “news about the diaspora” as if these were a show where some do good, others do bad, some suffer, other are happy. The dis-

tance from those people compels us to passivity... and yet, a curious inner reflexivity stirs us in an acceptable moral frame, where we show a particular interest towards misfortune. In order to see how these inner “voices” articulate in a speech, we will introduce two dimensions of “data” collection.

The first one concerns the *emotional* stance: from benevolent attention and empathy, to compassion and “pitying” – as public policy.⁴ The second one concerns especially the *argumentative* stance: the “data”. It refers to the ways of establishing common conventions for the “measurement” of merits, guilt, reparation injunctions etc.

The conceptual cladding of this study is based on the distinction between three types of media “caption” of moral-emotional alerts conjured by the diasporic experience: *the sentimental (emotional) topics*, *the topics of denunciation* (denunciative) and *the aesthetic (expressional) topics*. In the previous study (Perpelea, 2012) we have exemplified the various engagement practices in each of these *topics* and which of these “news” types is most used in the associated scenic features. Accumulating new observations suggests that the “news” types that we are going to further discuss are used in all these *topics* in order to rhetorically impose a “hierarchy of distant suffering”.

3. A model of information analysis

In our analysis we use these models, not in contrast, but to describe in a *topologic space* various media frames that aim to build a “hierarchy of distant suffering” starting with the different spreading of *moral-emotional figuration* (moral blindness, moral fatigue, compassion, mercy, indignation, denunciation, sublime narrative etc.) of various events and phenomena generically described by the concept of *diasporic experience*.

As in the previous analysis, we will use here the three news categories from L. Chouliaraki’s model (2006; 2008, pp. 371-391). We will only proceed with a brief didactic summarization. Certainly, its justification (why this one and no other) would require a separate study – especially since many meta-theoretical queries occurred. We will only mention that most of the critics draw from the fact that their originators have remained stranded to the idea of “ethically neutral news”. But Chouliaraki’s model rests upon the narrative theory of Bahtin (1982), thus preserving the implicit ethical meaning of any kind of media formatting of information. Among the truly constructive critics of Chouliaraki’s model we retained the one belonging to Stijn Joye and we showed the circumstances for the emergence – through informational regression – of the “neglected news” category.

Adventure news

The term “adventure” is borrowed by L. Chouliaraki from Bahtin’s narrative model.⁵ ‘Adventure news’ claim a maximal distance from the audience, to whom they suggest an ethical apathy. In journalistic terms, these information are called “breaking news”. More rarely, they are called “dispatch” and, more emphatically, *news alert*. How can we explain the increasingly used term of “news alert”? Certainly, in the professional field of journalists the following explanation would create some annoyance: this term would smoothen the meaning of “news that stir moral curiosity” (*funny occurrence; ...he made a mistake, but confessed it*)

implied by the “adventure news”. Here is an example drawn from the daily newspaper *Adevărul*, June 25th 2012:

Aged 34, Alexandru Dan Dumitru was today, in Leeds (England), among those who carried the Olympic torch. Downtown, an Italian woman approached him, while he was running, and she was detained by the Metropolitan Police.

The woman *admitted to have made a mistake, but she confessed* that she tried to touch the Olympic torch out of superstition... Of Italian roots, owner of a peninsular restaurant, Gilda Porcelli confessed that she was hoping for her gesture to bring luck to “Squadra Azzura” in their semifinal match against Germany.

Alexandru Dumitru Dan, the one who was – unwillingly – involved in this *funny incident*, was taking part in the carrying of the Olympic torch, today, on the streets of Leeds. Aged 34, he is involved in charity actions that aim to support underprivileged children.

(SOURCE: http://www.adevarul.ro/sport/antifotbal/sport-Jocurile_Olimpice_2012-flacara_olimpica-Alexandru_Dan_Dumitru-incident-italianca-Leeds-fan-Euro_2012_0_725327746.html).

The key words used by the editors are expressive for the definition of this information genre: *sport, 2012 Olympic Games, Olympic torch, Alexandru Dan Dumitru, incident, Italian, Leeds, fan, Euro 2012*.

Emergency news

They are achieved through complex narratives where multiple connections are exposed, as well as new possibilities of action for the “participants” in the scene of suffering and for the “audience” called to manifest various forms of moral feelings, meant to fuse emergency actions. The function of these news is to build, on the TV screen, an “internal hierarchy of suffering people and actors of a potential charity”. We recognize here the wide theme developed in L. Boltanski’s studies.

Ecstatic news

In this case, the media construction of the relationship between “viewer” and “related scene” stimulates a reflexive identification where the viewer engages in a *continuum mode* with the diasporic experience. The term *ecstatic* is of Heideggerian descent and signifies a temporality that breaks with the hitherto narrative order. This experience is also somewhat narrated in order for it to be felt with the same astonishment depicted through *mass-media events* such as “the tsunami catastrophe” or “the 9/11 terrorist attacks”.

Through media formatting, a radical opening of these extraordinary events takes place: those *moments when a minute lasts for a lifetime* or when *a week slips away unnoticed*. It is a relationship of identification that, subsequently, allows the commitment to a “universal moral position”, such as the one towards the 9/11 events. This type of positions is used in the attempt to legitimize political projects, such as “the war on terrorism”.

For the *diasporic experience*, a comparison with the “moral crusades” might be more adequate, as J. Gusfield suggests.⁶ Thus, from simple “daily routines”, by various strategies of media enhancement, they become public issues.

Neglected news

Romanian media context suggests that we shouldn't reduce the news categories to the three types established by Chouliaraki. It is interesting to "help" this model by adding a fourth category, discussed by Stijn Joye: *neglected news* (2010, pp. 586-601).

The concept of *mediation* (the unification of the action frame with the debate setting, so that the two originally different states become a *unique situation*) requires a special analysis of the information mechanisms used to achieve "the public condition". We notice that the definition is based on a theory of action between speakers placed in a circumstance that makes it possible to define the meaning as "an action brought to bear upon possible actions" (Foucault's expression). The category of "neglected news", though, refers to the irony of "an action brought to bear upon possible actions"!

If we translated the term based on the meaning assigned by Stijn Joye, we should name it, in Romanian, "știri neglijate" (*untended news*). However, we have opted for the translation "știri părăginite" (*fallow news*) in order to underline the idea that their initial effect has a moral relevance that is lost through public oblivion, inducing a particular kind of *moral fatigue*.

4. News Community. An example

The theoretical model of this study outlines three moral-emotional topics that constitute the core of news community, gather novel audiences and fuse debates through media framing. Unlike Chouliaraki's stand, of identifying a hierarchy of these pieces of "news" based on their contribution to form an ideal-type of diasporic public, in the present study this classification has only a heuristic purpose. Thus, two main consequences unfold, relevant for the methodological aspect.

First of all, this implies to see a news item, an instrument, a media frame as a space of attributes where certain virtual characteristics prevail: *adventurous*, *emergency-incentive*, *ecstatic*, *omissive* (the virtual character of being forgotten by the "public attention"). Then, the "public" will not be investigated through generalizations of certain "reception situations" predefined by Eco's model of "ideal reader" inscribed in the "text". Namely, rather than a sort of group predefined by a certain consumption of "news about diaspora", through "diasporic public" we mean to understand a type of *self-definition* behavior: that of explicitly seeking to "be among the public", of risking to publicly expose (a private conversation, an internet forum etc.) the personal way of morally and emotionally receiving the *diasporic experience* from the news repertory, be it adventure, emergency, ecstatic or neglected news.

The main dimensions of this concept are:

1. *The simultaneous consumption* of the same "media images"
2. The intangibility systems publicly available (ad-hoc conventions; moral, social and legal standards; interests and motivations; reading competencies) that mobilize "the real reader" to become a "learned reader", or in other words, able to observe and analyze his own reactions along the process of *updating* the text.

The first dimension of the "news community" refers, obviously, to the research of Benedict Anderson, who analyzes the ethnic community as an *imagined community* (Anderson, 2000).⁷ The second one derives from hypotheses retrieved in the concept of *interpretive community*, drawn up by Stanley Fish (1980).

For B. Anderson, the term "imagined" is not a construct of fantasy (lacking any real basis), but must be understood in the sense of belonging to a "represented community". Thus:

...the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion. (...) In fact, all communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact (and perhaps even these) are imagined. Communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined.⁸

The second dimension of the concept says more about the constancy of the idea of simultaneity. Through *interpretive community*, Stanley Fish (1980, p. 48) designates reading conventions that urge the “real reader” to do everything in his power to become informed (*informed reader*). This “informed reader” is “literate” in three ways:

- he is competent in reconstructing textual symbols (“the reader inscribed in the text”);
- he takes into account the evolution of textual meaning – his actions are “regarded not as leading to meaning but as having meaning” (Fish, 1980, p. 158);
- but most importantly, he takes into account his own consciousness transformation because of the text.

Finally, nowadays there is a jungle of opposed models, from one methodological end – that looks for arguments regarding how important the significance of the media text can be – to the other end, more radical maybe – where observations regarding what the media text does to us are being gathered. The concept of “news community” is not designed to join one side or the other. It seems to be closer to Fish’s model, but only to underline the function of interpretive communities to offer “the reader” the possibility of a receptive activity (“simultaneous reading contexts”) during which *something is happening within himself*.

For this reason, it is important to underline that the main dimension of this concept is not the one related with identity traits (author’s prescriptions, specific conditions of media production, social attributes of the “sender” and “receiver”), but the one that stresses on the way the information is designed in a *cognitive-affective cut* that connects the news show to a type of discourse by which “viewers” are encouraged to identify with the related persons or actions.

An interesting conceptualization in this sense is the one developed by Stanley Cohen (2001), starting from his critics against hypocritical humanitarian activism. According to him, in the mindset of the “viewers” belonging to such a “news community” there is an active imaginary ‘container model’ which authorizes the idea that irrationality or mere “consciousness flaws” are to be understood as the fruit of an existence *outside of our righteous spirit*. It is clear, according to Cohen, that sentimentalism has to be criticized: behind these tender-hearted charity bodies also reside a certain self-satisfaction, courtesy, hypocrisy and... vanity. But without the spread of vulnerability and dependency patterns, altruism and social justice would not exist as political needs (Cohen, 2001, p. 183).

Here is an excerpt from a conversation that we consider typical for the meaning of *news community* as a dialogue space for *diasporactivism*.

1. [...] Whether or not you feel threatened by people is totally irrelevant to their race/background/origin. It’s the way they make you feel at the time. There are some Romanian people who would “stab you as soon as look at you”, there are also English (and French, German, African...) people who would do the same thing. And I walk down Humberstone gate frequently, I live in the city centre. – KH, Leicester commented on 10-Sep-2009 12:04

2. Love all you politically correct mainstream idiots, maybe if everyone could talk frankly and openly about whatever differences they may have then there wouldn’t be so much hate in this world. By the way, Romanians are not a race, they are from Romania, in the same way the English are from

England so stop playing the boring race card where it isn't relevant. – *Frank, Leicester*, commented on 10-Sep-2009 12:13

3. Does anybody actually realise why people from other countries (not just Romania) come to England? The answer is simple England started it and what goes around comes around. – *A Romanian, Humberstone Gate*, commented on 10-Sep-2009 12:23

4. Mr Romanian, yes thats (*sic*) the real reason right? They just come becasue (*sic*) we went there, like an exchange student right? Gimme a break, you have no idea what racism is, me & my people we know the racism! – *Ahmed Ashed, Leicester*, commented on 10-Sep-2009 12:36

Note: It is the case of a local British counselor, Robert Fraser, who was accused of instigation to racial hatred after declaring, in a public meeting, that Romanians would stab somebody as soon as they see them; his remarks were posted on YouTube. For further details, see http://www.rea.litetea.net/un-oficial-britanic-spune-ca-cine-intalnest-romani-risca-sa-fie-injunghiat-intr-o-clipa_472687.html, and <http://www.thisisleicestershire.co.uk/Race-rant-Leicestershire-councillor-suspende-d/story-12033721-detail/story.html>

We can observe how discussants (3) and (4) prove themselves to be “informed (“actual”) readers” of the same *news community*, but invoke a different communitarian reference. By telling the Romanian discussant that he sees this (the diasporic experience, the immigrant condition) as a “student exchange”, Ahmed not only accuses him of banter – *The answer is simple England started it and what goes around comes around* – but also of tacitly introducing the assumptions of a “Western” *interpretive community*. In other words, Ahmed’s *definition of the situation* aims to radically differentiate between the representational field of racial discrimination (*Gimme a break, you have no idea what racism is, me & my people we know the racism!*) and conjunctural representations of “marginal” practices of English, Irish (“amateurs”, comparing them to “Easterners”) and Romanians.

5. New media publics activation through moral rhetorics processes

5.1. Sentimental topics

As L. Boltanski (2000, p. 81) analyzes this moral rhetoric figure, “in this case the internal state is treated as the internal inscription of an exteriority, as testifies the possibility allowed the inspired subject to report on his own states as if they were foreign to him”.

a. Affection and sympathy

Through “adventure news” media framing, the simplest informative emotion is activated; we will call it *affection*. We will give it the meaning that M. Nussbaum (2001, p. 302) attributes to empathy: “Empathy is simply an imaginative reconstruction of another person’s experience.”

On a scale of moral-emotional feelings, affection is at the bottom, compared to feelings such as compassion or mercy. Information is passed in a random and isolated chain of “curiosities” that do not impose any explicit emotional demand on the “viewer”. Short descriptive narrative, classifiable as so-called “daily news” or “daily risks” where space and time are particular: this process restricts the approach of the “moral viewer” to scenes of suffering or similar dramas.

But is there not involved a sort of moral mechanism of any kind? In the following example (Fig. 1) we notice, over the picture of the Eiffel Tower, a warning: *The process of repainting the tower is very dangerous*.

Figure 1. Title of article: *Many Romanian painters are repainting the Eiffel Tower.*Caption of picture: *The process of repainting the tower is very dangerous.*

Text: 25 Greek and Romanian painters, equipped with paints and climbing ropes, have started the work for changing the look of the Eiffel Tower, the trademark of Paris, the French capital. For accomplishing this mission, the workers will use 66 tons of “Eiffel Tower brown” paint and 50 km of climbing rope. The cost of the entire work is 4 million Euros. The painters will need 18 months of work for finalizing the project. Repainting the tower became a tradition, after the builder of the monument, Gustave Eiffel, explained that it must be painted every seven years.

(Source: <http://www.libertatea.ro/detalii/articol/mai-multi-zugravii-romani-revopsesc-turnul-eiffel-235159.html>).

Through this explicit “care”, the accusation of spineless information speech is avoided.⁹ At the same time, in order not to escape the voracious boundaries of the news (“news as novelty”), readers must not put too much moral effort, as they are only required to show dispersed proofs of their “competency” of having a “daily curiosity” for the potential unfortunate condition of the other, as we can observe in the neurotic pamphlet style of these two “receivers comments”:

Ion+ | 2009.04.02 | 15.57 *Ce mândrie națională pe capul romanilor, o victorie mai mare decât alea de la Călugăreni sau Mărășești! Micul Paris mulțumește din inima marelui Paris, pt. onoarea ce ni s-a acordat Patria veșnic recunoscătoare!*

psyhedelic trance | 2009.04.02 | 12.48 *să vină și zugravii din Franța să „vopsească” cel mai important simbol românesc, care este...*

Translation:

Ion+: *What a national pride for Romanians, a greater victory than the ones at Călugăreni or Mărășești! Little Paris thanks from the bottom of its heart to great Paris for the honor that was given to us. The ever-so-grateful Homeland!*

psychedelic trance: *let the French painters come as well to „paint” the most important Romanian symbol, which is...*

This is often seen as a reaction to the inflation of rhetorical narratives about the conditions of “the Romanian diaspora world”.

To conclude, recalling what we named, for analytical purposes, “news community” and the moral state of the *informed reader*, we cannot state that “the transformation of his consciousness” is the fruit of an *ethical choice*. Let us lean on a line from the above conversation: *let the French painters come as well to “paint” the most important Romanian symbol...* We notice that the reference by which a diasporic experience is being shaped (“the Romanian painters in France”) contributes to the process of substantialization and essentialization of a reified community (*the painters in France*) with its own will and specific interests. We can talk about a discursive interactivity motivated by *ethical choice* only from another perspective, when – opposed to an implicit “evil” – there is an *explicit moral request* that engages (or frees, when talking about an unfriendly community) towards the Other found in an unfortunate situation. Only then can it be called “sympathy”.

b. Compassion and mercy

Both feelings attract the audience on the public stage to expose the way they observe “the Other’s suffering”. The function of news is to achieve an “imaginary transfer”, but the generalization criteria are different. According to M. Nussbaum (2001, p. 301), we understand by compassion “a painful emotion occasioned by the awareness of another person’s undeserved misfortune.” Compassion is a complex emotional construct that includes a significant cognitive dimension: “...such cognitive beliefs as that the suffering of the other is serious, and that the suffering person does not deserve the pain” (Nussbaum, 2001, p. 306).

Unlike mercy “policies” – that use means of “imaginary transfer” of the “unfortunates” condition (statistics, life stories and hyper-publicized pictures) in order to “touch” the public able to launch a collective deliberation that would affect administrative procedures – compassionate policies are not generalized according to explicit criteria. Hannah Arendt (1967, p. 123)¹⁰ noticed a curious muteness of compassion, which does not require “verbosity” or too much eloquence in order to transpose individuals, natural groups or audiences into an engaging state.

Compassionate policies are “co-sufferings”, but addressed in singular form, locally and with a “practical” aim: they are updated when particular situations of media devices (for example, the campaign “No invisible child” – Fig. 2) achieve a certain type of *presence* between “those who do not suffer” and “those who suffer”. In this campaign, star figure Andreea Bănică tells us that in Romania there are 3.9 million children and that she supposedly identified – through her own effort – 12.000 children in difficult situations: a form of abuse, neglect or exploitation.

“In Romania there are 3.9 million children. 70.000 boys and girls are separated from their parents. 12.000 children are subjects of a certain form of abuse, neglect or exploitation. The project is run in: 8 counties, 64 communes, 110.000 children, 12.000 children in difficult situations. First priority: No invisible child. Beneficiaries: 100 teenage mothers, 200 children and families with no ID, 1.500 children from single-parent families, 2.000 families without social security/medical insurance, 3.000 children from poor families, 5.000 children with migrant parents. Save them now!”

(Source: http://www.prokid.ro/stiri/societate/andreea_marin_banica_si_povestile_copiilor_invizibili).

Figure 2. Infographic of UNICEF campaign “No invisible child”.



Here is a short storytelling, part of the same campaign, of the generic Popescu family, having three of the 5.000 neglected children, as a result of the parent's emigration:

(...) Three very beautiful and playful children. Their mother left them two years ago and has never contacted them since. Meanwhile, the father left abroad in order to offer them a better living. Who knows, without their grandparents' care and without the community's support, they might have ended up in the streets or in a child care facility. They miss their father very much and they enjoy every few moments when they get to talk to him, on the phone or on Internet. They don't talk much about their mother... but they nostalgically remember those times when their family was reunited. Now that vacation has started, Anghel is helping his grandfather at the sheepfold. Although thin and weak, he takes the sheep to be milked. They receive social assistance, but a cold and absent institution cannot replace family love. Children have to stay at home. Family love is invaluable.

Compassion is an amalgamation of feeling, evaluating and believing, but certainly it is dependent on what Nussbaum calls *eudeamonistic* judgment: "...the recognition of one's own vulnerabilities in the suffering of another. One sees in another's woe a potential for similar distress in one's own life. The terror of such vulnerability is essential to the experience of compassion." (2001, p. 319) Probably the most general "eudaemonistic factor", that achieves the "imaginary transfer", is the telephone/Internet. But how many of the Romanian viewers of this campaign realize that, although they do not have to let their children work in the sheepfold, they confide them to virtual affectivity?

c. *Mercy and sympathy*

We will present a variation of what H. Arendt calls "a crisis of the politics of pity" that occurs when the excessive distance between "happy" and "unfortunate" is invoked as a pretext for the exemption from moral obligation. The connection between "these here" and "those there" is minimal and abstract (potentially substituted by the activity of some NGO, religious group or media channel). Here is an account of Realitatea TV that invites us to enter a certain interpretative context of "long distance suffering".

Situație absurdă și dramatică pentru doi români în estul Franței. Cotidianul regional *Le Progrès* din Lyon scrie în ediția de joi că, de sâmbătă dimineața, o dubă înmatriculată în România stă blocată, în urma unui accident, într-un sens giratoriu. De cinci zile, fără bani de reparații, cei doi români dorm în autoutilitară, iar autoritățile nu au făcut, deocamdată, decât să constate accidentul. Nu vorbesc franceza și, scrie sursa citată, par să fi fost abandonați de angajatorul lor. În apropierea locului accidentului se află un service auto, însă angajații acestuia refuză să efectueze reparații gratis. Locuitorii din împrejurimi, intervievați de ziarul citat, spun că au crezut, inițial, că în dubă s-ar afla prostituate. Culmea cinismului, chelnerița unui bar din apropiere declară aceleași publicații: „Toată lumea îi lasă să moară de foame, e normal, doar sunt români”.

Translation:

Absurd and dramatic situation for two Romanians in Eastern France. Regional newspaper *Le Progrès* from Lyon writes in its Thursday edition that, since Saturday morning, a Romanian matriculated van has been stuck, following an accident, in a roundabout. For five days, lacking the money for repairing the vehicle, the two Romanians sleep in the utility van and the authorities haven't done anything up to this date, except for acknowledging the accident. They do not speak French and, the quoted source states, they seem to have been abandoned by their employer. Near the spot of the accident there is a repair shop, but its employees refuse to repair the car free of charge. The locals, interviewed by the newspaper, say that initially they believed there were prostitutes in the van. The epitome of cynicism: the waitress of a nearby bar states to the same newspaper: "Everyone is letting them starve, it's natural, they are Romanians".

(Source: Realitatea TV, September 10th 2009, Two Romanians are waiting for five days now in a utility van, in Eastern France.)

5.2. The topics of denunciation

Faced with certain situations, the reader of "diasporic news" can be overwhelmed with mercy. But, according to his moral disposition, he can channel his attention from the excessively suffering or victimized person to the prosecutor. If we are to employ the vocabulary used in the sociology of emotions, we may talk about the mechanism of *converting mercy into public indignation*. Certainly, before reaching indignation, we must first pass through mercy. Otherwise, we would defend hysterically or – in political terms – like some characters hyp-

ocritically sunken in a murderous humor, thus becoming permanently “indisposed” to identify culprits and to ask for justifications.

As we have seen in the introduction, we can analyze the moral-emotional phenomenology of each topic within multiple engagement systems. In the present text, we will exemplify a few cases of *denunciative rhetoric* regarding the following dimensions: actions, relations and non-relations; “public good” bound (usurped) by action¹¹; the way of appreciation (the value of proof); “the figure” of the agent (victim/prosecutor/benefactor; meta-descriptor: journalist, neutral eyewitness, proxy witness, “painter”).

Here is a case where the good is described through “the satisfaction of an accomplished action”, “the capacity to protect” and the *relevant proof* consists in the ability to evaluate the functionality of the environment. The publication quoted (AFP, quoted by NewsIn) offers the example of a Romanian doctor, recruited from the financial contribution of the local community, who quit his position after only two months: “*Doctors’ Order declared to be unsatisfied by the tendency of Romanian doctors to leave their jobs in rural areas, since these areas are deeply affected by the lack of medical care.*” In this news item provided by Realitatea TV, the French syndicate doctor denounces the excessive ability of some Romanian doctors who have turned the benevolence of the French system (“the benefactor”) into a business. Apparently, this is a simple and neutral dispatch, but in reality, it contains explicit denunciative characteristics. Thus, the French syndicate “denounces” the breach of *the moral promise* made by Romanian doctors: they came to fill a gap (private practice in difficult areas, underpaid, “in the countryside”) but “almost 89% among the Romanian doctors in France are employees”. The tacit meaning passed to the Romanian “news community” is that Romanian doctors occupy the positions that, according to unwritten and communitarian law (of Salic and Gallic origin, not of European descent) would belong only to French citizen-doctors.

A “denunciation” can, however, aim at the very person of the “painter”. We will use only one example, but on the news forums we notice an increasing number of protests against this kind of fade and stereotyped interpretations: “beyond”, “outside (n.r. of the country)”, “a little Romanian (*românaș*, pejorative), “well integrated”, “misunderstood”, “victim of”...

Olteancă la Paris. În cel mai mare cartier de firme al Parisului, o româncă lucrează cot la cot cu francezii și știe ce înseamnă succesul.

Adriana a plecat din România în 2003 la studii, iar acum conduce un departament la o importantă bancă franceză. A reușit pe propriile ei forțe și nu i-a fost rușine, niciodată, să spună că e româncă! Are 28 de ani și a plecat din Târgu Jiu când era în clasa a 12-a și a lăsat în urmă familie, casă și prieteni. Adriana spune că a fost destul de greu, a venit în 2003 în Franța cu o bursă, a muncit destul de mult, și-a continuat studiile și a făcut și un master. Ca să se poată întreține, Adriana lucra seara la un fast-food. Își amintește că atunci francezii o priveau cu reținere. Între timp însă lucrurile s-au mai schimbat și în Franța.

Translation:

Woman from Oltenia in Paris. In the largest business neighborhood of Paris, a Romanian woman works hand in hand with the French and has learned the meaning of success.

Adriana Popescu left Romania in 2003 to study abroad and now runs a department in a large French bank. She gained everything with her own work and she was never ashamed to say that she is Romanian! She is 28 years old and left Târgu Jiu when she was in her 12th grade of high school, leaving behind her family, home and friends. Adriana says it was quite difficult; she came to France in 2003 with a scholarship, worked hard enough, pursued her studies and graduated from a Master program as well. In order to support herself, Adriana took night shifts in a fast-food shop. She recalls

that the French were looking at her with reluctance, back then. Meanwhile, things have changed in France too.]

(Source: Jurnal TV, Kanal D, 4th June, 2009.)

5.3. Expressional topics

As we have seen, these pieces of news belong to the value field of humanitarian communication and have an expressional value in the measure that they incite the public to remain in an acceptable moral frame or, at least, to show an active attitude towards mediation. But a public manifestation of this disposition (of course, we exclude the cynic, as well as “the amorphous citizen” – E. Fromm) requires conducting a symmetrical action: to describe, at the same time, what is to be seen in the public space, as well as what is to be felt.

In the first rhetorical topics – *emotional mediation* – we have seen that public mentioning of the active disposition is made through manifesting an emotional feeling. Otherwise there would be no way to justify why we are “spiritually touched” by a symbol, why we show compassion or why we are merciful. In the *topics of denunciation* we struggle to weight situations, characters, and processes in order to define them as just or unjust and to get outraged about them. In the case of *expressional topics*, the justification of the effort to describe in the same way a situation of somebody’s suffering and the way in which this is felt (by the audience) is done through the *category of the sublime*. We will start with the following definition of the narrator agent given by L. Boltanski (2000, p. 116): “A painter or, more generally, an exhibitor who is able to get us to see suffering in its sublime aspect. The painter sees the unfortunate suffer and depicts his suffering”.

But is the public – and its media homologue – capable of such a *quality of viewing*? Do the media and its public not yield in front of a sympathetic interactionism? Let us re-analyze now the *adventure news* of June 25th 2012 as it is – reformatted according to expressional topics:

EXCLUSIVE: The Romanian who carried the Olympic torch: “In August, I will bring it home!”

The Romanian immigrant who carried, on Monday, this summer’s Olympic torch declared, for EVZ, why he was chosen and what this event means to him. The images have captured Dan running relaxed with the torch in his hand, assaulted by best wishers, on the streets of Leeds, where he lives. He is surrounded by Romanians carrying the national flag since dawn. An Italian woman tried to touch his torch. But Dan is amused when thinking about this. There were no incidents and – he jokes – maybe the woman’s gesture did bring the Italians some luck in their football match. When he is not carrying the Olympic flame, Dan Alexandru Dumitru is an engineer at a biscuits factory in Leeds; he runs in marathons and works for charity. Dan says he is hoping that his gesture will inspire other immigrants to “do good deeds”.

EVZ: How is it like to carry the Olympic torch?

Dan Alexandru Dumitru: (...) There is too little room to describe how I felt. But the experience was unique, given my nervousness at the time. Especially since I saw a lot of Romanians around. It was something to be proud of; I did it first and foremost for the Romanians in UK. (...) I’m bringing the torch to Romania, in August.

EVZ: What was the atmosphere like on the road, when you passed with the flame?

Dan Alexandru Dumitru: There was an Italian woman who wanted to touch it. But the lady didn’t harm me, she just touched the torch for a bit, that’s all. But maybe this brought her some luck because Italy won the match with Germany last night! If the torch, which is now with me, does bring luck, you must know that I will bring it to Romania in August and I will leave it there until the crisis passes! (he laughs) The item remained in my possession and I will bring it to Romania. It is my motivation and my inspiration. (...)

(Source: <http://www.evz.ro/detalii/stiri/romanul-care-a-purtat-flacara-olimpica-in-august-o-aduc-in-tara.html>)

We can easily notice how journalists, as well as audience initially bond to a formal sublime (*How is it like to carry the Olympic torch? (...) It was something to be proud of (...) I'm bringing the torch to Romania, in August*) but they do not have the ability to maintain this *quality of viewing*. Eventually, this too becomes a piece of *neglected news* through the interpretative stereotypes of the forum users (the Romanian gypsies who steal the torch, the corruption at the customs, necklace with a "huge" cross).

Finally, let us pursue some generalizations, starting from the following news item that invokes the merits/flaws of the "painter" (*Romania has talents. Romania has plenty of wonderful people. Too bad that the Romanian mass-media, tributary to old values, not to say, even more seriously, serving other interests than...*) very often commented in Romanian media.

Stefan Atirgovitoe, un baiat de 11 ani din Iasi, a castigat concursul italian "Ti lascio una canzone"

Stefan Atirgovitoe, in varsta de 11 ani, a castigat emisiunea-concurs "Ti lascio una canzone", difuzata de Rai Uno, cu piesa "Profeta non sarò". (...) Tanarul se calificase deja in finala dupa cea de a doua etapa cand a primit trofeul juriului tehnic pentru interpretarea unei piese considerate deosebit de dificila "Una canzone per te". Un alt membru al juriului, Francesco Facchinetti, l-a felicitat pe roman si a declarat ca in spatele fiecarei piese pe care o interpreteaza se poate observa munca titanica "stakanovista" depusa pentru a executa perfect fiecare nota, dar l-a sfatuit pe roman sa nu uite ca muzica este si o "distractie".

Translation:

Stefan Atirgovitoe, an 11 year-old boy from Iasi, won the Italian contest "Ti lascio una canzone"

Stefan Atirgovitoe, aged 11, won the contest-show "Ti lascio una canzone" aired by Rai Uno, with the song "Profeta non sarò". (...) The young man had already qualified in the finals after the second round when he received the technical jury's trophy for his interpretation a song considered to be very difficult, "Una canzone per te". Another member of the jury, Francesco Facchinetti, congratulated the Romanian and stated that, behind every song he sings, one can notice the titanic, "stachanovist" amount of work put in in order to perfectly express every note, but advised the Romanian not to forget that music is also "fun".

(Source: <http://life.hotnews.ro/stiri-muzica-10785004-video-baiat-11-ani-din-iasi-finala-concursul-ui-italian-lascio-una-canzone-dupa-castigat-doua-etape-premiul-juriului.htm>.)

We can observe that most media reports (and the related comments of the audience) are building this type of sublime that reveals "the quality of viewing" through a *ridicule aesthetization* (*Bravo, kids, here you would have lost in front of a "Tzutzu" at 'Romania's got talent' ... I am Romanian and I am proud of it and I do it mainly because I know that this nation is the descendant of a really great one: the Dacic nation.*) At the same time, from an interpretative point of view, a problematic coordination of "voices" (Bahtin, 1982) takes place and gives the global sense the meaning of a "reincarnated" feeling of indignation. We are therefore talking about an emotional conversion by switching to a protest registry specific to denunciative topics (*The contest-show aims to promote Italian and international music of the past 50 years. What do we promote? The Wonder kid? Guta? Salam? Let my enemy die? Wow, how cool is my woman?... you're free to add whatever you want if you know what I mean*).

6. Conclusion

Using an analytical framework belonging to expressivity pragmatics, we have examined the way some Romanian citizens' happiness, success or misfortune and suffering in their *diasporic experiences* were expressed in the media. The core question was if there is a specific media expression of these phenomena manifested by Romanian diaspora. And the exemplifications of this study bring up the arguments for a paradoxical conclusion.

On the one hand, in what we have defined as "news community" (an interactive system of frameworks for the mutual surveillance of interpretations) a *mediation* process takes place – that is, two originally different states of affairs appear as a unique situation – and "instigates" the publics to "supply" themselves with values such as honesty or responsibility that may lead to a healthy rumination ("*mulled over*"). This implies an optimistic vision, that of overcoming communication distance through mediation, that is "putting an end" to this moral distance. Through sensibility to suffering, *causes* are built in the favor of those people who get engaged, associate and dispute. On the other hand, from the same examples, we can see how, as soon as they are incarnated in interpretative frames through interactive features such as discussion forums, the same pieces of "news" generate a viewer position (in Boltanski's terms) or "improper distance" (Silverstone) where moral difference can be invoked as a strategy to justify passivity.

Through the collective redistribution of the function of information, media frames and storyboarding create the conditions for a cosmopolitan solidarity – by expanding, for instance, the limits of compassion. At the same time, though, as "audience shares" are needed, these *cuts* play the role of sensibility traps that enable a promiscuity of voyeuristic attention – a form of *media addiction*. From here derives the justification for lamenting used by media austerity proponents, who can ask themselves – not just rhetorically – whether this spectacularization of "shock news" delegitimizes humanitarian communication.

One can answer them that an authentic "humanitarian communication" can take the form of an "extended hand" – and not only the abstract clothing of "universal fraternity" that inevitably ends up in a "globalization of emotions" – only if it reincarnates into a "singular friendship". And in the form of media sublime, "the news spectacle" can conceive a good "exteriorization of interiors" – psycho-moral mechanism that helps conceive this special form of humanity that we call *singular friendship*.

Media sublime does not signify, though, a universal hedonism and we must recall, in this sense, Kant's position when talking about sublime as a quasi-political exigency towards building a "possible universal community". This kind of exigency requires from the "viewer" to sympathize with "misfortunes", as they allow themselves *to be seen by the public eye*. Certainly, we do not have to lose sight of the perverse media effect of marketing the public speech in expressional topics.

Unlike media formats specific to the *topics of denunciation* – where journalists express a preference for protest situations – in news reports belonging to *expressional topics* they tend to incarnate the sublime by presenting the suffering people or groups as having a sort of "moral capacity to be affected" (See the case of media genre called reality-show). In the *topics of sentiments*, media reports tend to ignore the "prosecutor" in order to focus on the "benefactor". In *expressional topics*, what we have defined as *ecstatic news* captures the attention of the "news community" through the aesthetics of frames and "the painter's" capacity (the journalist, the communicator etc.) to depict the general picture of "misfortunes". Frequently, though, those "dysfunctional cases" occur – excessive lamentation from Romanian journal-

ists, readers and internet users regarding the facts and the condition of the “new Romanian diaspora” – that induce a perverted effect: *the regression of public indignation* from the protest registry into a *mundane and voyeuristic affection*.

With obstinate drifts and regressions, within what we have called “news community” individuals show a strong interpretative appetite, which is nothing else than a sort of welcoming media coverage of the interrogations regarding the diasporic experience as a category of practice that engages energies and articulates new claims and projects, apart from rummaging the “ideal diaspora” *versus* “diasporaphetic” behaviors in order to remake an ideal Romanianship within the new European area.

Notes

¹ „I mean the tendency to treat ethnic groups, nations, and races as substantial entities to which interests and agency can be attributed” (Brubaker, 2004, p. 8).

² Silverstone says that the term *proper distance* is nothing else than a way to translate the Kantian concept of “open mentality” (Silverstone, 2006, p. 44).

³ Regarding the concept of “engagement practice” as a way of channeling “ethical unrest” within the grammar of public debates, see Perpelea (2012).

⁴ As, even from a virtual point of view, the result of these acts of coordination targets a future action based on conventional public processes, some authors call them “policies”. For example, Hannah Arendt talks about the emergence, in the logic of the implications brought in by the French Revolution, of a *pitiful policy*, whereas L. Boltanski analyzes “compassionate policies” as opposed to “vigilante policies”.

⁵ The main assumptions of Bahtin’s theory (1982) can be used to operationalize the act of communication through media devices: semiotic pluralism, issues polyphony, heterogeneity of linguistic and non-linguistic elements; all acts of speech are social acts, not just the performatives; all utterances are discursive social acts that impose a „social obligation”. Through utterance discursiveness (the carnivalesque speech) – friendliness and animosity, agreements and disagreements, sympathy and repugnance – dialogism opens up to create possibilities, to organize the relationship of cooperation or, on the contrary, of domination.

⁶ He shows how this “analysis frame” is used by some sociologists who avoid the monocausal explanation (“group interests”, such as the way of life that includes protestant ethics values) of a deviant phenomenon (alcoholism, sexual libertinism etc.) by considering the dramatic stigmatization of alcohol use as element of a symbolic struggle for protecting universal values (Gusfield, 1986).

⁷ For a detailed approach of this issue, see Perpelea (2002).

⁸ For the English quote, we used Anderson (1991, pp. 5-7).

⁹ Saint Augustin was mentioning, in this sense, *concupiscentia oculorum*; cf. *Confesuni* (X, 35).

¹⁰ H. Arendt starts from a difference made by J. J. Rousseau between natural mercy and self-conceit in order to identify in the public space a specific type of emotional policy: abstract mercy, “principled” – a sort of sadness of the “political body” without being “physically” affected. In an archetype sense, this mercy is incarnated by The Grand Inquisitor who, transforming it into a public virtue mechanism, confers it a “potential of cruelty superior to the one of cruelty itself” (1967, p. 129).

¹¹ Sometimes this can get the aspect of “affair”: Dreyfuss affair, Galați cigarette affair, “Smart boys” affair, Green leaf affair (the touristic brand of Romania), Strauss Kahn affair, “The wife and the parish” affair, Năstase affair etc.

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