

The Romanian Media System: Dynamics, Challenges, and Implications for Democracy

Madalina Botan 

College of Communication and Public Relations, National University of Political Studies and Public Administration (SNSPA), Romania

Correspondence: Madalina Botan (madalina.botan@comunicare.ro)

Submitted: 16 November 2023 **Accepted:** 22 January 2024 **Published:** 19 March 2024

Issue: This article is part of the issue “Communication Policies and Media Systems: Revisiting Hallin and Mancini’s Model” edited by Aurora Labio-Bernal (University of Seville), Rainer Rubira-García (Rey Juan Carlos University), and Rasa Pocevičienė (Šiauliai State Higher Education Institution), fully open access at <https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.i430>

Abstract

This article endeavors to delve into the recent transformation of the Romanian media landscape, aiming to offer a nuanced comprehension of the cultural and political dynamics that have influenced journalistic practices. The Romanian media environment has undergone swift changes, transitioning from a monolithic structure to one increasingly driven by commercial interests, all while navigating economic and political pressures. The shift toward a free-market framework has not only reshaped the social and political fabric but has also significantly impacted the media sector. This article posits that the Romanian media landscape is shaped by the interplay of cultural, economic, and political forces, evident in journalistic outputs across both traditional and digital platforms. This assertion aligns with Hallin and Mancini’s (2004) notion of parallelism between journalism and politics. Moreover, it extends this perspective to encompass cultural influences and the evolving media landscape resulting from shifts in the media market, changing consumption patterns, and the proliferation of digital media. Key indicators such as professional standards, editorial autonomy, transparency, financial sustainability, political influence, and media regulations are critically examined within the unique context of Romania, in which political interference and growing reliance on advertising revenue often curtail editorial independence. In conclusion, the article reflects on the current state of the Romanian media system and the manifold challenges it confronts amidst the changing dynamics of the media landscape.

Keywords

advertising money; Eastern Europe; editorial independence; journalism; media consumption; media regulations; media systems; media trust; political interventionism; Romania

1. Introduction

Media systems are in a constant state of flux, and Romania serves as a prime example of this phenomenon. While sharing similarities with neighboring countries, this article contends that the Romanian media landscape warrants examination in its own right, rather than being lumped into a generalized category of Eastern European systems. Two primary factors support this assertion: the lack of historical homogeneity despite a shared communist past, and the distinctive political and social evolution witnessed over the past three decades.

The transition from communism to democracy precipitated significant shifts in the Romanian media sphere. The early 1990s saw a rapid privatization of media outlets, heralding the promise of a more democratic and unfettered press. However, compared to its Eastern European counterparts, Romania experienced divergent political and social trajectories, attributed in part to the absence of liberal elites and a robust civil society, as suggested by some scholars (I. Coman & Gross, 2012; Gross, 2019, 2023). In his examination of media systems through a cultural lens, Gross (2023) posits that media elites play a pivotal role in reinforcing certain values and beliefs, thereby shaping the overarching journalistic ethos. He contends that contemporary Romanian journalism is a product of the interplay between corruption, nationalism, and a perceived sense of “specialness” among Romanians (Gross, 2023, p. 67). While this article does not adopt a purely cultural approach to delineate the intricacies of the Romanian media landscape, it endeavors to elucidate the multifaceted influence of cultural, economic, and political factors on journalistic practices.

The Romanian media landscape has long been characterized by high levels of political influence, limited press freedom, and a weak public service broadcasting sector (Boshnakova & Dănkovă, 2023; Dobek-Ostrowska, 2012). Independent organizations monitoring media freedom, such as Reporters Without Borders, have noted a growing threat to media freedom in Romania in recent years (Reporters Without Borders, 2022). Furthermore, recent reports from entities like ActiveWatch (2023a; 2023b) and Transparency International (n.d.) highlight ongoing interference by politicians and their associates.

In our endeavor to assess the credibility and quality of journalistic reporting in Romania, my colleagues and I (Buturoiu et al., 2023) conducted qualitative research based on nine in-depth interviews with experts in April 2022. These experts included four politicians responsible for media regulations and five journalists and media professionals. Our findings revealed a concerning trend towards biased reporting within Romanian journalism. All interviewed media professionals noted widespread editorial alignment with specific commercial or political agendas, undermining public trust in media organizations and indicating a lack of commitment to journalistic ethics. Additionally, our research illuminated the inadequate training of journalists, exacerbating the overall lack of professionalization within the Romanian media system. Consistent with other studies (Lupu, 2021), our interviews with media professionals highlighted a lack of consensus regarding journalistic norms in the Romanian media industry, hindering collaboration among journalists and media institutions. Moreover, political and owner intervention in the editorial process emerged as a pervasive practice. Journalists and media professionals indicated that editorial content in Romania is largely influenced by media owners or the political leanings of media conglomerates (Buturoiu et al., 2023). These findings underscore the existence of biased journalistic practices and an overall media system lacking autonomy and editorial independence, contributing to the erosion of trust in media with detrimental effects on democratic processes and civic life. This trend of eroded trust in Romanian journalism

is confirmed by recent EU-level research, which indicates that only 32% of Romanians trust journalistic practices in 2023 compared to 39% in 2017 (Newman et al., 2023).

This study builds upon the original framework proposed by Hallin and Mancini (2004) for analyzing media systems, adapting it to elucidate the complex interplay of media market dynamics, economic viability, media consumption patterns, trust in media, editorial independence, and media regulations in Romania. It contends that the Romanian media landscape grapples with challenges stemming from limited professionalization, a dearth of ethical norms and codes of conduct, inadequate media regulations, and significant political intervention. Aligned with similar approaches (e.g., Boshnakova & Dănkovă, 2023; Brüggemann et al., 2014; Castro et al., 2017; Dobek-Ostrowska, 2019; Humprecht et al., 2022) inspired by the original framework of Hallin and Mancini (2004), this study employs the theoretical framework alongside other critical dimensions to assess the current state of the Romanian media landscape. The research questions guiding this study are as follows:

RQ1: How does the Romanian media system compare with other Eastern European media systems?

RQ2: What defines the contemporary Romanian media market, and what factors shape its development?

RQ3: What are the trends in media consumption in Romania, and how does trust in media influence overall media engagement?

RQ4: How do factors such as the professionalization of the media sector, media regulations, editorial independence, and political influence interact within the Romanian media landscape?

To address these research questions, this article employs a mixed methodology, encompassing (a) the analysis and interpretation of secondary data, (b) empirical data gathered in 2022 through a national survey, and (c) in-depth interviews conducted in 2022 with journalists, media professionals, and politicians responsible for media regulations. Some of this empirical data has been previously published in a book focusing on news consumption patterns in Romania, co-authored with my colleagues Buturoiu and Corbu (Buturoiu et al., 2023). The secondary data draw from recent country reports released by prominent NGOs (such as ActiveWatch, Reporters Without Borders, and Transparency International), academic institutions and researchers (including Toma et al., 2023), media organizations (like the Media Fact Book), and EU regulatory bodies or institutions (such as Eurostat and Eurobarometer 99).

The subsequent sections of this article delve into the unique characteristics of the Romanian media system, providing a detailed examination of journalistic practices in Romania. The concluding portion of the article investigates the evolution of media consumption in Romania, the effects of high television concentration and the emergence of digital media, the influence of inadequate media regulations and ethical codes on journalistic practices, and the challenges faced by media professionals in maintaining editorial independence within a system heavily reliant on advertising revenue, both commercial and political.

2. The Specificities of East and Central European Media Systems

In *Comparing Media Systems: Three Models of Media and Politics* (Hallin & Mancini, 2004), the authors examine 18 countries from Western Europe and North America, all considered “advanced democracies,” due to their relatively homogeneous histories and political systems. Despite this, they argue against the existence of a singular “Western model” of media systems, recognizing the diversity shaped by unique historical and social contexts within the Western world. Since its initial publication, numerous media researchers have sought to apply the conceptual framework proposed by these American scholars to their own countries, attempting to universalize the model for all national contexts.

While applying the initial schema of media systems—Mediterranean or polarized pluralist, North/Central European or democratic corporatist, and North Atlantic or liberal model—has been useful for comparing media systems worldwide, it has sometimes fallen short in explaining certain cases. This article, echoing the sentiments of other researchers (e.g., Castro et al., 2017; Humprecht et al., 2022; Lilleker et al., 2021), suggests a more fruitful approach to comparative research. Rather than rigidly applying the four dimensions (structure of media markets, political parallelism, journalistic professionalism, and the role of the state) and assessing their fit, this article advocates for updating them to reflect the evolving realities of the online and social media landscape.

While this study initially draws on the *Comparing Media Systems* framework to examine the Romanian context, it also acknowledges the limitations of applying this framework to Romania. The framework, originally proposed by American authors, was designed as ideal types specific to Western nations, making its generalization to other national contexts problematic. Furthermore, the primary focus of Hallin and Mancini’s study was on theory-building rather than hypothesis testing, emphasizing the need to contextualize the dimensions of the model within each country.

In analyzing Eastern European media systems using the four-media model developed by Hallin and Mancini, some scholars, such as Dobek-Ostrowska (2012), have revised the framework to account for the Mediterraneanization or Italianization of post-communist media systems. Since the publication of Hallin and Mancini’s seminal work, numerous efforts have been made to empirically test their standardized dimensions, both in Western countries (e.g., Brüggemann et al., 2014) and specific media systems in East and Central Europe (e.g., Boshnakova & Dănkovă, 2023; Castro et al., 2017; Dobek-Ostrowska, 2012).

Numerous studies examining media systems in both Western and Eastern Europe have validated and nuanced Hallin and Mancini’s empirical dimensions. Some research has focused on key variables for comparison, such as political parallelism and public service broadcasting, revealing significant differences in press freedom and foreign ownership among media systems (Castro et al., 2017). Recent analyses, like that of Boshnakova and Dănkovă (2023), have provided empirical evidence of strong correlations between press freedom, foreign ownership, political parallelism, and the strength of public broadcasting. However, they also underscore notable variations among Central and Eastern European countries, indicating that these nations do not share the same media system type.

Exploring media in Eastern Europe underscores the diverse trajectories in media market development, even among countries with similar socio-political histories. This study aligns with arguments by Miconi and

Papathanassopoulos (2023), asserting that a comprehensive understanding of media market consolidation necessitates consideration of each European member state's political, cultural, and economic legacy. To advance this understanding, the present study reconsiders the framework of comparison proposed by Hallin and Mancini (2004) in the context of Romania. It leverages comparative and theoretical approaches tailored to Eastern Europe to explore relevant variables for Romania's case.

Moreover, this article advocates for the inclusion of a "post-communist" cluster within Hallin and Mancini's four-dimension model, as proposed by Dobek-Ostrowska and Głowacki (2016) and others. However, it argues that such an approach would offer only a limited understanding of certain national contexts and their intricate transitions.

Hallin and Mancini highlight the unique aspect of Eastern European media systems as their rapid transition between two contrasting regimes. They argue that while all media systems undergo change, the pace varies significantly. Consequently, Eastern media systems bear the imprint of sudden commercialization and high state control, both prominent legacies of the communist era (Hallin & Mancini, 2013). Other scholars, such as Humprecht et al. (2022), building upon Hallin and Mancini's framework, introduce additional variables like foreign ownership, media ownership concentration, press freedom levels, and online news outlet usage. Using this expanded model, they propose a matrix of empirical indicators, diverging notably from Hallin and Mancini's original prototype. Interestingly, countries from democratic-corporatist and polarized-pluralist areas often end up in the same cluster, challenging strict adherence to the three spaces defined by Hallin and Mancini and blurring East/West territorial distinctions.

Another theoretical model, presented by Dobek-Ostrowska (2019), identifies the delayed transition to democracy in Eastern European countries as a significant influencing factor. This model outlines a unique trajectory for Eastern European media systems, somewhat independent from Hallin and Mancini's framework. Dobek-Ostrowska (2016) proposes four successive stages of institutional and societal reformation: pre-transition, primary transition, secondary transition, and late or mature transition. Each country's specific position results from the intersection of these stages and other variables related to the overall state of the media system. Consequently, Dobek-Ostrowska (2019) identifies four distinct Eastern media systems: hybrid liberal, politicized, transition, and authoritarian.

In a recent examination of media systems in the digital era, Humprecht et al. (2022) expand upon the model initially developed by Hallin and Mancini (2004), incorporating more timely indicators such as online audience responsiveness. Their cluster analysis yields three groups of media systems, with Eastern European countries divided between the polarized pluralist cluster and a hybrid cluster. According to this framework, the Romanian media system not only shares similarities with Bulgaria, Croatia, Slovenia, and Slovakia but also with Spain and Greece. These countries are characterized by lower inclusiveness, a less developed ICT sector and creative economy, and higher TV concentration (Humprecht et al., 2022).

In a departure from predominant socio-political and economic approaches, Gross (2023) presents a cultural assessment of media systems and their functions. Introducing a cultural model to evaluate the nature and operations of the Romanian media system and broader transformations in East and Central Europe, Gross offers a pertinent exploration of the challenges posed by a mixed cultural background, shaping both the media system and Romanian society at large. He advocates for a culture-driven understanding of Romania's

media system as essential for comprehending its ongoing transformation, providing valuable insights into the workings of Romanian society and its institutions.

While this article acknowledges the influence of a country's general culture on its media systems, it views the cultural perspective presented by Gross (2023) as complementary to approaches that focus on exploring the composition of the media industry, its economic viability, political independence, and new patterns of digital media consumption. Drawing from a vast literature on media systems categorizations, this study seeks to gain a deeper understanding of the multifaceted factors driving the evolution of the Romanian media landscape. In doing so, it delves into key features such as the evolution of the media market, patterns of media consumption, trust in media, economic sustainability, media regulations, editorial independence, and political interventionism, aiming to provide a nuanced analysis of the Romanian media ecosystem.

3. Particularities of the Romanian Media Market

The shift of the Romanian media landscape from communist propaganda to democracy commenced with the pivotal live broadcast of the 1989 Revolution and the subsequent downfall of Dictator Nicolae Ceaușescu. This transition saw the conversion of state television into public television and the emergence of an audiovisual market, including commercial channels, which necessitated a series of socio-economic and cultural changes that left a lasting impact on the media system as a whole.

The early years following the 1989 Revolution witnessed the proliferation of newspapers branding themselves as “free” and the dominance of the national broadcaster, which swiftly aligned itself with political power, leveraging its monopoly position (M. Coman, 2001). Boards of directors and presidents of the national broadcaster, often politically appointed, consistently subjugated the institution to political interests from the 1990s onward (I. Coman & Gross, 2012; Gross, 2019). This trend intensified after the government began directly funding national broadcasting services following the elimination of the radio-TV tax in 2016.

In 1993, the first commercial channel, Antena 1, emerged on the scene, owned by the controversial former communist businessman, Dan Voiculescu. Pro TV, backed by an international trust, debuted in 1995, introducing an American model that quickly gained traction. The public was enthralled not only by the polished image and professional standards achieved through Central European Media Enterprise's (CME) investment in equipment and training but also by the abundant entertainment offerings that resonated with a populace navigating the challenges of transition. Prima TV, briefly under the ownership of the Scandinavian group SBS Broadcasting, embarked on a primarily entertainment-oriented venture in 1997, while Kanal D captured audiences in 2007 with Turkish telenovelas brought by the Dogan group.

Unlike in other Central and Eastern European countries such as Hungary, the Czech Republic, Poland, or Slovakia, where private television stations were often funded by Western shareholders, Romania experienced limited and temporary foreign investments in its media sector (Dobek-Ostrowska & Głowacki, 2016; Gross, 2019). In the 2000s, Western companies gradually withdrew from the Romanian media market, leaving television stations predominantly in the hands of domestic “moguls” (Armanca, 2019). While the phenomenon of “de-Westernization” also occurred in neighboring countries, it was not as extensive as in Romania, suggesting that Western models failed to take root primarily due to cultural and ethical disparities (I. Coman & Gross, 2012; Gross, 2008).

These Romanian moguls, often referred to as “press barons,” seized the opportunity and utilized their financial resources to assert control over the audiovisual space, gradually molding it into a tool for political maneuvering (M. Coman, 2016). Following the enactment of Law 504/2002 on Audiovisual Regulation, a surge in TV licenses issuance ensued, resulting in a media landscape heavily reliant on advertising revenue (Lupu, 2021). The advent of new technologies ushered in a paradigm shift, challenging traditional business models. In recent years, media outlets have synchronized their operations through the proliferation of online platforms and the widespread use of social networks for content dissemination, aided by increased internet penetration (89.2% in 2023; Eurostat, 2023).

In recent years, media advertising budgets have seen an uptick, although their distribution has not been uniform. The scarcity of data regarding the media market, ownership, and advertising budgets presents significant hurdles to the comprehensive evaluation of the media landscape. To assess media revenue, we rely on advertising revenue statistics obtained from Media Fact Book reports, serving as a proxy measure due to the absence of comprehensive public data on overall media revenue. In 2023, both television and digital advertising spending experienced growth, while radio ad revenue remained stagnant, and print ad revenue declined. According to the Media Fact Book, the total media market reached 683 million euros in 2023, with digital (+9%) and out-of-home (+8%) advertising witnessing moderate growth, a slight increase in radio advertising (+3%), stable evolution in TV advertising (7%), and a notable decline in print advertising by 11% (see Figure 1; Initiative, 2023).

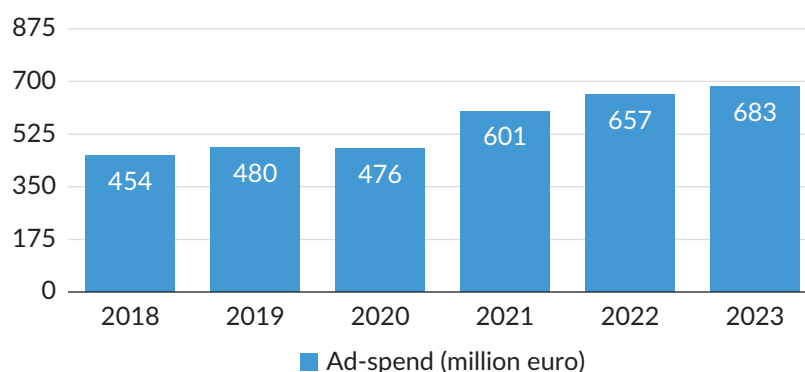


Figure 1. Advertising budgets allocated to media. Source: Adapted from Initiative (2023).

A recent notable trend is the significant growth of digital media, with a 25% increase compared to 2021 and a substantial 56% surge compared to 2020. This growth reflects the ongoing digitalization process initiated in 2020, driven primarily by organic factors such as eCommerce and shifts in media consumption patterns. By the end of 2022, digital media reached an estimated 232.9 million euros, constituting 35% of the total media market.

Meanwhile, there has been a noticeable decline in TV audiences, with this erosion accelerating in post-pandemic years, showing a decrease of 10% compared to 2021 and 8% compared to 2020. This decline can be attributed to the population returning to normal habits, including increased mobility freedom and more frequent out-of-home socializing and travel. On the other hand, both outdoor media and radio have experienced a resurgence in ad revenue, with outdoor media seeing a 23% increase and radio a 10% increase. Outdoor media generated 37 million euros, representing 6% of the estimated net media market,

while radio amassed 32 million euros, accounting for 5% of the market share. However, print media has continued its downward trajectory, experiencing a 10% decline compared to 2021, with revenue totaling 5.6 million euros, capturing slightly less than 1% of the media market share (see Figure 2; Initiative, 2023).

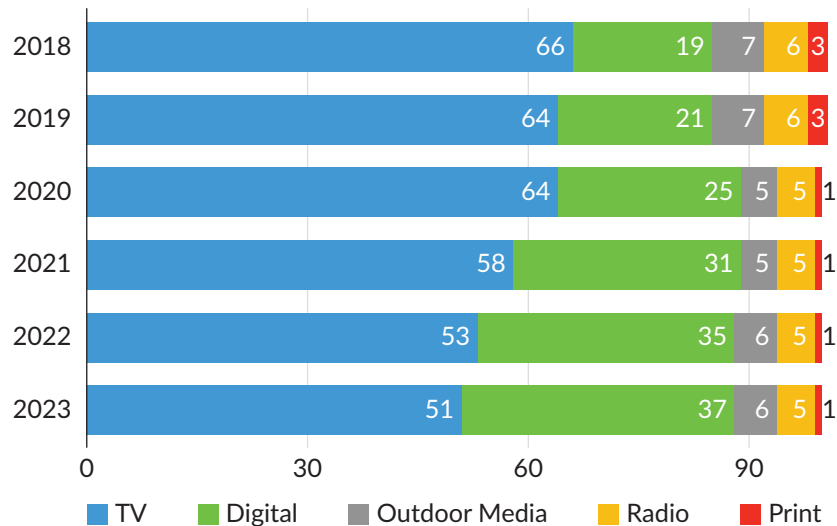


Figure 2. Advertising budgets allocated per media type (in percentages). Source: Adapted from Initiative (2023).

Media Fact Book reports indicate that television continues to dominate advertising spending, with a market valuation of 350 million euros in 2023, constituting 51% of the net media market. Data reveal that advertising TV budgets were predominantly distributed among major media trusts that own TV stations or media outlets with national coverage. Specifically, allocations were as follows: CME = 40%; Intact = 25%; Dogan = 10%; Thematics = 8%; RCS = 5%; others = 11%, leaving minimal allocations for small stations, radio, print, and online platforms (Initiative, 2023).

As suggested by certain analyses (Armanca, 2019; Lupu, 2021), the survival of small media outlets indicates that their owners might not consider them standalone businesses but prefer to invest minimally in them, using them as instruments of influence to serve their interests in other ventures and to strengthen their political relationships. The consequence is increased clientelism, as well as a serious ethical compromise for journalists who are forced to make concessions to maintain their jobs (ActiveWatch, 2023a). Moreover, it undermines the independence of the profession, contributing to the erosion of credibility and increasing its vulnerability.

4. News Consumption Patterns and Trust in Media

The overall market for news and public affairs-related content is relatively small in Romania, with Romanians consuming much less news (59%) compared to the European average of 72% (Eurostat, 2023). Concerning news consumption patterns, online media, including social media, has become the preferred source of news in Romania, reflecting a global trend. TV stations still remain highly popular for broadcasting news and current affairs programs, while print media has experienced a decline in both readership and circulation, reaching a historic low in 2023 (Figure 3).

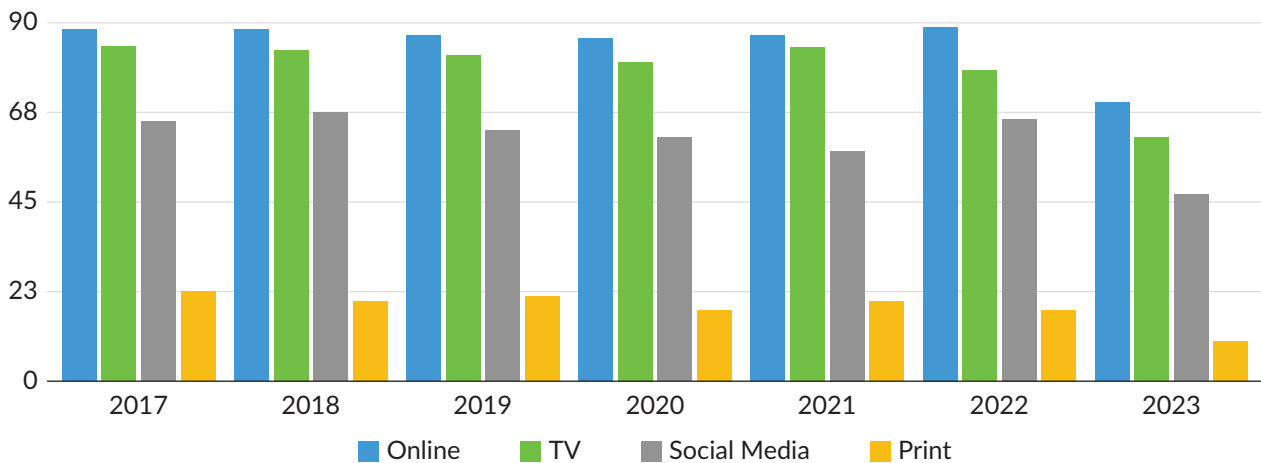


Figure 3. Sources of news in Romania. Source: Adapted from Newman et al. (2023).

Other reports confirm the high appetite for TV news in Romania; in the latest Eurobarometer 99 (European Commission, 2023), 80% of respondents mentioned TV as their top source for news, compared to a European mean of 75%. Online news is on the rise, but the exact audience is unclear; 53% of Romanian respondents indicated “online news websites” as one of their top sources for news, and 29% mentioned “social media” (European Commission, 2023). In terms of prominence, a recent national survey (Stanescu, 2023) indicates that the most frequently mentioned sources by other media outlets are the two main news channels: Digi 24 (597 mentions) and Antena 3 (548 mentions), and the generalist TV channel ProTV (199 mentions). This is a clear indicator that the inter-media agenda is currently set by news channels, which gained both visibility and trust in recent years. This pattern of inter-media agenda-setting is also validated by other studies (Buturoiu et al., 2022, 2023), showing that the flow is increasingly from news channels to generalist outlets. In line with similar findings (Perloff, 2022; Rossiter, 2021), Romanian data show that the proliferation of social media has further transformed inter-media agenda-setting dynamics, as social media content now engages in reciprocal agenda-setting with traditional news media (Buturoiu et al., 2022).

In today’s fragmented media environment, media consumption patterns change rapidly, and partisan selective exposure is dramatically amplified by social media algorithms. Since media consumption, namely news consumption, consistently impacts how citizens interpret politics (Andersen et al., 2022; Blázquez et al., 2022; Hameleers, 2022; Hameleers & van der Meer, 2020), exploring the current repertoire of news consumption is key to understanding the new developments in media diets. In previous studies (Buturoiu et al., 2022, 2023), my colleagues and I have identified different patterns of news consumption in Romania through quantitative research. Based on similar studies (e.g., Andersen et al., 2022; Castro et al., 2022), four main profiles of news consumption have been defined: all-media consumers (high news consumption from both mainstream and social media), mainstream media consumers, social media users, and minimalists (low consumption from both mainstream and social media sources). The news consumption patterns of Romanians were mapped through a national survey carried out by Daedalus New Media Research in October 2022 (Figure 4).

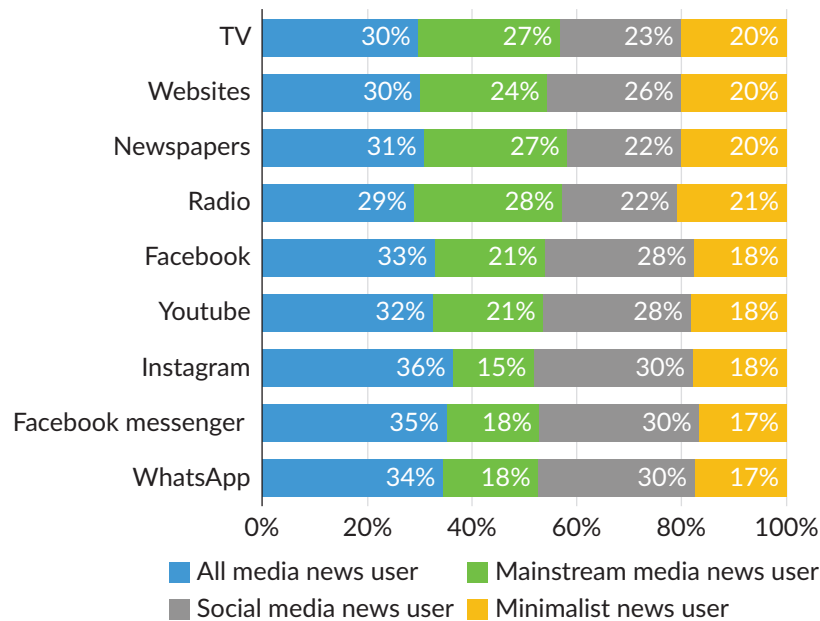


Figure 4. Profiles of news consumption in Romania. Source: Adapted from Buturoiu et al. (2023).

The data underscores that Romanians predominantly rely on mainstream media for news consumption, with television remaining the primary source, while Instagram and Facebook surpass other platforms. Minimalist news users are less common compared to other EU countries (Castro et al., 2022). Our research, consistent with previous studies (Park et al., 2020; Strömbäck et al., 2022), highlights significant shifts in media consumption patterns, indicating a gradual move from traditional sources to online platforms and social media. Meta, notably, holds a prominent position, with its platforms—Facebook, Facebook Messenger, Instagram, and WhatsApp—dominating the news consumption landscape.

Although Romanians haven't entirely abandoned traditional news sources, there are discernible disparities in media preferences and perceived credibility. According to the latest Eurobarometer, Romanian audiences exhibit less trust in national broadcasters compared to their European counterparts (43% vs. 49%), yet express more confidence in private TV stations (33% vs. 27%). Trust in print media is notably lower in Romania (22%) than the European average of 39%, suggesting reduced expectations for accuracy from print sources among Romanians. Conversely, social media and online news platforms are considered trustworthy sources by 18% of respondents, exceeding EU averages of 14% and 11%, respectively (European Commission, 2023). Similarly, the Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2023 underscores significant skepticism towards media organizations and journalists in Romania, with overall trust in media hitting a record low of 32%. The report links this decline in trust to factors such as “propaganda money, directed towards key newsrooms,” and “smear campaigns against investigative journalists,” which erode trust and professional integrity (Newman et al., p. 95).

5. Professionalization and Instrumentalization in the Romanian Media Landscape

Other crucial factors to consider when examining the characteristics of a media system include transparency, economic viability, editorial independence, and media regulations. Romania's lack of media transparency and inadequate regulatory framework have drawn attention in recent international reports, placing the country

among high-risk nations (Javier et al., 2022; Toma et al., 2023). Additionally, as highlighted in preceding sections, Romania has grappled with challenges to editorial independence due to political pressures, further contributing to its classification as a high-risk zone for undue political influence on editorial decisions (Reporters Without Borders, n.d.).

Journalistic transparency encompasses various facets, as elucidated in numerous studies (e.g., Latvala, 2023). While transparency in ownership and journalistic practices alone may not solve all the challenges facing media systems, it remains imperative, particularly in the Romanian media landscape, where issues of public accountability and ethics persist. Codes of ethics in journalism serve to shield readers, viewers, and listeners from manipulation by politicians, institutions, or private entities seeking to advance their agendas through media outlets (Lupu, 2021). Although Romania has some legal provisions safeguarding media freedom and editorial independence, their efficacy is hindered by challenges in implementation and enforcement (ActiveWatch, 2023a). These shortcomings contribute to a climate characterized by restricted media freedom, heightened political influence, and inadequate accountability within the media sector.

A recent study (Toma et al., 2023) introduces another vital aspect to the examination of the Romanian media landscape: economic viability, which extends to independence from both commercial and political pressures. According to the report, media viability in Romania poses a significant risk, with a score of 90%, indicating sluggish revenue growth across most media platforms. This situation renders media organizations more susceptible to influence from both commercial interests and political agendas. Similarly, the report highlights editorial independence from commercial and owner influence as an area of very high risk, scoring 97%. This suggests vulnerability to shifts in ownership or editorial policy due to the absence of legal protections against arbitrary appointments or dismissals (Toma et al., 2023).

Romania has a history of significant government control over the media (M. Coman, 2001; Gross, 2008, 2023). Various independent reports have investigated allegations of censorship in state-controlled media outlets, revealing how authorities wield influence through advertising revenue, media ownership, and regulatory bodies to shape media content and narratives in their favor (ActiveWatch, 2023a; Transparency International, n.d.; V-Dem, n.d.). Consequently, journalistic practices have been compromised, leading to a decline in public trust in the media. The country's low state capacity and government quality are evident in the mismanagement of the national broadcaster (Javier et al., 2022; Toma et al., 2023), the superficial parliamentary discussions regarding public media, and the overall dysfunction of the audiovisual regulatory agency (ActiveWatch, 2023a). These findings suggest that the root issue in the Romanian media system lies in the absence or inadequacy of essential institutions and mechanisms to nurture the development of free, independent journalism that prioritizes the public interest.

The risk associated with editorial independence from political influences is rooted in two fundamental factors: insufficient institutionalization and a lack of robust regulations to shield journalists from political or commercial pressures. The absence of clear regulations and consensus on journalistic norms, coupled with inadequate enforcement mechanisms, ultimately undermines the quality of information available to the public (Toma et al., 2023).

Political interference manifests through the allocation of subsidies for the press, often used for undisclosed political advertising. Another indication of the increasing politicization of the Romanian media landscape is

the presence of unethical electoral broadcasts on audiovisual platforms. In these instances, political parties pay for access but retain editorial control (ActiveWatch, 2023a; Lupu, 2021). The regulations governing the labeling of political advertising are particularly crucial in anticipation of the multiple electoral cycles scheduled for 2024.

In a recent report (Botan & Stancea, 2023) assessing the implementation of the Digital Service Act and the Code of Practice on Disinformation in Romania—both designed to foster a safer media environment that safeguards users' fundamental rights—authors highlight limited progress in accurately labeling political advertising across all media channels. There have been modest attempts to disrupt advertising-based incentives for political disinformation, particularly in digital media. Consequently, media users lack the tools to identify disinformation or political propaganda, undermining the transparency of democratic processes in Romania.

6. Conclusions

Building on extensive literature dedicated to journalistic practices, this article contends that media systems are not abstract ideals but concrete, distinct patterns that require the granularity of a national context for interpretation. The study explores how the original framework provided by Hallin and Mancini (2004) could aid in understanding the Romanian media system. Specifically, indicators such as the structure of the media market, political parallelism, journalistic professionalism, and the role of journalists in democratic processes, as conceptualized by Hallin and Mancini, are used to analyze Romanian journalistic practices. To provide more nuanced insights into the current media system, this study updates these dimensions to reflect new media consumption patterns and the realities of the digital media market. Additionally, other variables such as economic viability, editorial independence from owners and political influence, and media regulations are incorporated into the analytical model to better grasp the particularities of the Romanian case.

Using the conceptualization of Hallin and Mancini (2004), and in alignment with similar studies (Boshnakova & Dănkovă, 2023; Castro et al., 2017; Humprecht et al., 2022), the article concludes that there is no singular type of Eastern European media system. Despite common trends in Eastern European media markets, understanding journalistic models requires consideration of the political, cultural, and economic background of each country. As argued by other authors (I. Coman & Gross, 2012; Gross, 2023), decoding the cultural context is essential for exploring how instrumentalization, clientelism, and political parallelism have evolved. These characteristics may distinguish the Romanian media system from others in Eastern Europe (Gross, 2023). The article acknowledges that a culture-based approach to examining media can aid in understanding why a media system functions as it does. However, it further emphasizes the need to complement cultural insights with empirical data related to the media industry, surveys, reports, and interviews with experts and practitioners.

Utilizing the foundational conceptualization of Hallin and Mancini's media systems model, this article contends that the Romanian media system exhibits characteristics of both the liberal and polarized pluralist systems, resulting in a unique "hybridized" configuration. This hybridization is explored within the context of the media sector's evolution, characterized by significant TV concentration and the rapid expansion of digital and social media. Drawing on the author's previous research (Botan & Stancea, 2023; Buturoiu et al., 2023) and other scholarly findings (e.g., Boshnakova & Dănkovă, 2023; Dobek-Ostrowska, 2019; Miconi &

Papathanassopoulos, 2023; Toma et al., 2023), this study argues that Romania's media landscape is distinguished by diminished professionalism, limited economic sustainability (heavily reliant on advertising revenue), and constrained editorial autonomy, primarily influenced by commercialization and significant political intervention.

To provide a comprehensive analysis of the Romanian media systems, this article integrates indicators tailored to capture contemporary shifts in the media landscape into Hallin and Mancini's (2004) original model. Notably, it considers traditional and digital media consumption patterns, reflecting the dynamic nature of media preferences. The Romanian media market's advertising revenues exceeded 683 million euros in 2023, with online media constituting over a third of the market in both consumption and revenue (Initiative, 2023). While TV and digital platforms have witnessed growth, radio consumption and newspaper circulation have declined. This article critically examines these trends, highlighting the susceptibility of media organizations to commercial and political pressures posed by high-risk advertising revenue. Based on recent survey data (Eurostat, Eurobarometer, and Reuters Institute reports) and exploration of these contemporary indicators, the study concludes that media consumption patterns and trust in media in Romania are shaped by factors such as significant TV concentration, the rapid adoption of digital and social media, and low confidence in the written press.

Additionally, drawing from various international reports (Blázquez et al., 2022; Toma et al., 2023; Transparency International, 2023), this study contends that political interference significantly impacts media organizations in Romania by influencing editorial decisions and shaping news content. Qualitative insights gleaned from interviews with journalists, media professionals, and politicians knowledgeable in media regulation (Buturoiu et al., 2023) further underscore the inadequacy of ethical codes and industry regulations. Regulatory gaps, compounded by the use of propaganda funds and the misuse of public funds by politicians and public officials to manipulate newsrooms, are documented in recent analyses (ActiveWatch, 2023a; Lupu, 2021; Toma et al., 2023), indicating a lack of genuine commitment to press freedom among Romanian political elites.

Moreover, echoing Hallin and Mancini's recent emphasis (Hallin et al., 2023), this study underscores the importance of incorporating cultural elements into their original model. This aligns with a recent analysis by Gross (2023), which underscores the necessity of understanding the interplay between culture and journalism. To enrich theoretical frameworks, this study integrates empirical quantitative data pertaining to the Romanian media sector and qualitative data derived from previous interviews with journalists and media practitioners (Buturoiu et al., 2023). These empirical findings validate strong correlations between the restructuring of the media market, economic viability, professionalization, adherence to journalistic codes of conduct, and political interventionism (including masked political advertising and lax enforcement of media regulations). Additionally, the ascendance of digital media reshapes the media landscape, while social media algorithms influence public perceptions of matters concerning the public interest. Future examinations of the Romanian journalistic landscape should incorporate these indicators into analytical models and explore the evolving role of digital media in shaping power dynamics.

Acknowledgments

The empirical data gathered from the national survey and interviews with media experts were collaboratively collected and analyzed with my colleagues Raluca Buturoiu and Nicoleta Corbu. This data formed the

foundation for our book, *Patterns of News Consumption in a High-Choice Media Environment: A Romanian Perspective* (2023).

Funding

My institution, the National University of Political Studies and Public Administration (SNSPA), provided partial funding for publishing this article in an open-access format.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

References

- ActiveWatch. (2023a). *Political parties, money and the media: A toxic relationship*. <https://activewatch.ro/publicatii/political-parties-money-and-the-media-a-toxic-relationship-freeex-digest-no-4-english>
- ActiveWatch. (2023b). *Condamnări penale pentru punerea în pericol a siguranței jurnaliștilor*. <https://activewatch.ro/articole/condamnare-in-prima-instanta-pentru-planuirea-uciderii-unui-jurnalist>
- Andersen, K., Johansson, J., Johansson, B., & Shehata, A. (2022). Maintenance and reformation of news repertoires: A latent transition analysis. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 99(1), 237–261.
- Armanca, B. (2019). *Televiziunea și țara. Istoria postdecembristă în oglinda catodică*. România literară. <https://romanaliterara.com/2019/06/televiziunea-si-tara-istoria-postdecembrista-in-oglindea-catodica>
- Blázquez, J. F., Cappello, M., Milla, J. T., & Valais, S. (2022). *Governance and independence of public service media*. European Audiovisual Observatory. <https://rm.coe.int/iris-plus-2022en1-governance-and-independence-of-public-service-media/1680a59a76>
- Boshnakova, D., & Dănková, D. (2023). The media in Eastern Europe. In S. Papathanassopoulos & A. Miconi (Eds.), *The media systems in Europe* (pp. 163–190). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-32216-7_7
- Botan, M., & Stancea, A. (2023). *The implementation of the Code of Practice on Disinformation in Romania*. Bulgarian-Romanian Observatory of Digital Media. https://edmo.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/Evaluating-the-Revised-EU-Code-of-Practice-on-Disinformation-in-Romania_v2.pdf
- Brüggemann, M., Engesser, S., Büchel, F., Humprecht, E., & Castro, L. (2014). Hallin and Mancini revisited: Four empirical types of Western media systems. *Journal of Communication*, 64(6), 1037–1065. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcom.12127>
- Buturoiu, R., Corbu, N., & Botan, M. (2022). Profiles of news consumption in a high-choice media environment: Evidence from Romania. *Media Literacy and Academic Research*, 5(1), 95–115.
- Buturoiu, R., Corbu, N., & Botan, M. (2023). *Patterns of news consumption in a high-choice media environment: A Romanian perspective*. Springer.
- Castro, L., Humprecht, E., Engesser, S., Brüggemann, M., & Büchel, F. (2017). Rethinking Hallin and Mancini beyond the West: An analysis of media systems in Central and Eastern Europe. *International Journal of Communication*, 11, 4797–4823. <https://doi.org/10.5167/uzh-144867>
- Castro, L., Strömbäck, J., Esser, F., Van Aelst, P., de Vreese, C., Aalberg, T., Cardenal, A. S., Corbu, N., Hopmann, D. N., Koc-Michalska, K., Matthes, J., Schemer, C., Sheaffer, T., Splendore, S., Stanyer, J., Stępińska, A., Štětka, V., & Theocharis, Y. (2022). Navigating high-choice European political information environments: A comparative analysis of news user profiles and political knowledge. *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, 27(4), 827–859. <https://doi.org/10.1177/19401612211012572>
- Coman, I., & Gross, P. (2012). Uncommonly common or truly exceptional? An alternative to the political system-based explanation of the Romanian mass media. *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, 17(4), 457–479.

- Coman, M. (2001). The media landscape in Romania. *SEER: Journal for Labour and Social Affairs in Eastern Europe*, 4(1), 173–186.
- Coman, M. (2016). *Introducere în sistemul mass-media*. Elefant.
- Dobek-Ostrowska, B. (2012). Italianization (or Mediterraneanization) of the Polish media system? Reality and perspective. In D. Hallin & P. Mancini (Eds.), *Comparing media systems beyond the Western world* (pp. 26–50). Cambridge University Press.
- Dobek-Ostrowska, B. (2019). How the media systems work in Central and Eastern Europe. In E. Połońska & C. Beckett (Eds.), *Public service broadcasting and media systems in troubled European democracies* (pp. 259–278). Springer. https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-030-02710-0_12
- Dobek-Ostrowska, B., & Głowacki, M. (2016). 25 years after communism: Four models of media and politics in Central and Eastern Europe. In B. Dobek-Ostrowska (Ed.), *Democracy and media in Central and Eastern Europe 25 years on* (pp. 128–146). Peter Lang. <https://doi.org/10.3726/978-3-653-04452-2/10>
- European Commission. (2023). *Standard Eurobarometer 99: Spring 2023*. <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/3052>
- Eurostat. (2023). *Digital economy and society statistics—Households and individuals*. https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Digital_economy_and_society_statistics_-_households_and_individuals
- Gross, P. (2004). Between reality and dream: Eastern European media transition, transformation, consolidation, and integration. *East European Politics and Societies*, 18(1), 110–131. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0888325403259919>
- Gross, P. (2008). Forward to the past: The intractable problems of Romania's media system. *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, 13(2), 141–152. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1940161208314807>
- Gross, P. (2019). Journalism and transitions to democracy in Eastern Europe. In K. Wahl-Jorgensen & T. Hanitzsch (Eds.), *The handbook of journalism studies* (pp. 522–537). Routledge.
- Gross, P. (2023). *The cultural core of media systems: The Romanian case*. Rowman & Littlefield.
- Hallin, D., & Mancini, P. (2004). *Comparing media systems: Three models of media and politics*. Cambridge University Press.
- Hallin, D., & Mancini, P. (2013). “Comparing media systems” between Eastern and Western Europe. In P. Gross & K. Jakubowicz (Eds.), *Media transformations in the post-communist world: Eastern Europe's tortured path to change* (pp. 15–32). Lexington Books.
- Hallin, D., Mellado, C., & Mancini, P. (2023). The concept of hybridity in journalism studies. *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, 28(1), 219–237.
- Hameleers, M. (2022). Separating truth from lies: Comparing the effects of news media literacy interventions and fact-checkers in response to political misinformation in the US and Netherlands. *Information, Communication & Society*, 25(1), 110–126.
- Hameleers, M., & van der Meer, T. G. (2020). Misinformation and polarization in a high-choice media environment: How effective are political fact-checkers? *Communication Research*, 47(2), 227–250. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0093650218819671>
- Humprecht, E., Castro Herrero, L., Blassnig, S., Brüggemann, M., & Engesser, S. (2022). Media systems in the digital age: An empirical comparison of 30 countries. *Journal of Communication*, 72(2), 145–164. <https://doi.org/10.1093/joc/jqab054>
- Initiative. (2023). *Media Fact Book: Romania 2023*. <https://www.mediafactbook.ro>
- Latvala, J. (2023). *The mirage in the trust desert: Challenging journalism's transparency infatuation*. Reuters Institute. <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/mirage-trust-desert-challenging-journalistic-transparency>

- Lilleker, D. G., Coman, I., Gregor, M., & Novelli, E. (2021). *Political communication and Covid-19*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003120254>
- Lupu, C. (2021). *Jurnalismul în 2021: O cursă cu obstacole și cu tot mai puțini câștigători*. Friedrich Naumann Foundation For Freedom; Centrul pentru Jurnalism Independent. <https://cji.ro/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Jurnalismul-in-2021.-O-cursa-cu-obstacole-si-cu-tot-mai-putini-castigatori-raport.pdf>
- Miconi, A., & Papathanassopoulos, S. (2023). On Western and Eastern media systems: Continuities and discontinuities. In S. Papathanassopoulos & A. Miconi (Eds.), *The media systems in Europe* (pp. 15–34). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-32216-7_2
- Newman, N., Fletcher, R., Eddy, K., Robertson, C. T., & Nielsen, R. K. (2023). *Reuters Institute digital news report 2023*. Oxford University. https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2023-06/Digital_News_Report_2023.pdf
- Park, S., Fisher, C., Flew, T., & Dulleck, U. (2020). Global mistrust in news: The impact of social media on trust. *International Journal on Media Management*, 22(2), 83–96.
- Perloff, R. M. (2022). The fifty-year legacy of agenda-setting: Storied past, complex conundrums, future possibilities. *Mass Communication and Society*, 25(4), 469–499.
- Peruško, Z., Vozab, D., & Čuvalo, A. (2021). *Comparing post-socialist media systems: The case of Southeast Europe*. Routledge.
- Polyák, G. (2019). *Media in Hungary: Three pillars of an illiberal democracy*. In E. Połońska & C. Beckett (Eds.), *Public service broadcasting and media systems in troubled European democracies* (pp. 279–303). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-02710-0_13
- Reporters Without Borders. (n.d.). *Index*. <https://rsf.org/en/index>
- Reporters Without Borders. (2022). *Europe–Central Asia polarisation to the West, war & propaganda to the East: The European Union caught between two extremes*. <https://rsf.org/en/classement/2022/europe-central-asia>
- Rossiter, E. (2021). Measuring agenda setting in interactive political communication. *American Journal of Political Science*, 66(2), 337–351.
- Stanescu, G. (2023). *Cele mai citate surse media din România*. Media Trust. <https://www.mediatrust.ro/cele-mai-citate-surse-media-din-romania>
- Strömbäck, J., Boomgaarden, H., Broda, E., Damstra, A., Lindgren, E., Tsfati, Y., & Vliegenthart, R. (2022). From low-choice to high-choice media environments: Implications for knowledge resistance. In H. Oscarsson, J. Strömbäck, K. Glüer, T. Lindholm, & Å. Wikforss (Eds.), *Knowledge resistance in high-choice information environments* (pp. 49–68). Routledge.
- Toma, R., Popescu, M., & Bodea, R. (2023). *Monitoring media pluralism in the digital era: Application of the media pluralism monitor in the European Union, Albania, Montenegro, the Republic of North Macedonia, Serbia and Turkey. Country report: Romania*. European University Institute.
- Transparency International. (n.d.). *Corruption perceptions index*. <https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2023>
- V-Dem. (n.d.). *Country graph*. https://v-dem.net/data_analysis/CountryGraph

About the Author



Madalina Botan serves as an associate professor at the National University of Political Studies and Public Administration (SNSPA). Her teaching portfolio encompasses courses on mass media, misinformation, and the influence of new technologies on opinions and electoral behavior. She actively participates in two COST research networks dedicated to exploring opinions and radical polarization. Furthermore, she contributes to BROD, a European Digital Media Observatory hub, where her research concentrates on the impact of misinformation and the implementation of the European Code of Practice on Disinformation in Romania.