

AFFECTIVE AND SOCIAL MARKERS OF ROMANIAN MAINSTREAM AND NATIONALIST-ORIENTED NEWS MEDIA'S DISCURSIVE PATTERNS

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Abstract

The present paper is a quantitative investigation of the affective and social markers of mainstream and nationalist-oriented news media in Romania in a regular and a highly sensitive social context. To reach our aim, we analysed the linguistic markers of text corpus from two main news sites, representative for each type of media (Digi24 and Activenews). Our endeavor is structured in two empirical studies. In the first study, we analysed articles published in a regular, conflict-free context, while the second study helped us to differentiate between the two types of media's coverage of the sensible Uz Valley interethnic incident in Romania. The text corpus was processed with the help of the recently developed Romanian version of the Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count software. To check our hypotheses and analyze the difference in emotionality and social processes between the mainstream and non-mainstream, nationalist-oriented news media, we used the *t* test and the LDA modelling technique. Results pointed out the highly emotional and religious-focused language on Activenews as compared to Digi24, in both regular and ethnically sensitive contexts. However, the significant level of negativity on Digi24 as well, especially regarding the Uz Valley incident, challenges us to address the propagation of nationalist-type language elements through mainstream media as well.

Keywords: affectivity, social processes, interethnic conflict, alternative media, LIWC.

1. INTRODUCTION

Nationalist inflammatory discourse has an increasingly stronger echoing in society (Krzyżanowski & Wodak, 2017), and Romania has its murmur too. Notably, nationalism has a precedent of permeating both non-mainstream and general Romanian media (ActiveWatch, 2016). In this article, we will analyze the psychological and social markers of mainstream and non-mainstream, nationalist-oriented Romanian news media discourse both in a regular and an interethnic

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sensitive context (i.e., the Uz Valley incident¹). According to the ‘words as attention’ perspective (Boyd & Schwartz, 2021), the language analysis of both types of media coverage can provide us insight into the specifics of their attentional focus.

The centrality of emotions in nationalism (e.g., Demertzis, 2013; Eiranen, 2022) prompts us to focus on the affective markers of media discourse. Recent endeavors highlight the practical importance of the study of emotionality and nationalism under the umbrella concept of affective nationalism (Antonsich *et al.*, 2020). Affective nationalism defines both everyday nationalism (Skey, 2011) and highly emotional and intense ecstatic nationalism (Skey, 2009). News media language analysis could provide important markers of emotionality and can give away the social interests and dynamic in the text (Kacewicz *et al.*, 2009; Pennebaker & Chung, 2008), and can help us differentiate between mainstream and non-mainstream language mechanics (Kaati *et al.*, 2016).

Furthermore, considering Henry Tajfel’s fundamental social identity theory (Brown, 2019), we will also investigate the social processes ingrained in media discourse. As specified by this theory, individuals seek to create a positive social identity, a positive self-concept, identifying with members of a specific group. Sympathies or attachment towards ingroup members lead to dislike towards outgroup members; under certain circumstances, the latter increases intergroup intolerance and conflict. While we did not identify any relevant research on the psychological and social processes revealed by the language of non-mainstream, nationalist news media in Romania, we take our inspiration from the directions set by foreign research (e.g., Kaati *et al.*, 2016).

The Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC; Pennebaker *et al.*, 2015) is a reliable (Tausczik & Pennebaker, 2010) representative of language analysis software that allows a multifaceted quantitative research of large texts, including the analysis of affective and social processes. Notably, LIWC provides an accurate evaluation of the valence of emotions (Tausczik & Pennebaker, 2010; Zhao *et al.*, 2016; Dudău, 2019), augmented by its function words categories (Chung & Pennebaker, 2007), and it can recognize the affective processes in biased discourse (Baele 2017; Kaati *et al.*, 2016). Moreover, the objective nature of the instrument (Smirnova, Laranetto & Kolenda, 2017) is an asset in the evaluation of sensible topics such as interethnic conflict. Furthermore, LIWC was also used in nationalist or extremist text corpora analysis (e.g. Kaati *et al.*, 2016; Figea *et al.*, 2016), especially relevant considering nationalist-oriented media tends to mirror the emotionality connected to nationalism (e.g., Tuomola & Wahl-Jorgensen, 2022).

¹ The Uz Valley incident refers to an interethnic direct conflict between ethnic Hungarians and ethnic Romanians that took place in June 2019 in the Hungarian-majority county of Harghita in Romania.

Recently, a Romanian variant of the comprehensive 2015 LIWC was developed (Ro-LIWC2015; Dudău & Sava, 2020), thus allowing an objective and in depth analysis of Romanian texts. The two studies in this paper are the first ones to apply such a thorough and objective language analysis tool to analyze the affectivity of Romanian nationalist-oriented discourse. Ro-LIWC2015 has a good criterion validity and is reliable in identifying the contrasts between different text corpus (Dudău & Sava, 2020), thus making it valuable to our comparative research.

2. STUDY 1

The study investigates the emotional and social dimensions of mainstream and non-mainstream, nationalist-oriented news media in a regular context, free of sensitive ethnic incidents. In view of the nationalist discourse's particularities regarding emotionality (Demertzis 2013; Richards, 2013; Kaati *et al.*, 2016), we expect nationalist-oriented media's discourse to have a higher level of emotionality compared to mainstream media (Hypothesis 1). LIWC can offer valuable insights into the sentiment analysis of news media's discourse in general (Frimer, Brandt & Melton, 2018; Turetsky & Riddle, 2018), and surrounding politically-charged topics (Kaati *et al.*, 2016; Smirnova, Laranetto & Kolenda, 2017). Furthermore, LIWC is a valuable tool in identifying the markers used by media in the representation of different social groups (Smirnova, Laranetto & Kolenda, 2017), a feature enhanced by its function words (Tausczik & Pennebaker, 2010). Therefore, we expect different social markers characterize non-mainstream, nationalist-oriented news media as opposed to mainstream media, in a normal context (Hypothesis 2). In an exploratory analysis, we also investigate whether the two types of media have a different hierarchy of linguistic features (e.g., which negative emotion is primarily used).

2.1. METHOD

The analysis was conducted on a corpus of articles published on both mainstream media and non-mainstream, nationalist-oriented media from Romania. Activenews is among the most visited Romanian news sites with a nationalist-oriented rhetoric (Baya, 2020), according to *trafic.ro*. Activenews hosts news articles with a frequent anti-EU, anti-Hungarians, anti-refugees, anti-LGBT, and pro-Orthodox rhetoric, suggestive for an ethnic nationalist right-wing stance (Rydgren, 2017). Following Meyers' (2008) indices of alternative media, Activenews' non-mainstream, but also nationalist-oriented stance is mainly highlighted by its self-proclaimed ideological adherence to an autochthone perspective of events (Pocotilă, 2017). Similar to Activenews, Digi24 is a private, self-proclaimed politically independent news media. Digi24's online site has the biggest number of monthly visitors in Romania (Brat, 2019), thus being a relevant representative of Romanian mainstream media.

We analysed a group of Activenews ($N = 929$) and Digi24 articles ($N = 847$) published in July and August 2019. The Activenews corpus consisted of articles published on the News, External, and Culture sections of the news site. Since the mainstream Digi 24 site has a broader coverage than Activenews, we balanced the total number of articles by including only the External section articles, arguably the most varied section of Digi24. All the articles were processed using the Ro-LIWC (Dudău & Sava, 2020). The output was further analysed with the help of the statistical platforms SPSS 16.0 (IBM Corp., 2016) and R 4.0.2 software (R Core Team, 2020). To assess the above-mentioned hypotheses, we mainly focused on the Affective processes and Social processes categories of Ro-LIWC. Complementary to their analysis, we also evaluated other linguistic markers reflecting emotionality and social processes, such as pronouns (Pennebaker & Chung, 2008).

2.2. RESULTS

To verify the validity of the first study's hypotheses, the data was partly analysed with the help of a parametric test, the independent samples t test. Depending on the equality of variances, the Student's test and Welch's test were employed. Also, when the skewness value (>2) suggested an asymmetric distribution of a variable's frequency, the non-parametric Mann-Whitney test was used. Table no. 1 reveals Activenews articles have a more emotional, generally positive-focused language than Digi24. The results offer support for the first hypothesis.

Table no. 1
Comparison between Activenews and Digi24 July-August articles for Affective Processes

RoLIWC category		MD/Mean Rank	SD	Test	Value	p	Effect size
Affective processes	Activenews	6.20	2.29	Student's t	4.15	.00	.20
	Digi24	5.74	2.37				
Positive emotion	Activenews	3.34	1.56	Welch's t	13.30	.00	.63
	Digi24	2.38	1.48				
Negative emotion	Activenews	2.68	1.74	Welch's t	-4.74	.00	-4.74
	Digi24	3.11	2.09				
Sadness	Activenews	935.19	-	Mann-Whitney U	350053	.00	-.10
	Digi24	837.29	-				
Anxiety	Activenews	865.69	-	Mann-Whitney	372245		-.05

	Digi24	913.51	-	U		.04	
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Note. The effect size value is for *Cohens's d* (Student's *t* and Welch's *t*), respectively *r* (Man-Whitney U). For Whitney-Mann U, the Mean Rank was computed.

To check the second hypothesis and identify the social markers of both types of news media, we focused on the Social Processes, Drives, and Personal Concerns categories of the RO-LIWC2015. As seen in Table no. 2, the most notable social differentiator is Religion (Personal Concerns), suggesting the importance Activenews places on shared values and beliefs. The higher use of Family, Friends (Social Processes) and Affiliation (Drives) features suggests a pronounced appeal to readers' sense of belonging and community.

Table no. 2
Social markers. Significantly higher variables for Activenews compared to Digi24

RoLIWC category		Mean Rank	Test	Value	p	Effect size
Family	Activenews	1004.61	Mann-Whitney U	285568	.00	-.26
	Digi24	761.15				
Friends	Activenews	933.28	Mann-Whitney U	351834	<.00	-.10
	Digi24	839.39				
Affiliation	Activenews	1038.05	Mann-Whitney U	254495	<.00	-.31
	Digi24	724.47				
Religion	Activenews	1118.53	Mann-Whitney U	179744	<.00	-.50
	Digi24	636.21				

LIWC's function words (e.g., pronouns) nuance the interpretation of the affective and social categories (Tausczik & Pennebaker, 2010). There is a significantly higher presence of personal pronouns on Activenews ($t(1779) = 6.295, p = .00$), with the first person plural ("we") ($U = 324042, p = .00$) and the third person plural ("they") ($U = 329641, p = .00$) being the most frequently used. Other grammar such as the use of comparatives (e.g., "greater", "best") ($U = 368168, p = .02$) further suggests a focus on the differences between various groups or ideas.

Exploratory analysis. To further investigate the differences between the two site types and set a hierarchy of linguistic features that characterize each one of them, we employed a linear discriminant analysis (LDA). After fulfilling the

LDA's assumption of multicollinearity (Variance Inflation Factor > 5), the revised dataset included 62 linguistic features and was split into a scaled training set (75% of the news posts) and a test set (25% of the news posts). The LDA results show the ten main linguistic features that differentiate between mainstream and non-mainstream, nationalist-oriented media: fillers (-2.291), conjunctions (-.847), religion (-.361), numbers (.345), parenthesis (-.330), prepositions (-.307), time (-.245), power (-.236), article (-.210), focus on present (.200). The negative group means reveal that the majority of them are mainly present in Activenews posts. However, none of the affective processes categories are among the main ten, suggesting a relatively low emotionality. The area under the curve (AUC) parameter (.948) suggests the model is able to deliver very good predictions.

2.3. DISCUSSION STUDY 1

Activenews' discourse is more emotional. Similar to past studies (e.g., Kaati *et al.*, 2016), we identified emotionality as a relevant marker in non-mainstream, biased media. Counterintuitively (Onraet *et al.*, 2013; Kaati *et al.*, 2016; Frimer, Brandt & Melton, 2018), the affectivity is mainly built on positive emotions. It is worth mentioning that the study does not focus on the topic of the articles, thus the positive emotion words on Activenews could reflect the writers' focus on their own values and, in this way, represent a marker of difference between them and the perceived others' values. This latter interpretation is supported by the observed affiliation tendency and dichotomy between „us” and „them”, the ingroup and the outgroup, in the rhetoric of Activenews articles. Also, the use of positive words could be influenced by the specificity of the articles, non-mainstream sites frequently selecting a narrow, preferred base of topics rather than reporting on a diverse palette of subjects (Kaati *et al.*, 2016). Even if less poignant, there are also instances of negativity on Activenews (i.e., sadness). Although Digi24 uses more negativity (i.e., anxiety), the differences are modest, and the type of negative emotion appears to be the main differentiator in this case.

The abovementioned findings, doubled by the lack of affective processes in the main ten LDA features, point towards Romanian nationalist-oriented news media's relatively limited virulence. The sadness that permeates the Activenews articles' language could refer to the writers' wish to express disappointment at others' different values and beliefs, and thus solidify their social identity. Also, the sad tone of the text might suggest the writers focus more on promoting and stabilizing their ideology among the readership, than on mobilizing them towards action.

The most notable social differentiator between mainstream and nationalist-oriented media is religion-related content. Religion markers' top presence in the LDA model's hierarchy of features highlights Activenews frequently resorts to religious symbols or values to communicate their message. One possible

explanation is that we analysed only the Externe section of Digi24, but considered the Culture section of Activenews. However, this is debatable, as religion was frequently part of nationalist groups' discourse in modern history Romania (Andreescu, 2003). A similar pattern of religion-punctured nationalist discourse was observed in Polish far-right groups (Starnawski, 2003).

3. STUDY 2

While the first study focused on a regular, conflict-free context, the second study delves into the psycho-social specifics of emotional ethnic conflict portrayal. Thus, we investigate the affective and social mechanics of nationalist-oriented and mainstream news media's coverage of the sensitive Uz Valley incident through an objective computerized software. To this aim, we replicate the first study's hypotheses regarding the same news sites, Activenews and Digi24. The Uz Valley incident developed in the Hungarian-majority Harghita County in Romania and is the most recently encountered and representative direct and emotional interethnic conflict in Romania, and an indicator of the concrete negative consequences of perpetuating and inflaming ethnic bias.

Previous research showed the media's tendency to reflect the emotionality surrounding intense ethnic-related events such as the Charlottesville incident (Mahajan *et al.*, 2020), or the Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong (Song & Zhang, 2017). However, they typically did not focus on the psycho-social differences between mainstream and non-mainstream partisan media. Furthermore, few previous studies analysed highly tense periods of interethnic conflicts between Hungarians and Romanians living in Romania (e.g., Cernat, 2012), and they mostly had a descriptive, less-objective approach. The role of media representation of ethnic minorities in Romania was mainly investigated regarding the Roma people, in a descriptive or qualitative manner (e.g., Crețu, 2014).

3.1. METHOD

To compare the media's coverage of the Uz Valley incident, we used the Ro-LIWC2015 (Dudău & Sava, 2020) analysing program and selected all the Digi24 (N = 20) and Activenews (N = 21) articles that covered the incident and were published in June 2019, shortly after it took place.

3.2. RESULTS

When the normality assumption was met, we used a parametric test (independent samples Student *t* test or Welch's test, depending on the equality of variances) to analyze the differences between Activenews and Digi24 articles. Considering the relatively small sample of articles published on the topic in June,

for the word categories that didn't meet the normality assumption, a non-parametric test (Mann-Whitney U) was used. As can be seen in Table no. 3, Sadness is the most poignant affective differentiator between Activenews' and Digi24's coverage of the incident. However, Digi24 have a significantly higher level of Anxiety-related words than Activenews. Regarding social markers, Activenews rely significantly on Religion-related words, while Digi24 has a median of zero words used.

Table no. 3
Comparison between Activenews and Digi24 June 2019 articles

RoLIWC category		MD/Mean Rank	SD	Test	Value	p	Effect size
Sadness	Activenews	.76	.47	Student's t	2.974	.01	2.97
	Digi24	.39	.31				
Anxiety	Activenews	17.02	-	Mann-Whitney U	127	.03	-.35
	Digi24	25.18	-				
Religion	Activenews	26.00	1.21	Mann-Whitney U	105	.01	-.44
	Digi24	15.75	.21				

Exploratory analysis. To provide further nuance to the analysis of the Uz Valley incident, we employed the LDA method of classification. Similar to the procedure in the first study, we checked the level of collinearity of all the variables from the Affective Processes, Social Processes, Drives and Personal Concerns categories, along with the function words (pronouns, adverbs, etc.). However, following the unfavorable multicollinearity diagnosis, the LDA was computed on 11 variables: I (.602 coefficient of linear discriminants), We (-.592), You (-.127), She/He (.515), They (.352), Positive Emotions (-.054), Anxiety (-.182), Anger (.580), Sadness (-.596), Affiliation (.280), Power (.078). Negative values refer to an Activenews majority. As observed, the main affective differentiator is Sadness (Activenews), closely followed by Anger (Digi24). Also, Digi24 rely more on social features (i.e., Affiliation), result augmented by the higher use of pronouns suggestive of an "us vs. them" narrative ("I", "She/He"). Therefore, our hypotheses were only partially confirmed. The AUC parameter (.60) computed on the testing set shows the model has a satisfactory performance.

3.3. DISCUSSION STUDY 2

The Uz Valley incident has triggered a strongly religious-filled and slightly more intense negative response from Activenews than Digi24. The higher use of

negative affect words (i.e., Sadness) could imply hostility towards certain topics or people (Pennebaker & Chung, 2008), but also disappointment and disagreement with others, and was also observed in biased and extremist discourse (e.g., Torregrosa *et al.*, 2020), including media's coverage of ethnic events (e.g., Song & Zhang, 2017; Mahajan *et al.*, 2020). However, the comparable proportion of anger-related words in Digi24's articles might reflect impartiality on mainstream media's part too, or its disapproval of the incident. This finding is not unique, as ethnic events were previously covered in a negative light in Romanian (Durach, Pîrvan & Udrea, 2017) and foreign (Song & Zhang, 2017) mainstream media. The negativity is accompanied by pronouns suggestive of an affiliation infused rhetoric on Digi24 and a general focus on the ingroup and/or the outgroup ("we" on Activenews, respectively "she/he" and "I" on Digi24). While different in type, the negativity-filled discourse on both mainstream and non-mainstream sites could be explained by Romanians' strong national identity and the great influence of their perception of threat to their ingroup identity (Dimitrova, Buzea & Jordanov, 2013).

4. GENERAL DISCUSSION

The two studies point out the nationalist-oriented media's increased emotionality and focus on the ingroup in both regular and ethnically-sensitive contexts. While the regular context Activenews articles' tone was mainly characterized by positivity, during the coverage of the Uz Valley ethnic incident, nationalist-oriented media reflected solely negative emotions (sadness), possibly reflecting the strong value it places on ethnic-related topics (Song & Zhang, 2017). Furthermore, nationalist-oriented media's frequent use of religion markers in both contexts suggests it appeals to religion to augment its message and possibly emotionality. Therefore, the historical religious element of Romanian nationalism (Andreescu, 2003) appears to be a characteristic of contemporary nationalism as well.

Nonetheless, mainstream media was also characterized by negativity (anger) and an "us vs them" discourse especially when covering the sensitive Uz Valley incident. In this sensitive context, the main affectivity-related difference between the two types of media is connected to the type of negative emotion they convey (sadness, respectively anger). The prominent presence of negativity and a dichotomous discourse on both types of media, especially when covering sensitive ethnic events, suggests that both mainstream and non-mainstream media might have a role in the gradual normalization of nationalist discourse in society, advancing the knowledge that the difference in their practices is sometimes blurred (Macek *et al.*, 2017). Also, this finding could be explained by the type of reporting, sadness might be linked to an interpretation of the events, while anger might reflect a direct reporting of others' declarations concerning the incident. Since sadness

was previously linked to information contagion (Mahajan *et al.*, 2020), Activenews might be more invested in advancing its own perspective on the readership.

5. CONCLUSION

The studies mainly suggest the malleability of affect and reliance on a religion-backed divisive rhetoric in nationalist-oriented media as compared to mainstream media. Nationalist-oriented media juggles with affect valence (positive vs negative) depending on the social context. While representing limits of the present paper, future research could diversify the type of non-mainstream media it includes (e.g., blogs) and increase the number of relevant nationalist-oriented sites. Important insight might also be provided by analysing mainstream and non-mainstream media's topics of interest and its social and emotional features in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and after AUR's rise to political significance. Also, the descriptive nature of LIWC results (Boyd & Schwartz, 2021) is another limit that might be overcome by incorporating an experimental design that allows for the identification of words' deeper link with psychological processes.

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