Romanian Journal of Communication and Public Relations

Revista Română de Comunicare și Relații Publice

Volume 26, no. 2 (62) / July 2024

NUPSPA
College of Communication and Public Relations

ROMANIAN JOURNAL OF COMMUNICATION AND PUBLIC RELATIONS

Volume 26, no. 2 (62) / July 2024

NUPSPA
College of Communication
and Public Relations

Publisher

College of Communication and Public Relations – NUPSPA
6 Povernei St., Sector 1, Bucharest
Tel.: 201 318 0889; Fax: 021 318 0882
elena.negrea@comunicare.ro; www.journalofcommunication.ro

The Journal is published three times a year. The journal has been indexed by SCOPUS, ProQuest CSA, EBSCO Publishing, CEEOL, DOAJ, Cabell's Directory, Index Copernicus and Genamics Journal Seek. This journal is recognized by CNCSIS and included in the B+ category (www.cncsis.ro).

ISSN 1454-8100

Contents

Articles

Romanian Journal of Communication and Public Relations
vol. 26, no. 2 (62) / July 2024, **7-24**
ISSN: 1454-8100/ E-ISSN: 2344-5440

Andreea STANCEA*
Iulia CĂLIN**
Cecilia CIOCÎRLAN***

Memes and Their Role in the 2019 Romanian Presidential Elections: An Exploratory Analysis

Abstract

This article explores the influence of memes on political discourse and public opinion during the 2019 Romanian presidential elections. Focusing on memes related to candidates Klaus Iohannis and Viorica Dăncilă, the article highlights the dual role of memes: as entertainment and as tools for framing political narratives in a biased manner. Employing content analysis, the article offers a view over the types of memes that emerged during the 2019 Romanian presidential elections, emphasizing the representation of the two front-runner candidates: Klaus Iohannis and Viorica Dăncilă. Generally, memes of both candidates were negative in tone with Iohannis more likely to be framed in terms of his funny and humorous situations and Dăncilă in terms of her low intellectual qualities. The article calls for further exploration into the strategic use of memes in politics, aiming to grasp their impact on shaping public perceptions and narratives in the upcoming 2024 elections.

Keywords: memes; elections; political communication; political humor; disinformation

1. Introduction

In the last years, memes have emerged as a potent force in shaping public opinion and discourse, particularly in the context of election campaigns (McLoughlin & Southern, 2021; McKelvey et al., 2023;). These succinct, often humorous images, videos, or texts spread rapidly online, offering a unique blend of entertainment and political commentary. Their accessibility and shareability make them a powerful tool for engagement, capable of reaching wide audiences with minimal effort (Beskow et al., 2020). The use of various digital communication forms, such as image-text memes, highlights significant concerns about the role of digital media platforms in shaping the political landscape (Penney, 2020; McLoughlin &

* National University of Political Studies and Public Administration, Bucharest, Romania; andreea.stancea@comunicare.ro, https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1489-6154
** National University of Political Studies and Public Administration, Bucharest, Romania; iulia.calin@comunicare.ro, https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7870-2278
*** Bucharest University of Economic Studies; cecilia.ciocirlan@iem.ro, https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4460-6958

Southern, 2021; Leiser, 2022; McKelvey et al., 2023). Thus, as we approach the upcoming elections in Romania, understanding not only the role of memes, but also the impact of different forms of digital communication on citizens' political behavior becomes crucial. Additionally, as the Romanian electorate prepares for its next electoral battle in an unstable geopolitical environment (the Russia – Ukraine war and the conflict between Hamas and Israel), the strategic use of memes, or other forms of image-text based forms of communication by various stakeholders – including political parties, supporters, and malicious actors – will likely play a significant role in shaping the electoral landscape, making it important to examine their impact on the spread of information, disinformation, and propaganda (Bargaoanu & Radu, 2018; Corbu et al., 2020).

In this context, the 2019 Romanian presidential election provides a compelling case study on how memes can influence political narratives and voter perceptions. The 2019 elections occurred in a period marked by political instability and challenges: the ruling Social Democratic Party (PSD) faced widespread criticism and protest over issues such as corruption, judicial reforms, and governance, while the incumbent president, Klaus Iohannis, ran for re-election primarily on an anti-corruption platform. As of now, the candidates for the 2024 presidential elections in Romania still have to tackle corruption which has been a persistent issue in Romanian politics, and it is likely to remain a central theme in the 2024 elections. In addition, the rise of extreme right-wing political parties in Romania makes the 2024 round of elections to be seen as a crucial turning point in the continent's political landscape. Although the 2019 and 2024 Romanian elections occur within distinct political contexts, they share a common dynamic: both tend to polarize public opinion, forming clear divisions around various candidates and issues. In these polarized environments, memes emerge as a powerful tool for expression and solidarity. They not only enable supporters of different camps to rally around their causes, but also offer a means to humorously critique opposing views. This dual function makes memes an integral part of the digital discourse during election seasons, reflecting and shaping public sentiment. However, Romanian research on image-text memes is scarce (Stoicescu, 2020; Buraga & Pavelea, 2021).

Thus, this article aims to contribute to the literature by exploring the idea that the 2019 presidential campaign saw a proliferation of memes targeting the front-runners, Klaus Iohannis and Viorica Dăncilă, highlighting their perceived qualities and flaws in starkly contrasting manners. Findings from the analysis reveal that Iohannis was frequently depicted in humorous situations, leveraging his persona for comedic effects, while Dăncilă was often portrayed in a negative light, focusing on her intellectual capabilities. This dichotomy not only reflects the creativity and biases inherent in meme culture but also underscores the potential of memes to sway public opinion by framing political figures in specific, often simplistic narratives (Ross & Rivers, 2019; de Saint Laurent et al., 2021; Peters & Allan, 2022).

Having as case study the 2019 Romanian presidential elections, this article aims to elaborate an exploratory analysis on image-text based memes and their potential contribution to online propaganda and disinformation. The article focuses on the political memes that were popular during the 2019 Romanian presidential elections, as they represent a tool of political participation and played an important role in the 2019 Romanian presidential elections. The article follows a multidisciplinary approach considering that selected topic stays at the intersections of several research fields such as communication, politics as well as sociology. Furthermore, in this article we do not intend to follow the actors who use memes as an instrument of propaganda and disinformation but to observe how citizens' engagement with memes could

contribute to the spread of online propaganda and disinformation created by those actors. This analysis focuses on the engagement that selected memes could evoke among users. Thus, we consider the sentiment or emotional orientation of the messages as a dependent variable.

2. Literature review

The concept of memes appeared for the first time in the work of Richard Dawkins (1976/2006) (evolutionary biologist) defined as a new unit (a cultural replicator) that spread ideas and behaviors in an infectious, gene-like fashion among individuals and populations alike. It is considered that the concept of meme is based on Universal Darwinism's principle because it intends to be spread as widely as possible: memes have a certain agency of their own and propagate themselves to ensure their survival. Similarly, in internet studies/cultural studies research, memes are treated as media objects with specific characteristics. For example, Limor Shifman (2013) underlined that Dawkinsian memes and internet memes are both social phenomena. They reproduce through imitation and diffuse through competition and selection. However, Shifman (2013) contends that the issue of human agency is central to understanding internet memes, defining them as "units of popular culture that are circulated, imitated, and transformed by individual Internet users, creating a shared cultural experience in the process" (p. 367). Marwick and Lewis (2017) note that, while virtually anything can be a meme since it is a unit of information, in modern Internet parlance, a meme is a visual trope that proliferates across Internet spaces as it is replicated and altered by anonymous users.

As social media platforms are continuously developing, researchers are focusing on content creation, dissemination, and consumption, as well as on the dynamics of sharing that are becoming more and more central to memes' nature. Furthermore, memes are more than "digital artifacts of public opinion" (Moody-Ramirez & Church, 2019, p.3). They are "consumable, collectible and shareable objects of political discourse" (Moody-Ramirez & Church, 2019, p.3). In other words, memes have high qualities of engaging mass population and create strong opinions that resist long periods through social media platforms. Scholars emphasized that the study of political memes allows researchers to understand behaviors and actions, both from the perspective of actors that created them and the users who attach value to them. In addition, previous studies emphasized that pictures are valuable in shaping attitudes about people because they can be used to convey a sense of credibility, gain the attention of audience members, and evoke feelings (McLoughlin & Southern, 2021).

One main characteristic of memes is their multimodal content - combination of multiple forms of communication (such as textual, visual, and auditory modes) within a single medium that enriches and complicates the transmission and interpretation of messages. This fact can encourage different actors to use memes as a tool for disinformation and manipulation. In her work Shifman (2013), argues that memes are complex content, where text and image not only coexist but interact in ways that significantly enhance the message's effectiveness and reach. Memes serve as potent vehicles for cultural expression and political commentary, precisely because they synthesize visual and textual rhetoric into a cohesive whole that is immediately accessible yet deeply reflective of societal contexts (Shifman, 2013). Such integration allows memes to resonate differently across diverse audiences, making them an intriguing subject for studying various social phenomena – from political bias and preference to emotional engagement and cultural trends.

Considering the complex nature of image-text based memes and their profound impact on citizens' behaviour, an analysis of memes' effects on citizens' behavior cannot be performed without understanding the influence of several associations. First, we must consider the social media's implications for the political arena, where social media acts as the transmitter of the online political message. Diverse actors involved in politics use social media as a channel to spread political disinformation and propaganda (Dupuis & Williams, 2019). However, this type of social media usage stems not only from the behavior of (malicious) actors but also from the behavior of ordinary users who spread and magnify the information without any intention (Dupuis & Williams, 2019).

Furthermore, considering the increasing number of people using different platforms to communicate and collect information, social media is becoming an increasingly prevalent approach to communicate political information. For example, in 2020, there were 15 million social media active users in Romania, with +1.9% more users than in 2019 (DATAREPORTAL, 2020). This rapid and continuous development creates room for persuasive communication, misinformation and propaganda targeted towards voters, consumers, donors and even investors (McKelvey et al., 2023). In this context, this article focuses on citizens' interactions and engagement with content spread on social medial channels in the form of memes, as receivers of messages who react based on the received signal of the message (Shannon & Weaver, 1964). To understand the memes' impact requires an understanding of how citizens interact with the instruments used by different actors to spread information, as well as an understanding of how users can spread this information unwittingly or not (Bargaoanu & Radu, 2018; Corbu et al., 2020, 2021). Thus, this article focuses on the reactions that specific image-text memes generated among citizens. Lastly, to understand citizens' engagement with image-text memes requires an exploration of the role of political humor, which involves an understanding of individuals' emotions.

Thus, this article extends the previous literature by exploring patterns of memes creation in Romania with a focus on political memes employing the front runners' candidates of the 2019 presidential election: Klaus Iohannis (the right-wing candidate) and Viorica Dăncilă (the left-wing candidate). More specifically, this article aims at emphasizing how political humor is used to generate candidates' profiles portrayed in the image-text memes and, as well as on how the citizens as users engage and react to the profiles created. The article aligns with an international stream of research focused on investigating memes impact on citizens behavior (Mortensen & Neumayer, 2021; Paz et al., 2021; Erlichman & Pluretti, 2023; Halversen & Weeks, 2023).

2.1. Political humor: memes as the modern manipulation instrument

One direction that can be taken to understand how image-text based memes appeal to citizens' behavior is through the analysis of different types of political humor (Iyengar & Kinder, 2010; Young, 2017; Baishya, 2021; Adiga & K., 2024). The hybrid forms of political information over the years raise scholars' attention to political humor and its implications (Young, 2017). Studies emphasize the potential of political humor to increase users' attention to politics (Young, 2017).

However, the research on political humor is still trying to understand the impact of humor on knowledge, attitudes and behaviors focusing on the question of whether political humor is an agent of influence or merely a barometer of public opinion (Young, 2017). Extended

research emphasizes the potential of humor to have a persuasive capacity because users are both viewers and creators of humor (Young, 2017). Humor can playfully present information or argument without eliciting a negative audience reaction, a fact that incites attitude change. Research on humor is concentrated, on the one hand, on how humor can increase the salience of certain issues or constructs in the minds of the audience (Moy et al., 2006). On the other hand, other scholars focus on how humor can change attitude per se and affect subsequent decision-making processes of users (Iyengar & Kinder, 2010). Considering that the understanding of political humor requires a comprehension of the cognitive characteristics of the audience, scholars recommend that future work on political humor ought to link detailed analyses of humorous texts to audience characteristics, psychology, and viewing motivations (Polk et al., 2009; Young et al., 2019; Heiss & Matthes, 2021).

Based on the observations raised by political humor research, an analysis of memes needs to consider some concepts within the field of psychology (Putra & Triyono, 2018; Glitsos & Hall, 2019; Ross & Rivers, 2019; Scott, 2021). The diffusion of ideas in real or online social networks is strongly influenced by human emotions, making memes one of the most powerful tools in the fast spreading of information (Beskow et al., 2020; McLoughlin & Southern, 2021). Emotions can alter political behavior and matter in voting decisions (Kriesi, 2012). Brader (2005) argues that if candidates add music and images in their political campaign ads, they could significantly alter the motivational and persuasive power of these ads. Similarly, a political message's creator can make the messages even more persuasive if they add emotional words or images (Huddy & Gunnthorsdottir, 2000). Other studies emphasized how different types of emotions have different engagement, hence different political effects. For example, Valentino and collaborators (2011) showed that anger increases political mobilization more than anxiety or enthusiasm. The literature analysis shows that most research focuses on textual rather than audio-visual misinformation. However, text-images content is a more effective instrument for political persuasion because they contain manipulative techniques that strengthen their abilities to create a distorted view of reality.

In addition, moral psychology highlights that emotions contribute to moral contagion, increasing the chances of information becoming viral. Previous studies emphasize the usage of moral emotions – both positive and negative by politicians, community leaders and other actors to influence people's reactions and engagement, and thus their civic or political behavior (Xie et al., 2015; Brady et al., 2017; Weismueller et al., 2022). These emotions, ranging from indignation and outrage to empathy and hope, not only increase message exposure but also significantly affect the reactions and engagement levels of the audience (Bentivegna & Marchetti, 2019). Jasper (1998) underlines that emotions often emerge when individuals perceive that moral norms have been violated. When actions are undertaken collectively, they tend to amplify the emotions felt by individuals, which not only legitimizes but also reinforces the appropriateness of these feelings (Doidge & Sandri, 2019).

According to Doidge and Sandri (2019), both positive and negative moral emotions are intricately linked to political behaviors. Positive emotions such as compassion, concern, and sympathy generally draw individuals toward the object of their feelings and may inspire them to join or initiate group activity. For example, feelings of compassion towards refugees may motivate people to provide support. On the other hand, negative emotions like guilt, embarrassment, or shame typically repel individuals from the subject, thus deterring their involvement. Karakayali (2017) notes that both positive and negative emotions play a crucial role in building social connections among individuals and groups, with historical analyses by Scheff

(1990) and Goffman (1963) demonstrating how emotions like shame and pride are essential to collective actions.

Furthermore, research on prosocial behavior often dichotomizes motives for engagement with social issues, focusing on whether actions are driven by pleasure or pressure, such as guilt and outrage (Thomas et al., 2009), or selfishness versus altruism (Penner, 2004). The relationship between the emotional dynamics described above and the phenomenon of memes lies in how both are vehicles for expressing and amplifying collective emotions and moral sentiments (Yeo, 2022). Memes serve as a medium through which complex emotional and moral responses are communicated within groups and across digital platforms (Heath et al., 2001). Hence, considering that memes are important creators of emotions that determine people to share and comment, their usage by different actors is undoubled (Cacioppo et al., 2009). Thereby, this study aims to understand how memes affect users' behavior, amplify political ideas and shape people's engagement. The findings of this study may provide insights on the measures that could be taken to prevent memes from being used as a tool for political communication and to create disinformation and manipulation.

The common ground of previous studies on memes is that they can have the power to change public opinion and promote social movements (Hristova, 2014). The role image-based memes has played in political debates, protests and online conversations is another area of studying memes (Kilpinen et al., 2008). Wiggins (2017) oriented the research focus towards the use of memes in presidential elections. Considering this, to contribute to the development of research on memes, this study analyses the memes that emerged during the 2019 Romania presidential race. More specifically, it examines how individuals used different websites and social media platforms (e.g. Facebook) to spread information regarding candidates Klaus Iohannis and Viorica Dăncilă.

Overall, this meme-related study area is important for several reasons. First, memes allow different users to make their meanings for the same content, creating room for researchers to study multiple implications with a relatively small number of data (Jenkins et al., 2013). Second, considering that humor is a key component of many memes, users use them as an ideal tool for political critique and commentary. By studying memes, researchers can observe political tendencies, preferred candidates, and types of policies. Third, memes have a powerful emotional resonance with users. A specific element within a meme will evoke emotions that differ from person to person. This emotional implication allows researchers to study different users' profiles and to determine what emotions encourage more engagement. Fourth, due to their modality, memes can be an efficient, high-impact method of spreading a message or idea since users do not need to have strong knowledge of the meme's topic, but they need to have a good understanding of the social dynamics they are living in (last viral shared trends in music, movies, TV shows, etc.).

3. Methods

Based on the literature review, this article focuses on how users interact with and spread memes. Specifically, it investigates the characteristics that may influence people to change their attitude and behavior. The study addresses the following research questions:

RQ1: Which were the most popular memes (in terms of engagement) and what reactions did they generate among the online audience during the 2019 Romania presidential race?

RQ2: What was the overall tone and sentiment of the Romanian presidential candidates' memes?

3.1. Methodological approach

To answer our research questions, we conducted a qualitative content analysis aimed to analyze image-based memes that were popular during the 2019 Romanian presidential elections. In particular, we aim at exploring how memes that appeal to emotion, rationality, sarcasm, or humor are spread online and which ones determine more the users to engage with the meme and share it.

To answer the research questions formulated and considering the multimodal nature of the content (image and text) (Shifman, 2013) this study applies a methodology that includes both the textual context and image-based memes. Thus, we perform a human-driven analysis that allows us to systematically identify, extract, quantify, and study affective states and subjective information. Moreover, a human-driven analysis allows us to classify the polarity of a given text or image at the document, sentence, or feature/aspect level – whether the expressed opinion in a document, a sentence, or an entity feature/aspect is positive, negative, or neutral. In addition, this classification based on engagement, for instance, looks at emotional states such as enjoyment, anger, disgust, sadness, fear, and surprise (Nandwani & Verma, 2021).

3.2. Dataset collection and sample

Focusing on the 2019 Romanian presidential elections, to get a sense of Klaus Iohannis and Viorica Dăncilă's portrayal on the internet, the study used the keywords to gather a sample of image-based memes. For the 2019 presidential race, several image-based memes spotlighted both politicians Iohannis and Dăncilă. At a first glance, it could be observed that more memes emphasized Dăncilă than Iohannis.

First, in order to offer the portrayal of Klaus Iohannis and Viorica Dăncilă in the context of the 2019 Romanian presidential elections, this study employs a strategic approach to keyword selection for data collection process. The primary keywords used are "meme", "memeuri" (the Romanian word for memes), "Iohannis Pre?edinte", and "Veorica Pre?edinte". These terms are specifically chosen to directly relate to the candidates and the electoral context, ensuring that the memes collected reflect the political atmosphere of the time. However, to refine the search and capture a broader array of relevant memes, we also use Boolean operators. Using operators such as AND, OR, and NOT allow us to refine search results by specifying which terms must be included, which are optional, and which should be excluded. For instance, searches like "meme AND Klaus Iohannis" and "meme AND Viorica Dăncilă" were conducted. These enhanced search strategies helped in identifying memes that specifically featured either of the two candidates, thereby improving the specificity and relevance of the search results. The platforms selected for this meme search were Google Images and Facebook, as they are prevalent sources where memes are often shared and can thus provide a representative sample of popular opinion. The search and data collection were conducted retroactive, in 2021, from March 1st, until April 1st, approximately one and a half years after the 2019 presidential election. This allowed for the accumulation of memes over an extending period from the election until the time of data gathering. This approach, however, intro-

duces a limitation due to the potential deletion or removal of memes over time, which could affect the representativeness of the findings.

An equal number of memes featuring Iohannis and Dăncilă were collected, resulting in a total dataset of 34 memes. This equality in number ensured a balanced comparative analysis between the two candidates. The initial pool of memes was larger (approximatively 60 memes), but the final selection was made based on criteria such as the clarity of the image, the direct relevance to the 2019 elections, and the presence of either candidate prominently featured in the meme.

3.3. Input attributes

The next step performed after the data collection was to understand how memes may be used for manipulation. To do that it was necessary to identify categories of information manipulation. The development of categories through which memes could be characterized was inspired by Bean (2011). Bean's classification system was not entirely applicable to memes, so it was modified for the current study. Each meme was categorized based on four primary themes. The codebook containing the definitions of categories is presented in Table A1 (see Appendix A) and two coders developed the coding process. The categories by which a meme is coded are appeal to emotion, appeal to rationality, appeal to humor and appeal to sarcasm. Appeal to emotion was defined in this study as the degree that the meme intended to provoke an emotional response regardless of whether the emotion was positive (happiness) or negative (sadness, anger). Higher scores represented greater intention to provoke emotion. Appeal to rationality represented the extent that a meme attempted to apply reasoning and logical arguments. The degree to which a meme appealed to rationality was determined by its use of mathematical or statistical information or use of formal or informal logic conventions. Sarcasm and humor were coded because they appeared to be the most common techniques for expressing amusement for both presidential candidates (see Table A1 for more details about scale interpretation).

Another step performed to code the collected memes was to look at how users engaged with these different memes. This study operationalizes user engagement by looking at the number of comments and reactions. Users can post one or multiple comments ( ) below images and they can react to the image. Users can like ( ) a post, they can indicate whether the post made them laugh ( ), feel angry ( ), sad ( ), enthusiastic ( ), or surprised ( ). They can also share the image on their own page.

To ensure the accuracy and consistency of the coding process in our study, several methodological steps were implemented. Initially, coders underwent thorough training and calibration, using a range of examples for each point on the rating scale. This training was designed to clarify the criteria and foster a deep understanding of the scale's nuances. A comprehensive codebook was provided to all coders, (see Table A1) which included detailed definitions and illustrative examples for each category, ensuring that coders had a solid reference material to guide their evaluations. Prior to the commencement of full-scale coding, a pilot test was conducted to verify that coders understood the scales and applied them consistently across different memes. The pilot test was conducted on a sample of another 30 image-text based memes of the two candidates. However, to ensure that there was consistent application of the coding framework across all coders, inter-coder reliability was regularly assessed using Krippendorf's alpha (> 0.80).

4. Findings

The first research question asked which were the most popular memes and the most frequent engagement they evoked among users during the 2019 Romanian presidential election. The analysis revealed that users communicated through pictures, caricatures and digitally manipulated images of Klaus Iohannis and Viorica Dăncilă. Of the 17 memes depicting Iohannis, the most prominent themes were "Sarcasm" (n= 7, 41%) and "Emotion" (n= 6,35%). Comparatively, the most prominent themes among memes depicting Dăncilă were "Rationality" (n= 5,29%) and "Funny" (n= 6,35%).

The popularity of the memes that emerged during the elections was measured by how many likes each meme received. Most pages in the Iohannis sample had between 18 and 600 likes (M = 131.12, SD= 174.04). Similarly, most Dăncilă memes had between 1 and 266 likes (M = 72.59, SD= 64.27). Based on this number, it can be assumed that Iohannis memes were more popular than the other candidate was. The total number of likes that the Iohannis samples received was 3.463, while the total likes Dăncilă sample received was 2.448.

The study also looked at the type of content that proved to be the most effective among Romanian users, what motivated them to share this content and how were they targeted. To do that, the study operationalized user engagement by looking at the number of comments by users, and their reactions through clicks. Table 1 summarizes how each category was represented in images in the collected sample. In 35.3% percent of all memes, information was funny, while only 11.8% of memes presented information that appeals to emotion. "Sarcasm" and "Rationality" appeared in 29.4%, respectively 23.5% of the cases.

Table 1. Overview of the topics used for image-based memes

			Candidate		Total
			Dăncilă	Iohannis	
Appeal	Emotion	Count	3	1	4
		% within Candidate representation	17.6%	5.9%	11.8%
	Funny	Count	6	6	12
		% within Candidate representation	35.3%	35.3%	35.3%
	Rationality	Count	5	3	8
		% within Candidate representation	29.4%	17.6%	23.5%
	Sarcasm	Count	3	7	10
		% within Candidate representation	17.6%	41.2%	29.4%

Source: Authors' contribution

Going further in the analysis, the second question of this study asked what the overall tone of Iohannis and Dăncilă's image-based memes was. To qualitatively assess the tone and the sentiment of the memes portraying the two presidential candidates, we looked at the visual and textual elements to evaluate how each candidate was represented.

The memes depicting Klaus Iohannis predominantly convey a tone of humor and mockery, often paired with a sense of irony, while the memes reflecting Viorica Dăncilă convey a tone of ridicule, with an underlying sentiment of disbelief regarding her candidacy and intellectual qualities for such a position.

Assessing comparatively, the memes depicting Klaus Iohannis and Viorica Dăncilă reveal a stark contrast in tone and sentiment, reflecting the differing perceptions of their respective candidacies. Memes featuring Klaus Iohannis predominantly convey a tone of humor and mockery, often laced with irony. For instance, Iohannis is compared to a cartoon character, juxtaposing his serious demeanor with a light-hearted and somewhat absurd image, suggesting that, despite his authority, he is seen as a figure subject to ridicule. Another meme humorously depicts Iohannis as a king, highlighting his re-election in a manner that implies his victory was almost a foregone conclusion. The crown and title "KING OF THE CITADEL" satirize his leadership style, hinting at a perceived detachment or aloofness. Furthermore, in a meme where Iohannis is shown with glowing red eyes, he is portrayed as a powerful, almost authoritarian figure, with the exaggerated visual elements adding a humorous yet critical layer to his portrayal. While the tone in these memes is mocking, it also acknowledges Iohannis's dominant position in the political landscape, blending critical humor with a recognition of his established authority.

In contrast, the memes featuring Viorica Dăncilă convey a tone of ridicule, underscored by a sentiment of disbelief regarding her candidacy. The portrayal of Dăncilă is consistently dismissive, as seen in a meme where she is depicted in a casual, almost embarrassed pose, accompanied by text that diminishes her political ambitions, likening her to a small-town figure out of place on the national stage. This reflects a widespread perception of Dăncilă as being out of her depth in the presidential race. Another meme highlights the significant vote gap between Iohannis and Dăncilă, depicting her in a stereotypical rural setting, which reinforces the idea that she was not a serious contender. The caption "It ain't much, but it's honest work" adds a layer of irony, suggesting that her efforts, though sincere, were ultimately futile. Additionally, in a cartoon-like depiction, Dăncilă is shown questioning whether her second-place finish qualifies her for the vice-presidency, satirizing her political aspirations and implying a simplistic or naive understanding of political roles. In another meme, Dăncilă is presented in a dignified pose, but the caption transforms her candidacy into a motivational joke, suggesting that her participation in the presidential race was more of an anomaly than a serious bid for leadership.

Overall, while both candidates are subjected to humor and criticism, the tone towards Iohannis is more nuanced, combining irony with an acknowledgment of his political strength. In contrast, the sentiment towards Dăncilă is overwhelmingly dismissive, with her candidacy portrayed as implausible and not taken seriously by the creators of the memes. This comparison underscores the differing levels of respect and legitimacy accorded to the two candidates in the public discourse as reflected in these memes.

Table 2. The tone of Iohannis and Dăncilă memes by frequency and percentage

	Meme Tone							
	Positive		**Negative**		**Neutral**		Total	
Iohannis	8	24%	5	15%	4	12%	17	50%
Dăncilă	4	12%	11	32%	2	6%	17	50%
Total	12	35%	16	47%	6	18%	34	100%

Source: Authors' contribution

Additionally, to the qualitative content analysis, we also computed descriptive statistics based on coders assessments of the codebook in Table A1. Of the 34 presidential election memes in the sample, 16 were coded as negative, while 12 were coded as positive, and the remaining 6 were coded as neutral (Table 2). Overall, Iohannis and Dăncilă memes leaned toward negative; however, the difference was not significant (see Table 2).

Regarding the overall sentiment of memes, there were 6 (17.6%) anti-Iohannis memes and 10 (29.4%) anti-Dăncilă memes (Table 3). Similarly, the sample showed 8 (23.5%) pro-Iohannis memes, and only 6 (17.6%) pro-Dăncilă memes out of a 34 total sample. Hence, the number of memes that are either for or against are almost the same. Pro-Iohannis memes percentage (23.5%) is higher than pro-Dăncilă memes percentage (17.6%), while the anti-Iohannis memes percentage (17.65) is smaller than anti-Dăncilă memes percentage (29.4%).

Table 3. Sentiment of Iohannis and Dăncilă memes

	Meme sentiment											
	Anti-Iohannis		Anti-Dăncilă		Neutral		Pro-Iohannis		Pro-Dăncilă		Total	
Iohannis	6	17.6%	0	0.0%	3	8.8%	8	23.5%	0	0.0%	17	50.0%
Dăncilă	0	0.0%	10	29.4%	1	5.9%	0	0.0%	6	17.6%	17	50.0%
Total	6	17.6%	10	29.4%	4	11.8%	8	23.5%	6	17.6%	34	100.0%

Source: Authors' contribution

Overall, the qualitative content analysis of the memes reveals a distinct difference in how the two candidates were portrayed. Klaus Iohannis is depicted with a tone of ironic humor, acknowledging his established position in Romanian politics, albeit with a critical edge. Viorica Dăncilă, on the other hand, is portrayed with a tone of ridicule and disbelief, emphasizing the perceived absurdity of her candidacy. The overall sentiment in the memes reflects a critical and often dismissive attitude towards both candidates, though the nature of the criticism differs significantly between Iohannis and Dăncilă.

5. Discussion and conclusions

The present article emphasized important insights into how image-text based memes shape citizens' engagement on social media. The article aimed at exploring how the profile of political candidates reflects on content spread online and how citizens engage with these profiles online by engaging with different forms of online content such as memes. The article explored the most popular memes (in terms of engagement) and the reactions they generated among online audience during 2019 Romanian presidential race, as well as the overall tone and sentiment of the Romanian presidential candidates' memes. To reach these objectives, the article first collected the memes distributed on Facebook and different Google pages during the election campaign. Second, it employed several techniques to analyze the collected memes. The results of this exploratory analysis reinforce those of previous studies (Iyengar & Kinder, 2010; Young, 2017; Baishya, 2021; Adiga & K., 2024) in emphasizing the role of image-text based memes in shaping citizens' online engagement, and potentially their (political) behavior.

The main focus of our analysis was on providing a general overview of Iohannis and Dăncilă memes' popularity during the 2019 presidential elections. In terms of most popular memes and the reactions generated among online audience, our findings support the results of prior research that the most popular memes are the ones that spread sarcastic and funny information and not memes that presented information emotionally or rationally (Soare, 2019; Buraga & Pavelea, 2021). As the analysis revealed, people reacted the most to funny (35.3%) and sarcastic memes (29.4%), while rational and emotional memes did not create high user engagement. As previous studies indicate (Shifman, 2013; Dupuis & Williams, 2019), citizens can easily spread disinformation online if the content they access is presented funnily and sarcastically.

In relation to the sentiment and the tone generated by the analyzed memes among online audience, the findings of the second question indicate that the overall tone of Iohannis and Dăncilă memes was mostly negative, closely followed by a positive tone. However, the difference was not statistically significant. The sentiment variable indicates there were more anti-Dăncilă and pro-Iohannis than pro-Dăncilă and anti-Iohannis memes. Building on the rationale from previous studies (Williams & Dupuis, 2020; McKelvey et al., 2023), this finding suggests that the manner in which citizens interact with online content, coupled with the factors that drive online audiences to engage with various materials, indicates that memes could be effectively utilized during elections to disseminate and amplify messages that potentially influence voter behavior. In this context, as the 2024 elections approach, several red flags have emerged from this article that warrant attention: (1) the manipulation of public opinion through digital media, particularly the strategic use of content that appeals to humor; (2) the integrity of the electoral process, necessitating vigilant monitoring and rapid response mechanisms to safeguard democracy; as well as (3) the proliferation of misinformation and targeted disinformation campaigns. These seemingly innocuous pieces of content can be engineered to amplify specific political messages, potentially swaying voter behavior subtly yet effectively. This underscores the need for greater media literacy among voters and more robust regulatory measures to ensure that the digital campaign landscape does not unduly influence electoral outcomes.

This study, while providing insightful observations, is constrained by several limitations that could impact its generalizability. First, the sample size of only 34 memes is too small to capture the full spectrum of meme dynamics within the political context. For more robust findings, future research should aim to collect a substantially larger dataset of memes from a diverse range of social media platforms. This would enable a comprehensive analysis of how memes originate, proliferate, and eventually wane throughout an election cycle, providing a clearer picture of their influence and lifecycle. Second, the retrospective nature of this study poses significant challenges, particularly in the context of content moderation policies. Since the study commenced two years post-election, much of the potentially offensive or influential content might have already been identified and removed by platform moderators. This delay likely resulted in a dataset that does not fully encompasses the online environment during the election period. Future studies should consider implementing real-time monitoring of online content to capture the immediate impacts of memes more accurately during critical political events, thereby avoiding the complications associated with retrospective analyses.

Despite these limitations, the study offers three primary findings. First, this article aimed to explore the political memes that emerged during the 2019 Romanian presidential elections, an unexplored topic in Romania literature. As indicated in the literature review section, previous studies have emphasized the study of content analysis in political campaigns, but the

study of image and content is still rare. Less common are studies of meme representations of Romanian candidates on social media platforms. Second, this article offers a preliminary methodology that can be used as the first step in a more complex analysis done on the 2024 elections rounds in Romania.

Concluding, this article offers some exploratory results regarding memes in Romania. The analysis revealed several implications that may be used as directions for future research. The first one is related to emotions *versus* social interaction: do they create social bonding and consumption? The article concludes that memes evoking funnier and sarcastic emotions increase consumption or social bonding more than memes evoking rationality or emotions (sadness, empathy, etc.). Future studies could explore whether social interaction is another variable that might increase consumption and social bonding, considering that people socially exchange the most interesting and engaging stories. The second implication is related to memes as an alternative form of political information. As stated in the literature review, memes are starting to be seen as a form of political humour. The results of this study strengthen this idea considering that the most popular and engaging memes were the ones that evoked funny and sarcastic content. Hence, future studies could explore memes not as an alternative to political information, but as an alternative form of political information. This type of analysis could consider variables such as political knowledge, trust in institutions and people in general, as well as digital literacy. A better understanding of political themes outside the traditional elite model of political discourse might offer insights into how memes could be used as an instrument of disinformation and propaganda. From a user's perspective, this type of study might explain why political humour through memes invites more people into the political conversation.

Based on the arguments presented in the study, future analysis could be performed following any direction elaborated in the conclusion and further research section. As mass media continues to transform, the need to study memes' interactions in new media environments increases in importance. As social media platforms will continue to play an important role, further research on political memes is important. Citizens and politicians must be aware of the dynamics of social media. Scholars must continue to test all communication paradigms in new media environments.

References

Adiga, P. G., & K., P. (2024). Humor, Politics and the Global North: A Systematic Literature Review of Internet Memes. *Internet Reference Services Quarterly*, *0*(0), 1–19. https://doi.org/10.1080/10875301.2024.2335920

Baishya, A. K. (2021). The conquest of the world as meme: Memetic visuality and political humor in critiques of the hindu right wing in India. *Media, Culture & Society*, *43*(6), 1113–1135. https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443720986039

Bargaoanu, A., & Radu, L. (2018). Fake news or disinformation 2.0? Some insights into Romanians' digital behaviour. *Romanian Journal of European Affairs*, *18*(1), 24-38.Bentivegna, S., & Marchetti, R. (2019). News Users on Facebook: Interaction Strategies on the Pages of *El Paìs* , *la Repubblica* , *Le Monde* , and *The Guardian*. *Journalism Studies*, *20*(15), 2182–2199. https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2019.1580149

Beskow, D. M., Kumar, S., & Carley, K. M. (2020). The evolution of political memes: Detecting and characterizing internet memes with multi-modal deep learning. *Information Processing & Management*, *57*(2), 102170. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ipm.2019.102170

Brader, T. (2005). Striking a Responsive Chord: How Political Ads Motivate and Persuade Voters by Appealing to Emotions. *American Journal of Political Science*, *49*(2), 388–405. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0092-5853.2005.00130.x

Brady, W. J., Wills, J. A., Jost, J. T., Tucker, J. A., & Van Bavel, J. J. (2017). Emotion shapes the diffusion of moralized content in social networks. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, *114*(28), 7313–7318. https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1618923114

Buraga, R., & Pavelea, A. (2021). Memes in Romania: A New Form of Political Participation. *Journal of Media Research*, *14*(2), 91–104. https://doi.org/10.24193/jmr.40.5

Cacioppo, J. T., Fowler, J. H., & Christakis, N. A. (2009). Alone in the crowd: The structure and spread of loneliness in a large social network. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *97*(6), 977–991. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0016076

Corbu, N., Bargaoanu, A., Buturoiu, R., & Ștefăniță, O. (2020). Does fake news lead to more engaging effects on social media? Evidence from Romania. *Communications*, *45*, 694–717. https://doi.org/10.1515/commun-2019-0152

Corbu, N., Bargaoanu, A., Durach, F., & Udrea, G. (2021). Fake News Going Viral: The Mediating Effect of Negative Emotions. *Media Literacy and Academic Research*, *4*(2), 58–87.

Dawkins, R. (2006). *The Selfish Gene*. Oxford University Press (Original work published in 1976)

de Saint Laurent, C., Glăveanu, V. P., & Literat, I. (2021). Internet Memes as Partial Stories: Identifying Political Narratives in Coronavirus Memes. *Social Media + Society*, *7*(1), 2056305121988932. https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305121988932

Doidge, M., & Sandri, E. (2019). 'Friends that last a lifetime': The importance of emotions amongst volunteers working with refugees in Calais. *The British Journal of Sociology*, *70*(2), 463–480. https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-4446.12484

Dupuis, M. J., & Williams, A. (2019). The Spread of Disinformation on the Web: An Examination of Memes on Social Networking. *2019 IEEE SmartWorld, Ubiquitous Intelligence & Computing, Advanced & Trusted Computing, Scalable Computing & Communications, Cloud & Big Data Computing, Internet of People and Smart City Innovation (SmartWorld/SCALCOM/UIC/ATC/CBDCom/IOP/SCI)*, 1412–1418. https://doi.org/10.1109/SmartWorld-UIC-ATC-SCALCOM-IOP-SCI.2019.00256

Erlichman, S., & Pluretti, R. (2023). A Presidential Bromance: How Meme Culture Upsets Race, Gender, and Political Power Dynamics. *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, *47*(3), 311–336. https://doi.org/10.1177/01968599211050057

Glitsos, L., & Hall, J. (2019). The Pepe the Frog meme: An examination of social, political, and cultural implications through the tradition of the Darwinian Absurd. *Journal for Cultural Research*, *23*(4), 381–395. https://doi.org/10.1080/14797585.2019.1713443

Goffman, E. (1963). *Embarrassment and Social Organization* (p. 548). John Wiley & Sons, Inc. https://doi.org/10.1037/11302-050

Halversen, A., & Weeks, B. E. (2023). Memeing Politics: Understanding Political Meme Creators, Audiences, and Consequences on Social Media. *Social Media + Society*, *9*(4), 20563051231205588. https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051231205588

Heath, A. F., Jowell, R. M., & Curtice, J. K. (2001). *The Rise of New Labour: Party Policies and Voter Choices*. OUP Oxford.

Heiss, R., & Matthes, J. (2021). Funny Cats and Politics: Do Humorous Context Posts Impede or Foster the Elaboration of News Posts on Social Media? *Communication Research*, *48*(1), 100–124. https://doi.org/10.1177/0093650219826006

Hristova, S. (2014). Visual Memes as Neutralizers of Political Dissent. *tripleC: Communication, Capitalism & Critique. Open Access Journal for a Global Sustainable Information Society*, *12*(1), 265–276. https://doi.org/10.31269/triplec.v12i1.507

Huddy, L., & Gunnthorsdottir, A. H. (2000). The Persuasive Effects of Emotive Visual Imagery: Superficial Manipulation or the Product of Passionate Reason? *Political Psychology*, *21*(4), 745–778. https://doi.org/10.1111/0162-895X.00215

Iyengar, S., & Kinder, D. R. (2010). *News That Matters: Television and American Opinion, Updated Edition*. University of Chicago Press.

Jasper, J. M. (1998). The Emotions of Protest: Affective and Reactive Emotions In and Around Social Movements. *Sociological Forum*, *13*(3), 397–424. https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1022175308081

Jenkins, H., Ford, S., & Green, J. (2013). Spreadable Media: Creating Value and Meaning in a Networked Culture. In *Spreadable Media*. New York University Press. https://doi.org/10.18574/nyu/9780814743515.001.0001

Karakayali, S. (2017). Feeling the scope of solidarity: The role of emotions for volunteers supporting refugees in Germany. *Social Inclusion*, *5*(3), 7–16. https://doi.org/10.17645/si.v5i3.1008

Kilpinen, S., Autio, R., Ojala, K., Iljin, K., Bucher, E., Sara, H., Pisto, T., Saarela, M., Skotheim, R. I., Björkman, M., Mpindi, J.-P., Haapa-Paananen, S., Vainio, P., Edgren, H., Wolf, M., Astola, J., Nees, M., Hautaniemi, S., & Kallioniemi, O. (2008). Systematic bioinformatic analysis of expression levels of 17,330 human genes across 9,783 samples from 175 types of healthy and pathological tissues. *Genome Biology*, *9*(9), R139. https://doi.org/10.1186/gb-2008-9-9-r139

Kriesi, H. (2012). Personalization of national election campaigns. *Party Politics*, *18*(6), 825–844. https://doi.org/10.1177/1354068810389643

Leiser, A. (2022). Psychological Perspectives on Participatory Culture: Core Motives for the Use of Political Internet Memes. *Journal of Social and Political Psychology*, *10*(1), Article 1. https://doi.org/10.5964/jspp.6377

Marwick, A., & Lewis, R. (2017). Media manipulation and disinformation online. *New York: Data & Society Research Institute*, 7-19. McKelvey, F., DeJong, S., & Frenzel, J. (2023). Memes, scenes and #ELXN2019s: How partisans make memes during elections. *New Media & Society*, *25*(7), 1626–1647. https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448211020690

McLoughlin, L., & Southern, R. (2021). By any memes necessary? Small political acts, incidental exposure and memes during the 2017 UK general election. *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, *23*(1), 60–84. https://doi.org/10.1177/1369148120930594

Moody-Ramirez, M., & Church, A. B. (2019). Analysis of Facebook Meme Groups Used During the 2016 US Presidential Election. *Social Media + Society*, *5*(1), 2056305118808799. https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305118808799

Mortensen, M., & Neumayer, C. (2021). The playful politics of memes. *Information, Communication & Society*, *24*(16), 2367–2377. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2021.1979622

Moy, P., Xenos, M. A., & Hess, V. K. (2006). Priming Effects of Late-Night Comedy. *International Journal of Public Opinion Research*, *18*(2), 198–210. https://doi.org/10.1093/ijpor/edh092

Nandwani, P., & Verma, R. (2021). A review on sentiment analysis and emotion detection from text. *Social Network Analysis and Mining*, *11*(1), 81. https://doi.org/10.1007/s13278-021-00776-6

Paz, M. A., Mayagoitia-Soria, A., & González-Aguilar, J.-M. (2021). From Polarization to Hate: Portrait of the Spanish Political Meme. *Social Media + Society*, *7*(4), 20563051211062920. https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051211062920

Penner, L. A. (2004). Volunteerism and Social Problems: Making Things Better or Worse? *Journal of Social Issues*, *60*(3), 645–666. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0022-4537.2004.00377.x

Penney, J. (2020). 'It's So Hard Not to be Funny in This Situation': Memes and Humor in U.S. Youth Online Political Expression. *Television & New Media*, *21*(8), 791–806. https://doi.org/10.1177/1527476419886068

Peters, C., & Allan, S. (2022). Weaponizing Memes: The Journalistic Mediation of Visual Politicization. *Digital Journalism*, *10*(2), 217–229. https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2021.1903958

Polk, J., Young, D. G., & Holbert, R. L. (2009). Humor Complexity and Political Influence: An Elaboration Likelihood Approach to the Effects of Humor Type in The Daily Show with Jon Stewart. *Atlantic Journal of Communication*, *17*(4), 202–219. https://doi.org/10.1080/15456870903210055

Putra, R. A., & Triyono, S. (2018). The Diversity of Internet Memes Interpretations: A Discourse Analysis of Incongruity of Popular Memes Made by Indonesian Netizen. *PAROLE: Journal of Linguistics and Education*, *6*(2), 49. https://doi.org/10.14710/parole.v6i2.49-61

Ross, A. S., & Rivers, D. J. (2019). Internet Memes, Media Frames, and the Conflicting Logics of Climate Change Discourse. *Environmental Communication*, *13*(7), 975–994. https://doi.org/10.1080/17524032.2018.1560347

Scheff, T. J. (1990). *Microsociology: Discourse, Emotion, and Social Structure*. University of Chicago Press.

Scott, K. (2021). Memes as multimodal metaphors: A relevance theory analysis. *Pragmatics & Cognition*, *28*(2), 277–298. https://doi.org/10.1075/pc.21010.sco

Shannon, C., & Weaver, W. (1964). *The Mathematical Theory of Communication*. University of Illinois.

Shifman, L. (2013). Memes in a Digital World: Reconciling with a Conceptual Troublemaker. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, *18*(3), 362–377. https://doi.org/10.1111/jcc4.12013

Soare, A. N. (2019). From classic political cartoons to memes in Romanian satirical news. *Bulletin of the Transilvania University of Brașov, Series IV: Philology & Cultural Studies*, *12*(2), 97–110.

Stoicescu, A. (2020). When the online backs the street – the making of digitized political emotion: A case study of the Romanian anti-government protests. *Continuum*, *34*(3), 363–377. https://doi.org/10.1080/10304312.2020.1764783

Thomas, E. F., McGarty, C., & Mavor, K. I. (2009). Aligning Identities, Emotions, and Beliefs to Create Commitment to Sustainable Social and Political Action. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, *13*(3), 194–218. https://doi.org/10.1177/1088868309341563

Valentino, N. A., Brader, T., Groenendyk, E. W., Gregorowicz, K., & Hutchings, V. L. (2011). Election Night's Alright for Fighting: The Role of Emotions in Political Participation. *The Journal of Politics*, *73*(1), 156–170. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022381610000939

Weismueller, J., Harrigan, P., Coussement, K., & Tessitore, T. (2022). What makes people share political content on social media? The role of emotion, authority and ideology. *Computers in Human Behavior*, *129*, 107150. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2021.107150

Williams, A., & Dupuis, M. (2020, March). I don't always spread disinformation on the web, but when i do i like to use memes: An examination of memes in the spread of disinformation. In *Proceedings of the 11th International Multi-Conferences on Complexity, Informatics and Cybernetics: IMCIC* (pp. 165-172). Xie, C., Bagozzi, R. P., & Grønhaug, K. (2015). The role of moral emotions and individual differences in consumer responses to corporate green and non-green actions. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, *43*(3), 333–356. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11747-014-0394-5

Yeo, T. E. D. (2022). Models of Viral Propagation in Digital Contexts: How Messages and Ideas – From Internet Memes to Fake News – Created by Consumers, Bots, and Marketers Spread. In *The Routledge Handbook of Digital Consumption* (2nd ed.). Routledge.

Young, D. G. (2017). Theories and Effects of Political Humor: Discounting Cues, Gateways, and the Impact of Incongruities. In K. Kenski & K. H. Jamieson (Eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Political Communication* (p. 0). Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199793471.013.29_update_001

Young, D. G., Bagozzi, B. E., Goldring, A., Poulsen, S., & Drouin, E. (2019). Psychology, political ideology, and humor appreciation: Why is satire so liberal? *Psychology of Popular Media Culture*, *8*(2), 134–147. https://doi.org/10.1037/ppm0000157

Appendix A

Table A1. The codebook used for performing the content analysis

Category	Definition	Values	Scale interpretation
Appeal to emotion	To what extent does the meme appear to appeal to emotions regardless of whether the emotion was positive or negative?	0 (not at all) to 7 (extremely so)	0 (Not at All): The meme shows no discernible attempt to evoke emotions. 1-2 (Slightly): Minimal emotional content is present; emotions may be inferred but are not the focus. 3-4 (Moderately): The meme clearly aims to evoke emotions, though it does so subtly. 5-6 (Very Much): Strong emotional appeal is evident, with clear intent to provoke emotional responses. 7 (Extremely So): The meme is heavily loaded with emotional triggers, potentially overwhelming the viewer with strong emotional content.
Appeal to rationality	To what extent does the meme appear to appeal to logic/rationality, including the use of statistical or logical conventions?	0 (not at all) to 7 (extremely so)	0 (Not at All): No use of logical, statistical, or factual data. 1-2 (Slightly): Occasional use of basic factual data or common-sense reasoning. 3-4 (Moderately): Regular use of logic or data to support an argument, though not thoroughly or complexly. 5-6 (Very Much): The meme employs detailed and sophisticated logical arguments or statistical evidence. 7 (Extremely So): The meme is dominated by high-level rational discourse, possibly using advanced statistical analysis or complex logical constructs.
Appeal to sarcasm	To what extent does the meme appear to employ sarcasm? Sarcasm = harsh or bitter derision or irony; use of words to convey a meaning opposite of literal meaning.	0 (not at all) to 7 (extremely so)	0 (Not at All): No sarcasm is present. 1-2 (Slightly): Sarcasm is hinted at but might be missed without careful consideration. 3-4 (Moderately): Sarcasm is clearly identifiable and contributes to the overall message. 5-6 (Very Much): The meme uses sarcasm as a primary tool to convey its message, with clear and biting irony. 7 (Extremely So): The entire meme is structured around deep and cutting sarcasm, potentially requiring nuanced understanding to grasp fully.
Appeal to humor	To what extent does meme appear to employ amusement? Humor = being funny without employing positive or negative attitudes towards a candidate or another.	0 (not at all) to 7 (extremely so)	0 (Not at All): The meme is not humorous. 1-2 (Slightly): Mildly amusing elements are present but are not central to the meme's appeal. 3-4 (Moderately): The meme is funny, with humor playing a significant role in its appeal. 5-6 (Very Much): Very humorous; the meme elicits laughter and is designed to entertain. 7 (Extremely So): The meme is exceptionally humorous, possibly involving clever or complex jokes that hit the mark perfectly.

Note. Appeal to emotion, appeal to fear, appeal to rationality, degree of sarcasm was rated based on a combination of the text and image.

Table A2. References to memes

Figure No.	Link to the meme
Meme 1	https://imgflip.com/i/36b898
Memes 2 - 9	https://www.digifm.ro/stiri/cele-mai-bune-meme-uri-dupa-alegerile-prezidentiale-56000
Meme 10	https://www.facebook.com/govrolol/photos/pb.100071706293340.-2207520000/2814563408576480/?type=3
Meme 11	https://www.facebook.com/govrolol/photos/pb.100071706293340.-2207520000/2530414766991347/?type=3
Meme 12	https://www.facebook.com/govrolol/photos/pb.100071706293340.-2207520000/2814830715216416/?type=3
Meme 13	https://www.facebook.com/govrolol/photos/pb.100071706293340.-2207520000/2348269441872548/?type=3
Meme 14	https://9gag.com/gag/anMN4vE
Meme 15	https://9gag.com/gag/aY7rKg7
Meme 16	https://www.facebook.com/govrolol/photos/pb.100071706293340.-2207520000/2194880800544747/?type=3
Meme 17	https://www.facebook.com/govrolol/photos/pb.100071706293340.-2207520000/2141664699199691/?type=3

Romanian Journal of Communication and Public Relations
vol. 26, no. 2 (62) / July 2024, **25-56**
ISSN: 1454-8100/ E-ISSN: 2344-5440

Shimaa H. A. MOHAMMED*
Guido KEEL**
May O. S. AHMED***
Adel R. A. MUSTAFA****

Tracking Network Salience: A Transnational Study of Inter-Media Agenda-Setting in the Iranian-American Crisis 2020

Abstract

The present study investigated the international intermedia network agenda setting among eleven news websites from four different languages and three political orientations, in the aftermath of the assassination of Iranian General Qasem Soleimani. Our study aimed to explore the potential for a given medium to shape the agenda of other countries' media, and to identify if language or political orientation may influence intermedia network agenda setting at both the issue and attribute levels.

The findings of our study are consistent with previous research on intermedia agenda setting, which has shown that media outlets can influence the issues and attributes that are deemed important by other media outlets. Our study extends this research by exploring the dynamics of intermedia agenda setting in the international sphere and for an unexpected situation.

Our findings showed that intermedia network agenda setting occurred among the websites studied, with high correlations between issues and a greater number of relationships between attributes. Interestingly, we found that the New York Times was not able to set an agenda in either issue or attribute levels in contrast to Tehran Times which has one of the most powerful agendas to affect many other agendas including New York Times.

Keywords: Network analysis, international intermedia agenda setting, international newspapers, Soleimani assassination, Cross-lagged correlation, Rozelle-Campbell baseline.

1. Introduction

During Donald Trump's presidency, a pivotal shift occurred in the dynamic between the United States and Iran. Trump's decision in 2018 to reimpose sanctions on Iran and withdraw from the nuclear deal marked the beginning of heightened tensions. Subsequently, he esca-

* Suez Canal University (Egypt),
shimaahassan211@gmail.com, https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8644-4168
** Zurich University of Applied Sciences (Switzerland),
guido.keel@zhaw.ch, https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2010-8823
*** Minia University (Egypt), mayo12726@gmail.com, https://orcid.org/0009-0006-8261-1076
**** Menoufia University (Egypt), a_elhakeem@yahoo.com, https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9339-7016

lated the situation by tightening sanctions on Iran's oil exports. The relationship reached a boiling point in 2019 following attacks on six oil tankers in the Gulf of Oman, an incident Iran denied involvement in, attributing it to American disinformation and warmongering. Matters worsened when the US accused an Iran-backed militia of killing an American contractor, prompting the targeted assassination of General Soleimani, a move that further strained relations between the two nations (Kirkpatrick et al., 2019; Wallerå, 2020).

Soleimani, Iran's esteemed military leader and one of the country's most influential figures after the supreme leader, was assassinated while on a diplomatic mission in Iraq, targeted by a US drone strike. The attack sparked immediate reactions from Iran, Iraq, the US, and the international community ("Qassem Soleimani: Timeline of Events Following Iranian General's Assassination", 2020). The assassination polarized global opinions, with some viewing it as a triumph against terrorism and others as a dangerous escalation that could incite widespread conflict. Demonstrations both in support of and against the assassination erupted worldwide, reflecting the divisive nature of the event. This assassination is considered a prominent global event that occurred in the first half of 2020 (Alshaabi, 2021).

The incident drew significant media coverage and analysis, with international outlets scrutinizing the implications and aftermath. However, reporting on such complex international events poses financial challenges for news organizations, particularly in conflict zones like Iran, where maintaining a full-time correspondent presence is costly and resource-intensive (Izadi, 2022; Orgeret, 2016; Strauß, 2019). As a result, media outlets often rely on external sources for coverage, a phenomenon known as international inter-media agenda-setting in media studies (Mohammed & McCombs, 2021; Morales & Menechelli, 2024).

2. Literature review

2.1. International Inter-media agenda setting (IIMAS)

According to McCombs (2014), Inter-Media Agenda Setting (IMAS) is a phenomenon that pertains to the impact that different news media have on one another (p. 112). This phenomenon explains why and when one media's agenda can affect the agendas of other media outlets. Unlike the traditional agenda-setting theory, which explains how the media shape the public's agenda, IMAS examines how media agendas are developed through journalistic co-orientation. IMAS has three levels, as the original theory: The first level identifies the transfer of objects– what is being reported; the second discusses the transfer of attributes – how is it being reported; and the third covers the transfer of a network which could be an attribute network or an object network (Guo & McCombs, 2011). Adding international scope, International intermedia agenda-setting (IIMAS) focuses on the impact of international media agendas on other international media agendas, and explores the circumstances under which this influence occurs (Mohammed & McCombs, 2021).

IIMAS occurs when media outlets lack their own correspondents to cover foreign news events, leading them to rely on coverage from other sources. However the selection of news stories is not uniform across all outlets, as gatekeepers assess various factors when making decisions (Golan, 2006; Harjuniemi, 2023; Mohammed & McCombs, 2021).

Previous studies on events like the Arab Spring have shown that international media rely on each other's coverage when an event is newsworthy and there is a lack of correspondents.

These studies focused on the coverage and dissemination of the revolution through different media channels, including TV, newspapers, and social media (Alasuutari et al., 2013; Dube, 2013; Guzman, 2016; Russell, 2011). Although not all these studies are based on IIMAS theory, the outcomes assert that when an event is newsworthy and there is a lack of correspondents, practically all international media rely upon each other's coverage.

The rise of hybrid media and accessible online editions of international newspapers has made it easier to monitor stories published by news organizations in other countries. Qian (2009) found that the agenda of the New York Times could influence the coverage of Chinese newspapers during the Beijing Olympics. Elite newspapers like the New York Times still hold significant influence and can shape the agenda of others (Livingston & Asmolov, 2010; Vargo & Guo, 2017).

While studies have confirmed the existence of IIMAS, the direction of influence remains unclear. Du (2013) analyzed eleven newspapers across different countries and languages, observing evidence of IIMAS but without identifying a consistent dominant agenda. Mohammed & McCombs (2021) also found that no single agenda consistently dominates others among international media. Other studies, such as Wallsten (2007), Vargo & Guo (2017), Billard (2019), Stern, Livan, & Smith (2020), and Zhao & Zhang, (2023) recognize the reciprocal relationships and interactions between agendas over time.

During the Belgian election campaign in 2014, Harder, Sevenans, and Aelst (2017) explored inter-media hypotheses. They found mutual relations between Twitter, online and offline media, that vary in effect direction and strength. They presume that if the incident is unexpected, the results will be different. This is where this study sets in. It goes beyond the restrictions of prior studies and concentrates on one unforeseen incident, the assassination of General Soleimani. The incident and its aftermath were covered by numerous international newspapers and considered internationally newsworthy incident. This study focuses on the third (the newest) level which is IIMNAS.

2.2. Network agenda-setting

Guo and McCombs (2011) introduced the concept of network agenda-setting, a model that emphasizes news media's role in shaping individuals' cognitive networks. In this framework, media establish connections between different attributes of an issue, influencing how the public perceives these connections. So, according to network agenda-setting theory, the frequency of association between two elements in news coverage influences the audience's perception of their interconnectedness (Tahamtan et al., 2022).

This model posits that issue and attributes are transmitted to the public as networks of interconnected elements. For instance, in the context of Soliemani assassination, attributes like Iranian revenge, nuclear file, and Iranian Militia can be collectively presented to the public as interconnected components (Guo & McCombs, 2011). Consequently, when individuals think about one aspect, they are prompted to also consider related attributes. This method not only dictates what issues and attributes individuals should focus on but also guides how these issues and attributes are mentally linked (Arman & McClurg, 2024).

A key distinction between traditional agenda setting and network agenda setting lies in how attributes are conveyed to the public. While traditional agenda-setting treats issues and attributes as separate entities, network agenda-setting posits that these elements are transmitted simultaneously as a network of interconnected attributes. Whilst the first and second levels of agenda set-

ting focus on disseminating discrete objects and/or attributes, the NAS model evaluates whether the established association can be transferred among agendas. (Liu, Geng &Liu, 2022).

2.3. International intermedia Network agenda setting (IIMNAS)

Intermedia Network agenda setting proposes that the media can transfer the importance of a bundle of objects, including issues, stories, ideas, or figures, as well as their attributes, to other media instead of transferring it to the public in network agenda setting (Vargo & Guo, 2017). However, studies asserted many factors could affect this process. According to Vliegenthart & Walgrave (2008), same-language influences is stronger than other language influences; nevertheless, Vu, et al. (2018) discovered that the language barrier does not eliminate all influences.

Guo et al. (2016) compared the coverage of the Iraq war in six different countries and discovered positive and significant network correlations among the various news agendas, despite their diverse political and cultural attitudes towards the war, while Mohammed (2018) demonstrated that, despite analysing three elite newspapers in the same language, allied countries have a stronger IIMNAS on the attribute level (Mohamed, 2018). Similar result from recent studies on media coverage of the Russian-Ukrainian war which suggest that political orientation significantly influences media coverage (Fisher, 2023; Hyzen & Bulck, 2024; El-Khouly 2022).

This study investigates the impact of language and political barriers on international newspapers' relationships by addressing the following research questions:

RQ1: At the issue level, do language and political orientation affect the correlation between international newspapers agendas?

RQ2: At the attribute level, do language and political orientation affect the correlation between international newspapers agendas?

Recent studies have found reciprocal relationships among media agendas without a dominant medium consistently leading (Vargo & Guo, 2017; Vu et al., 2014; H. Wang & Shi, 2022). Interactions between different media agendas are found to be interconnected rather than hierarchical, suggesting uniform and reciprocal interactions across various media agendas (Vu, Guo, & McCombs, 2014; Vargo & Guo, 2017).

Studies in the international context have also revealed similar findings, with evidence of IIMNAS among newspapers from different countries over varying time frames (Mohammed, 2018; Vu, Guo, & McCombs, 2014). Vliegenthart & Walgrave (2008) and Vargo & Guo (2017) detected that the most efficient time lag is from one to multiple days, however, they all discovered positive and significant network correlations among the various news agendas. Similarly, studies by Su, Hu, and Lee (2020) and Su and Hu (2020) revealed reciprocal relations among major international newspapers and Twitter discussions when reporting on the anti-extradition bill movement in Hong Kong and the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands dispute.

Most studies have identified reciprocal and mutual relations among media agendas at different levels of intermedia agenda-setting. However, few studies have determined the strength and direction of these effects. In the international sphere, studies disclosed that if there is domination it usually comes from the US media on other countries' media.

While many studies have focused on issues in IIMNAS, fewer have analyzed attributes. This study delves into international inter-media network agenda setting on multiple levels across eleven countries and four languages, examining the influence of network agendas of international newspapers on each other.

This study investigates whether the network agenda of an international newspaper can influence the network agendas of newspapers in other countries. Thus, the current research questions addressed are:

RQ3: at the issue level, is there a dominant network agenda between analysed newspapers across time?

RQ4: at the attribute level, is there a dominant network agenda between analysed newspapers across time?

3. Methodology

This study pursues prior studies that revealed significant agenda-setting correlations among newspapers in the international context (Mohammed & McCombs, 2021; Vu et al., 2018). It investigates the third level of inter-media agenda-setting in the international sphere focusing on both issue and attribute levels across eleven newspapers. This study, like conventional agenda-setting research, utilizes content analysis for these newspapers.

3.1. Time lag

Vargo & Guo (2017) and Vliegenthart & Walgrave (2008) found that inter-media agenda-setting is a short-term process with limited long-term impact. In this study, the news coverage of the Soleimani assassination is examined from January 3rd, 2020, to January 10th, 2020. The authors divided this period into two times frames: January 3rd to 6th and January 7th to 10th. This specific timeframe corresponds to a period when the media extensively covered and analyzed the issue, as the world awaited Iran's response and speculated on the possibility of a third world war. Following the Iranian strike on two American bases in Iraq and subsequent statements from both the American and Iranian Presidents expressing their desire to avoid escalation, international media attention towards this issue diminished.

3.2. Sample of countries

Authors choose countries according to political orientation and language. We commenced with the conflict parties: the United States, Iran, and Iraq. Then we took their antagonists, Russia (the United States adversary), Saudi Arabia, and Egypt (as adversaries to Iran). Furthermore, we looked at allies like China, Israel, and at countries in other roles such as Switzerland (the mediator between Iran and the USA), and other powerful European countries like Germany and Austria. As a fair result, eleven countries have been chosen.

3.3. Newspaper sample

Two criteria guided researchers in determining which online newspapers qualified for study. First and foremost, it should be one of the most prominent daily newspapers in its region: second, it should provide a free archive on its website. Furthermore, we considered previous studies' results. Depending on Vu et al, (2018) the most prominent newspapers in the US, Switzerland, Israel, Germany, and Austria are accordingly New York Times, Neue Zürcher Zeitung, The Jerusalem Post, Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, and Der Standard. According

to Ahmadian & Farahani (2014) study, Tehran Times is Iran's voice and the most influential English-language newspaper. According to McCombs& Mohammed (2021) Al-Ahram is Egypt's most influential newspaper. According to Guanjie Wang (2013), China Daily is China's most prominent English-language newspaper. The authors tried to recruit Persian and Chinese coders to have a Persian and Chinese newspaper but with no success.

Okaz and Aalriyadh are the most significant Saudi newspapers, according to Shalhob (Shalhob, 2007) and Ba'thman (Ba'thman, 2021). Notably, authors found only one article about assassinating Solimanei in Okaz newspaper, hence, Aalriyadh has been analyzed instead. For Iraqi newspapers (Al-Rawi, 2020) asserts that Al-Zawraa was always one of the most notable in Iraq. We used the "statista" website to select one of the crucial Russian newspapers, and as a fair result Rossiiskaia Gazeta has been analyzed. Table 1 shows the newspaper's sample.

Table 1. Newspapers' sample and number of topics analyzed

No	Countries	Newspapers	Language	Political orientation	number of topics
1.	Russia	Rossiiskaia Gazeta	Russian	With Iran	14
2.	Iran	Tehran Times	English	With Iran	112
3.	China	China daily	English	With Iran	32
4.	USA	New York Times	English	With USA	15
5.	Israel	The Jerusalem Post	English	With USA	23
6.	Saudi Arabia	Aalriyadh	Arabic	With USA	51
7.	Egypt	Al-Ahram Egypt	Arabic	Neutral	108
8.	Iraq	AlZawra Iraq	Arabic	With Iran	19
9.	Swiss	Neue Zürcher Zeitung	German	Neutral	5
10.	Austria	Der Standard	German	Neutral	8
11.	Germany	Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung	German	With USA	10
Total					397

3.4. Data collection

To collect data, online archives were used for all newspapers. The search terms were Soleimani (in various spellings) as a keyword from January 3rd, 2020, to January 10th 2020. Only stories with the assassination as the main theme were added to the sample.

The entire story has been analyzed to determine the issues and attributes. The main topic in a given story was defined as an issue, while the subtopics have been defined as attributes (Ghanem, 1997; S. Mohammed, 2018). The transmission of IIMNAS at issue and attribute levels from one newspaper to another has been analyzed over two-time lags. To ensure the validity of our coding book, we initially selected a random sample of 10% of the articles and analyzed them. Table 2 presents a complete breakdown of the issues and attributes. This article's sampling unit is dyad, which relates to the co-occurrence of two elements (Issues or attributes) in the same news story.

Table 2. A list of the detailed issues and attributes

Issues	Attributes
Assassination Soleimani Operation	Reasons The Operation details Results
public Iranian responses	Solimani Funeral demonstration against US or Israel
Iraqi responses	responses to save its land responses against US responses with Iran responses with the USA
American responses	war with Iran preparations Against Soleimani assassination responses to official Iranian statements
International responses	with the USA Agaist USA with Iran Agaist Iran Neutral
Iranian Nuclear File	Uranium production agreement (JCPOA) With the Iranian Uranium enrichment Against the Iranian Uranium enrichment
official Iranian responses	Iranian threating to Israel Iranian threating to US strike US military bases other responses to US statements The Ukranian Plane
Others	

4. Research strategy

In order to achieve the goals of this study, the empirical research has been divided into steps.

4.1. First: preparing for matrices

This step involves learning about the sampled newspapers' issues, and attributes agendas. Table 1 displays the total number of stories analyzed from each newspaper, along with their language and political orientation. This analysis yielded eight issues and twenty-five attributes (table 2).

4.2. Second: network agenda

This study employs network analysis to investigate how the sampled websites portrayed General Soleimani's assassination comparably. Specifically, the study compared the sampled websites' networked agendas, based on issues and attributes, to gain a more nuanced perspective on the networks presented by this news coverage.

Following previous research, to examine the Network Agenda Setting (NAS) model and answer RQ1, and RQ2, we built issue-based and attribute-based matrices for each newspaper as network agenda analysis is interested in dyads showing how frequently every issue appears with every other issue and how frequently each attribute appears with every other attribute for each newspaper.

Recall that Non-directional networks consist of edges that represent the strength of the relationship between nodes, which represent issues or attributes. These networks focus on the connections between issues or attributes, rather than solely counting the occurrences or frequency of each individual issue or attribute. We divided the sample based on language and political orientation. For language, English newspapers include New York Times, The Jerusalem post, Tehran Times, and China Daily. Arabic newspapers are Al-Riyadh, Al-Zawraa, Al-Ahram. German newspapers include Neue Zürcher Zeitung, Der Standard, and Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung whereas the Russian newspaper, Rossiiskaia Gazeta, stands alone.

For political orientation, we divided the sample into three categories: allied with the US (New York Times, The Jerusalem post, Al-Riyadh, Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung), allied with Iran (Tehran Times, China Daily, Al-Zawraa, Rossiiskaia Gazeta), neutral (Al-Ahram, Neue Zürcher Zeitung, Der Standard)

We then summed the English newspapers that were pro-America (New York Times and The Jerusalem Post) as one matrix, the English newspapers that were pro-Iran (Tehran Times, China Daily) as one matrix, The German newspapers which were on neutral side (Der Standard, Neue Zürcher Zeitung) as one matrix; all other categories were presented with only one newspaper as shown in table 1.

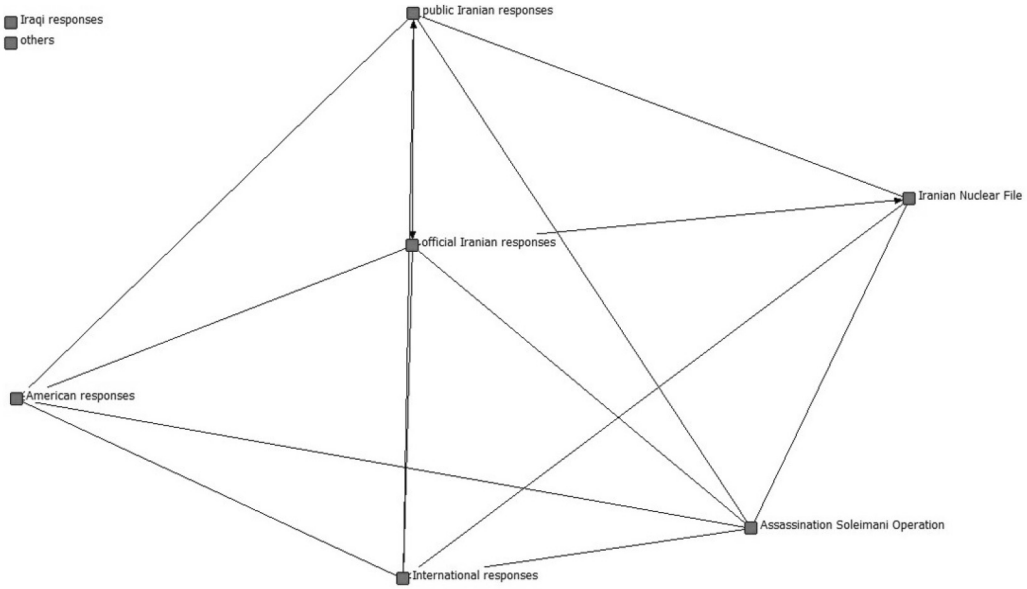
We used UCINET 6.631 program (Borgatti et al., 2002) to:

• Draw the network agenda by Net Draw tool to visualize the results (Borgatti, 2002).

For example, Figure (A) illustrates the network of issues covered by the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung newspaper. As depicted, most of the issues are interconnected, except for “Iraqi responses” and “others.” This indicates that whenever the newspaper mentions a particular issue, it also references at least one other related topic, excluding Iraqi responses and others.

The isolation of “Iraqi responses” and “others” in the graph suggests that the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung has not connected these issues to any other topics in its coverage. While the newspaper may have discussed these topics, it has not established any relationships or associations between them and other relevant issues. Consequently, both “Iraqi responses” and “others” remain disconnected from the main network of topics, highlighting their lack of integration within the newspaper’s coverage.

Figure A. German newspaper network agenda (Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung)



• Measure Quadratic Assignment Procedure (QAP) correlations to examine the correlation between all the matrices.

QAP correlation was calculated for issue-based and attribute-based matrices among all matrices. (QAP) correlation, is a frequent measurement used in network agenda-setting studies (e.g. Liu, Geng &Liu, 2022; Mohammed & McCombs, 2021; Tahamtan et al., 2022; Tang, 2021). "The QAP correlation regresses is a dependent matrix on one or more independent matrices and computes the significance of the r-square and regression coefficient" (Tang, 2021, p.181). The QAP value is divided into three categories. A weak correlation is represented by a value less than 0.31. A moderate correlation is indicated by a value between 0.31 and 0.69, while a value above 0.70 suggests a strong correlation between the matrices being compared (ăĺăĬ, 2018).

4.3. Third: inter-media network agenda-setting

To answer RQ3 and RQ4, we divided data from each newspaper into Time 1 (T1; from January 3rd to 6th) and Time 2 (T2; from January 7th to 10th). To measure IIMNAS, Cross-lagged correlations and Rozelle-Campbell baseline were used. The Rozelle-Campbell baseline was calculated with QAP correlations. QAP correlation was computed among all newspapers in T1 and T2 for issue-based and attribute-based matrices.

Cross-lagged correlations with Rozelle-Campbell baseline can explore the causal relationship between two different media X and Y at two different times. They help to determine which agenda influenced the other. Rosenthal (2015) detailed that "This requires computing three pairs of correlations: the synchronous correlations X1Y1 (X in T1 * Y in T 1) and X2Y2 (X in T2 * Y in T2), the autocorrelations X1X2 and Y1Y2, and the cross-lagged correlations X1Y2 and X2Y1. Synchronous and auto-correlations are used to calculate the Rozelle-Camp-

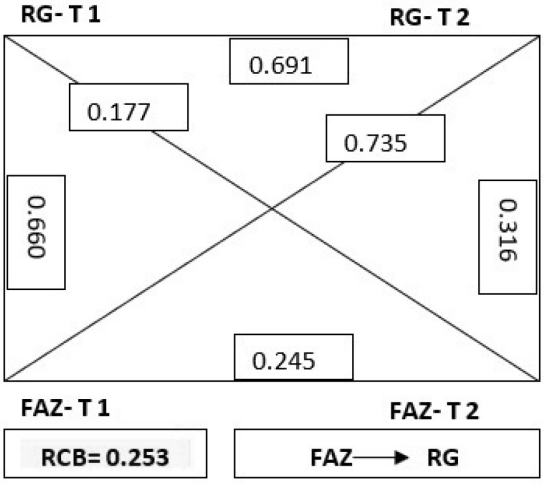
bell baseline value" (p. 20). Utilizing QAP values, we were capable of computing the Rozelle-Campbell baseline formula, which is:

$$\frac{X1/Y1+X2/Y2}{2}\sqrt{\frac{(X1/X2)^2+(Y1/Y2)^2}{2}}$$

The range of the baseline is from -1 to 1. If one agenda affected the other one, two conditions need to occur: first, the cross-lag correlation between X at T1 and Y at T2 must exceed the cross-lag correlation between Y at T1 and X at T2. Second, the cross-lag correlation between X at T1 and Y at T2 must exceed the Rozelle-Campbell baseline statistic. Thus, if X1Y2 > Y1X2 and RCB > Y1X1, we conclude that X1 has an influence on Y2" (Rosenthal, 2015).

For example, The relation between (Rossiiskaia Gazeta) and (Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung) is shown in figure (B). The correlation between Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (FAZ) in Time 1 and Rossiiskaia Gazeta (RG) in Time 2 (0.735) is greater than the correlation between Rossiiskaia Gazeta at Time 1 and Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung in Time 2 (0.177) and the Rozelle-Campbell baseline (0.253). This means Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung set the Rossiiskaia Gazeta agenda in Time 2.

Figure B. The relation between (Rossiiskaia Gazeta) and (Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung).



4.4. Intercoder Reliability

Three authors have coded the sampled newspapers. We had one independent coder for the Russian newspaper only. To test intercoder reliability, two authors coded approximately 15% of the obtained data from English (37 stories) and Arabic (27 stories) newspapers to measure agreement levels. For the Russian and German language newspapers, we had one independent coder in each language analyzing around 15% of the articles (3 stories for the Russian and 5 stories for the German newspapers). Those articles were randomly selected.

Intercoder reliability was computed using Holsti's reliability formula, CR=2M/(N1+N2), where M is the number of times the coders concurred, and N1, N2 represent the total number of each coder's coding decisions" (Rourke, Anderson, Garrison & Archer, 2001, p.11).

According to Wimmer and Dominick (2006), intercoder reliability greater than 75% is desired. All variables fell within acceptable levels.

Table 3. intercoder reliability for each category in newspapers

Issues	Newspaper Attributes	Rossiiskaia Gazeta	Arabic newspapers	English newspapers	German newspapers
Assassination Soleimani Operation	Reasons	% 100	100%	97%	% 80
	The Operation details	% 100	100%	100%	% 100
	Results	% 100	96%	95.9%	% 100
public Iranian responses	Solimani Funeral	% 100	100%	100%	% 100
	demonstration against US or Israel	% 100	100%	% 100	% 100
Iraqi responses	responses to save its land	% 100	96%	97%	% 100
	responses against US	% 100	100%	100%	% 100
	responses with Iran	% 100	96%	100%	% 100
	responses with the USA	% 100	100%	100%	% 100
American responses	war with Iran preparations	% 100	100%	100%	% 100
	Against Soleimani assassination	% 100	100%	97%	%80
	responses to official Iranian statements	% 100	96%	95.9%	% 100
International responses	with the USA	% 100	100%	100%	% 100
	Against USA	% 100	100%	97%	% 100
	with Iran	% 100	100%	100%	%80
	Against Iran	% 100	96%	97%	%80
	Neutral	% 100	100%	89%	%80
Iranian Nuclear File	Uranium production agreement (JCPOA)	% 100	100%	100%	% 100
	With the Iranian Uranium enrichment	% 100	96%	95.9%	% 100
	Against the Iranian Uranium enrichment	% 100	96%	100%	% 100
official Iranian responses	Iranian threating to Israel	% 100	100%	100%	% 100
	Iranian threating to US	% 100	100%	100%	% 100
	strike US military bases	% 100	100%	100%	% 100
	other responses to US statements	% 100	92.5%	91.8%	% 100
	The Ukranian Plane	% 100	% 100	100%	% 100
Others		% 100	96%	97%	% 100

5. Results

5.1. Network Agenda setting (NAS) at issue level

To address RQ1, QAP correlation was conducted across all tiers. Newspapers are divided into 8 tiers which are: pro-America English newspapers (New York Times and The Jerusalem Post), pro-Iran English newspapers (Tehran Times, China Daily), neutral German

newspapers (Der Standard, Neue Zürcher Zeitung), pro-America German newspaper (Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung), Arabic newspapers that are pro-American (Al-Riyadh), pro-Iran (Al-Zawraa), and neutral newspapers (Al-Ahram). Pro-Iranian Russian newspaper (Rossiiskaia Gazeta). Figures 1 through 8 in the appendix represent network agendas.

The results presented in Table 4 demonstrate high, moderate, and weak significant relations among various matrices. Looking at the neutral Arabic newspaper network agenda, it has moderate and significant relations with pro-Iranian Arabic newspaper network agenda (0.423), pro-American Arabic newspaper network agenda (0.431), pro-Iranian English newspaper network (0.590), and German newspaper network agenda with neutral orientation (0.591). Although it had relationships with other Arabic agendas, the strongest relation was with German newspapers with similar political orientations (neutral).

Similarly, pro-Iranian Arabic newspaper network agenda has moderate and significant relations with pro-American Arabic newspaper network agenda (0.606), pro-Iranian English newspaper network agenda (0.570), and neutral German newspaper network agenda (0.643). Although it has relations with other Arabic agenda and newspapers with identical political agenda, its prominent relation was with a network agenda that is different in language and political orientation.

The most remarkable result is that the network agenda of a pro-American German newspaper matches perfectly with the network agenda of a pro-Iranian Russian newspaper. Both have moderate relations with the pro-Iranian English newspaper network agenda (0.623), the pro-American English newspaper network agenda (0.582), and the neutral German newspaper network agenda (0.639). Both have relations with network agendas that differ in language and political orientation.

Furthermore, pro-American Arabic newspaper network agenda has moderate and significant relation with pro-Iranian Arabic newspaper network agenda (0.606), neutral Arabic newspaper network agenda (0.431), pro-Iranian English newspaper network agenda (0.570), and German newspaper network agenda with neutral orientation (0.571). Its highest relation was with an Arabic network agenda with distinct political orientation (with Iran).

Ultimately, the pro-Iranian English newspaper network agenda has six moderate and significant relations in addition to one high and significant relation. It has moderate relations with neutral Arabic newspaper network agenda (0.590), pro-Iranian Arabic newspaper network agenda (0.570), pro-American Arabic newspaper network agenda (0.570), pro-American German newspaper network agenda (0.632), pro-Iranian Russian newspaper network agenda (0.632), neutral German newspaper network agenda (0.795), and pro-American English newspaper network agenda (0.671). Although it has relations with all other network agendas, its highest relation is with a network agenda that differs in language and political orientation (Neutral German network agenda).

Thus, answering RQ1, the results indicate that neither language nor political orientation can predict IIMNAS at issue level.

Table 4. Shows relations between all tiers for issue level

		Neutral Arabic	With Iran Arabic	With USA German	With Iran Russian	With USA Arabic	With Iran English	Neutral German	With USA English
Neutral Arabic	QAP	1.00							
	Sig.	0.000							
With Iran Arabic	QAP	0.423*	1.00						
	Sig.	0.037	0.000						
With USA German	QAP	0.255	0.246	1.00					
	Sig.	0.199	0.170	0.000					
With Iran Russian	QAP	0.255	0.246	1.000 **	1.00				
	Sig.	0.197	0.163	0.000	0.000				
With USA Arabic	QAP	0.431*	0.606 *	0.195	0.195	1.00			
	Sig.	0.048	0.003	0.249	0.261	0.000			
With Iran English	QAP	0.590*	0.570 *	0.632*	0.632 *	0.570 *	1.00		
	Sig.	0.022	0.009	0.018	0.020	0.031	0.000		
Neutral German	QAP	0.591*	0.643 *	0.639 *	0.639 *	0.571 *	0.795 *	1.00	
	Sig.	0.017	0.004	0.029	0.025	0.035	0.008	0.000	
With USA English	QAP	0.186	0.266	0.582 *	0.582 *	0.257	0.671 *	0.403	1.00
	Sig.	0.264	0.172	0.035	0.032	0.218	0.013	0.131	0.000

The RQ3 asks whether there is evidence of IIMNAS among the newspapers sampled. To solve this question, a matrix for each newspaper in each time was created, Correlations among Agendas across times has been conducted, cross-lagged correlations were calculated between a pair of agendas at two points in time and compared with the Rozelle-Campbell baseline statistic to determine the influence direction (e.g. Lopez-Escobar et al., 1997; Roberts & McCombs, 1994). All of these correlations and the influence direction are presented in the appendix in figures 9 to 63.

Applying Rozelle-Campbell baseline (RCB) roles, if X1Y2 is greater than Y1X2 and RCB, and Y1X2 is less than RCB, X1 sets IIMNAS for Y2. If RCB is greater than both correlations, there is no relation; if both correlations are greater than RCB, X and Y have reciprocal relations without dominance for either.

Figures from 9 to 63 show relations among pairs of newspapers in T1 and T2. The results show that the most relations are reciprocal, thus we cannot assert that one agenda set the other. We only have seventeen relations to establish which agenda is the influencer. Tehran Times could set the IIMNAS for 5 newspapers which are Rossiiskaia Gazeta, New York Times, The Jerusalem Post, Al-Ahram, and Der Standard. Rossiiskaia Gazeta could set the IIMNAS for New York Times and Al-Zawra. China Daily could set the IIMNAS for Al-Zawra. Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung could set the IIMNAS for Rossiiskaia Gazeta. AL-Riyadh could set the IIMNAS for New York Times. Al-Ahram could set the IIMNAS for New York Times only. The Jerusalem Post could set the IIMNAS for Der Standard. China Daily could set the IIMNAS for Al-Zawra. Neue Zürcher Zeitung could set the IIMNAS for 4 newspapers which

are New York Times, Al-Zawra, Al-Riyadh, and Der Standard. Der Standard could set the IIMNAS for New York Times, and Al-Riyadh.

Answering RQ3, results show evidence of IIMNAS in a short time span (several days), but with no dominance for any of them. Tehran Times in time1 is the most powerful network agenda affecting five other agendas. In contrast to the New York Times which has no impact.

5.2. Attribute network Agenda setting (NAS)

Figures 65 through 72 represented attribute network agendas. In order to address RQ2, the same logic at issue-level is pursued at attribute-level. The results presented in Table5 show moderate, and weak significant relations among different matrices.

Looking at the neutral Arabic newspaper attribute network agenda, it has weak and significant relations with pro-Iranian Arabic newspaper attribute network agenda (0.203), pro-American Arabic newspaper attribute network agenda (0.157), pro-Iranian English newspaper attribute network agenda (0.257), with pro-American (0.205), and neutral German newspaper attribute network agenda (0.230). All relations are weak. Although it has relations with other Arabic agendas, but the highest relation was with the pro-Iranian English newspapers.

Identically, pro-Iranian Arabic newspaper attribute network agenda has weak and significant relations with pro-American Arabic newspaper attribute network agenda (0.140), and neutral German newspaper attribute network agenda (0.257). Although it has relations with other Arabic agenda, the highest relation was with attribute network agenda that is diverse in language and political orientation.

Although the pro-American German newspaper and the pro-Iranian Russian newspaper agendas have perfect match in issue level, it is disparate here. Pro-American German newspaper attribute network agenda has two weak and two moderate relations with other agendas. It has two weak relations with Russian (0.214), and pro-Iran English (0.230) network attribute agendas. It has two moderate relations with neutral German network attribute agenda (0.478) and with pro-American English network attribute agenda (0.538). The highest relation here is with network attribute agenda with different language, but same political orientation.

Russian network attribute agenda has weak relations with other attribute agendas. It has relations with pro-Iranian English agenda (0.227), and pro-American English agenda (0.195) network attribute agendas. Moreover, it has relations with neutral German (0.225), and pro-American German network attribute agendas. Although all relations are weak, the highest one is with a network that is identical in political orientation.

The pro-American Arabic newspaper network attribute agenda has weak and significant relations with the pro-Iranian Arabic newspaper attribute network agenda (0.14), neutral Arabic newspaper attribute network agenda (0.157), and neutral German newspaper attribute network agenda (0.185). Its highest relation is with an agenda with different languages and different political orientations.

Afterward, the pro-Iranian English newspaper attribute network agenda has three weak, two moderate and significant relations. It has moderate relations with neutral German newspaper attribute network agenda (0.492), pro-Iranian English newspaper attribute network agenda (0.646). Three weak relations with neutral Arabic newspaper attribute network agenda (0.257), pro-American German newspaper attribute network agenda (0.230), pro-Iranian Russian newspaper attribute network agenda (0.227). Although it has relations with many attribute network agendas, its highest relation is with an attribute network agenda that is same in language and differ in political orientation.

Thus, answering RQ2, results indicate that neither language nor political orientation can predict IIMNAS at attribute-level.

Table 5. Shows relations between all tiers for attribute level

		Neutral Arabic	With Iran Arabic	With USA German	With Iran Russian	With USA Arabic	With Iran English	Neutral German	With USA English
Neutral Arabic	QAP	1.000							
	Sig.	0.000							
With Iran Arabic	QAP	0.203	1.000						
	Sig.	0.015	0.000						
With USA German	QAP	0.116	0.096	1.000					
	Sig.	0.096	0.082	0.000					
With Iran Russian	QAP	0.035	-0.008	0.214	1.000				
	Sig.	0.303	0.593	0.025	0.000				
With USA Arabic	QAP	0.157	0.140	0.127	-0.035	1.000			
	Sig.	0.027	0.045	0.095	0.385	0.000			
With Iran English	QAP	0.257	0.086	0.230	0.227	0.096	1.000		
	Sig.	0.006	0.108	0.035	0.015	0.151	0.000		
Neutral German	QAP	0.230	0.257	0.478	0.225	0.185	0.492	1.000	
	Sig.	0.014	0.004	0.000	0.024	0.042	0.000	0.000	
With USA English	QAP	0.205	0.097	0.538	0.195	0.154	0.646	0.557	1.000
	Sig.	0.023	0.091	0.000	0.042	0.066	0.000	0.001	0.000

International Inter-Media network Attribute Agenda Setting (IIMNAS) at attribute level

The RQ4 asks whether there is evidence of IIMNAS among the newspapers sampled. To answer this question, Matrix for each newspaper in each time was built, Correlations between Agendas across times has been conducted, cross-lagged correlations were calculated between a pair of agendas at two points in time and compared with the Rozelle-Campbell baseline statistic to determine the influence direction (e.g. Lopez-Escobar et al., 1997; Roberts and McCombs, 1994). Hence, Figures 72 to 126 illustrate all of these correlations and the influence direction.

Applying Rozelle-Campbell baseline (RCB) roles, if X1Y2 is greater than Y1X2 and RCB and Y1X2 is less than RCB, this means X1 sets IIMNAS for Y2. If RCB is greater than both correlations this means there is no connection; if both correlations are greater than RCB, X and Y have reciprocal relations without any dominance for either.

Results show that most relations are reciprocal in which we can't assert that one agenda set the other. Only twenty-seven relations that we could determine which agenda is the influencer. Der Standard could set the IIMNAS for 6 newspapers which are Al-Ahram, Tehran Times, New York Times, China Daily, Neue Zürcher Zeitung, and Al-Riyadh. Rossiiskaia Gazeta could set the IIMNAS for five newspapers which are New York Times, China Daily, The Jerusalem Post, Neue Zürcher Zeitung, Der Standard. Also, Tehran Times could set the

IIMNAS for 5 newspapers which are New York Times, China Daily, Al-Ahram, Neue Zürcher Zeitung and Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung. Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung could set the IIMNAS for Rossiiskaia Gazeta, New York Times, and The Jerusalem post. Neue Zürcher Zeitung could set the IIMNAS for New York Times, and Al-Zawra. China Daily could set the IIMNAS for The Jerusalem post, and AL-Riyadh. Al-Ahram could set the IIMNAS for China Daily and The Jerusalem Post. The Jerusalem Post could set the IIMNAS for New York Times. Al-Riyadh could set the IIMNAS for The Jerusalem Post

Answering RQ4, results show evidence of IIMNAS at attribute level in a short time span (several days), without dominance for either. Der Standard in T1 is the most powerful network agenda affecting six other agendas. In contrast to the New York Times which has no effect.

6. Discussion

This study is among the few studies interested in exploring cross-country, cross-language, and different political orientations intermedia network agenda setting. It assesses the effects and relationships between media in countries that are geographically, politically, culturally, and economically diverse.

In this study, we investigated the occurrence of intermedia agenda-setting in the international sphere, with a particular focus on the factors that may influence this process like language and political orientation. Our findings suggest that intermedia network agenda setting is indeed present in the international sphere, with high correlations between issues and a greater number of relationships between attributes.

This study asked which could affect more language or political orientation. Results at issue and attribute levels didn't give a definitive answer. Most media agendas have relations with other agendas that are similar in language or in political orientation, but they also have relations with agendas that are different in both variables.

We also found that although these countries have different political and cultural attitudes towards the assassination, most of the network correlations among the various news agendas were positive and significant. This result goes well with Guo et al. (2016) who investigated transnational inter-media agenda-setting at the network level and compared the Iraq war coverage of newspapers located in six different countries and found that despite the diversity all the network correlations were positive and significant.

Despite the high harmony between the agendas, there is no single agenda was able to lead all others in either issue or attribute levels. However, our results did show that the Tehran Times had the most powerful agenda, which was able to set many other agendas including that of the New York Times. This surprising result could be interpretated in different ways, Tehran Times has published a lot about this crisis and every aspect in it while New York Times has published less, so the similarity happened to show up just for the same interests. Other interpretation could be that journalists in New York Times look at the enemy's media (specially it is published in English and easy to follow) and they were affected by it so what Tehran Times give attention for in the first time, New York Times adopted in the second time.

Previous studies usually bound media power with western media (Ekeanyanwu et al., 2012; Golan, 2006; Kim & Barnett, 1996) as they are the focus of other media's attention. Qian (2009) resulted that New York Times could set the agenda for Chinese media even when the event was in China. In contrast, Interestingly, we found that the New York Times was not

able to set an agenda in either issue or attribute levels. This is somewhat surprising, given the influential role that the New York Times has traditionally played in shaping public and media discourse in the United States (Golan, 2006; Kushin, 2010) and beyond. It is possible that the influence of the New York Times has declined in recent years, what supports this idea is recent studies results. Meraz (2016), who has found supporting evidence for the flow of influence from Twitter discussions to traditional media (New York Times and Washington Post). Weiss-Blatt (2016) found comparable results, reporting that technology blogs were the main drivers of traditional media coverage of technology. This agrees with Vonbun, Königslöw, & Schoenbach (2016) who discussed that online media have the power to influence other traditional media outlets and that. This study agrees with recent studies that New York Times couldn't set any agenda at issue or attribute levels. Moreover, many other agendas have similar priorities and could affect New York Times' agenda.

Therefore - on a professional level - it can be said that such events that receive international attention represent an opportunity for local media to spread and influence. Therefore, these local media outlets must work to exploit these events to reach the international level.

Another noteworthy finding of our study was that language and political orientation did not appear to influence media behavior in transmitting issues and attributes. This suggests that intermedia agenda setting may be more influenced by factors such as audience preferences, media ownership, and journalistic norms. Here, at the theoretical level, the results of the current study refute the idea that language and political orientation may represent an obstacle to the transfer of the agenda of issues and attributes from one media outlet to another. The agenda transmit through the media, although the perspective differs according to political or cultural orientation. The priorities in such cases are similar in their subject, but they may not be similar in their content and attitude, as each media outlet has its own biases.

Overall, our study adds to the growing body of research on intermedia agenda setting and underscores the complex and multifaceted nature of this phenomenon. Further research is needed to better understand the factors that influence intermedia agenda setting in different contexts and to develop strategies for promoting more diverse and inclusive media agendas.

7. Conclusion

This study contributes to the growing body of research on intermedia network agenda-setting, across countries with diverse political orientations, languages, and cultures. Through an exploration of the influences on this intricate process, particularly focusing on language and political orientation, the study uncovers the presence of intermedia network agenda setting on the international stage.

The findings reveal a complex network of interconnected media agendas, showcasing high correlations between issues and a multitude of relationships between attributes. While the study does not definitively determine whether language or political orientation exerts a greater influence, it highlights the coexistence of similarities in the agendas across various media outlets emphasizing reciprocal relations over the dominance of a single agenda.

Interestingly, despite differing political and cultural stances towards Soleimani's assassination, the study uncovers positive and significant network correlations among news agendas, mirroring previous research on transnational inter-media agenda-setting. Notably, the Tehran Times emerges as a potent influencer, capable of influencing other media outlets, in-

cluding the New York Times. This finding underscores a shift in influence dynamics, challenging the traditional notion of Western media dominance in shaping global discourse.

Moreover, the study indicates that language and political orientation might not be the primary drivers of media behavior in agenda transmission, challenging the notion that language and political alignment impede agenda transfer between media outlets, emphasizing the nuanced nature of agenda-setting processes.

In conclusion, this research offers valuable insights into the dynamics of intermedia network agenda-setting in the international context. Future studies could explore additional factors that may influence this phenomenon, such as media ownership, journalistic norms, and audience preferences. Additionally, the results could vary depending on the nature of the event, whether it is anticipated (like elections) or prolonged (lasting more than several days). By deepening our comprehension of intermedia agenda setting, we can better grasp the intricate interplay between media outlets and their role in shaping global public discourse.

References

Ahmadian, M., & Farahani, E. (2014). A Critical Discourse Analysis of The Los Angeles Times and Tehran Times on the Representation of Iran's Nuclear Program. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, *4*(10), 2114–2122. https://doi.org/10.4304/tpls.4.10.2114-2122

Alasuutari, P., Qadir, A., & Creutz, K. (2013). The domestication of foreign news: News stories related to the 2011 Egyptian revolution in British, Finnish and Pakistani newspapers. *Media, Culture & Society*, *35*(6), 692–707. https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443713491299

Al-Rawi, A. A. (2020). The Genesis of the Iraqi Printed Press. *Middle East Research Journal*, *76*, 31–44.

Alshaabi, T. (2021). *Developing natural language processing instruments to study sociotechnical systems*. The Faculty of the Graduate College. https://scholarworks.uvm.edu/graddis/1464

AlShalhub A. (2007). Issues of reform in Saudi newspapers: An analytical study of opinion articles in daily newspapers [in Arabic]. *Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, 1427(1), 106-180.

Arman, Z. R., & McClurg, S. (2024). Exploring the Relationship Between Televised Presidential Debate and Twitter: A Network Analysis of Intermedia Agenda Setting. *Communication Studies*, *0*(0), 1–19. https://doi.org/10.1080/10510974.2024.2342062

Ba'uthman, R. Y. S., & Salem, D. F. (2021). The impact of the design of Saudi E-newspapers on their readership: An analytical and field study. [in Arabic]. *Arab Journal of Media and Communication*, 25, 189-230.

Billard, T. J. (2019). Setting the transgender agenda: Intermedia agenda-setting in the digital news environment. *Politics, Groups, and Identities*, *7*(1), 165–176. https://doi.org/10.1080/21565503.2018.1532302

Borgatti, S. P. (2002). *NetDraw Software for Network Visualization*. https://sites.google.com/site/netdrawsoftware

Borgatti, S. P., Everett, M. G., & Freeman, L. C. (2002). *Ucinet 6 for Windows Software for Social Network Analysis.* https://www.scirp.org/(S(vtj3fa45qm1ean45vvffcz55))/reference/ReferencesPapers.aspx?ReferenceID=1992656

Du, Y. R. (2013). Intermedia agenda-setting in the age of globalization: A multinational agenda-setting test. *Global Media and Communication*, *9*(1), 19–36. https://doi.org/10.1177/1742766512463038

Dube, J. (2013). *International news media coverage of the "Arab Spring: Actors, technology and political impacts*. Master of political science, Faculty of Clark Atlanta University, Department of political science. https://radar.auctr.edu/islandora/object/cau.td%3A2013_dube_julian/

El-Khouly S. (2022).The frames of foreign and Arab newspapers coverage of the Russian-Ukrainian war [in Arabic], *Egyptian Journal of Communication Research*, 2022(81), 47-117. doi: 10.21608/ejsc.2022.281497

Ekeanyanwu, N. T., Jnr, Y. K., & Peters, A. S. (2012). Global News flow debate in the era of social media network: Is the US media still the world's news leader? *European Scientific Journal, ESJ*, *8*(3), Article 3. https://doi.org/10.19044/esj.2012.v8n3p%p

Fisher, H. O. (2023). *Media Objectivity and Bias in Western Coverage of the Russian-Ukrainian Conflict*. https://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:sh:diva-51707

Ghanem, S. (1997). Filling the tapestry: The second level of agenda setting. In M. McCombs, D. Shaw, & D. Weaver (Hrsg.), *Communication and democracy: Exploring the intellectual frontiers in agenda-setting theory* (S. 3–14). Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Golan, G. (2006). Inter-Media Agenda Setting and Global News Coverage. *Journalism Studies*, *7*(2), 323–333. https://doi.org/10.1080/14616700500533643

Guo, L., Chen, Y.-N. K., Vu, H., Wang, Q., Aksamit, R., Guzek, D., & McCombs, M. E. (2016). News coverage of the Iraq war: An International comparison of network attribute agendas. In L. Guo & M. E. McCombs (Hrsg.), *The Power of Information Networks: New Directions for Agenda Setting* (S. 144–166). Routledge. https://books.google.ch/books?id=dzi6DAEACAAJ

Guo, L., & McCombs, M. E. (2011, August 10). *Toward the Third Level of Agenda Setting Theory: A Network Agenda Setting Model*. Communication Theory and Methodology Division of AEJMC, St. Louis. http://www.leiguo.net/publications/guo_nas_2011_aejmc.pdf

Guzman, A. L. (2016). Evolution of News Frames During the 2011 Egyptian Revolution: Critical Discourse Analysis of Fox News's and CNN's Framing of Protesters, Mubarak, and the Muslim Brotherhood. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, *93*(1), 80–98. https://doi.org/10.1177/1077699015606677

Harder, R. A., Sevenans, J., & Van Aelst, P. (2017). Intermedia Agenda Setting in the Social Media Age: How Traditional Players Dominate the News Agenda in Election Times. *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, *22*(3), 275–293. https://doi.org/10.1177/1940161217704969

Harjuniemi, T. (2023). A topic among others—Examining the attention dynamics of the COVID-19 pandemic through interviews with Finnish journalists. *Journalism*, *24*(12), 2723–2740. https://doi.org/10.1177/14648849221138431

Hyzen, A., & Van den Bulck, H. (2024). "Putin's War of Choice": U.S. Propaganda and the Russia–Ukraine Invasion. *Journalism and Media*, *5*(1), Article 1. https://doi.org/10.3390/journalmedia5010016

Izadi, E. (2022, November 28). Covering Iran's unrest and crackdown from thousands of miles away. *Washington Post*. https://www.washingtonpost.com/media/2022/11/28/iran-journalist-mahsa-amini-radio-farda/

Kim, K., & Barnett, G. A. (1996). The Determinants of International News Flow: A Network Analysis. *Communication Research*, *23*(3), 323–352. https://doi.org/10.1177/009365096023003004

Kirkpatrick, D. D., Pérez-Peña, R., & Reed, S. (2019). Tankers Are Attacked in Mideast, and U.S. Says Video Shows Iran Was Involved. *The New York Times*. https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/13/world/middleeast/oil-tanker-attack-gulf-oman.html

Kushin, M. J. (2010). *Tweeting the Issues in The Age Of Social Media? Intermedia Agenda Setting between The New York Times and Twitter*. Washington State University, Edward R. Murrow College of Communication.

Liu, K., Geng, X., & Liu, X. (2022). The application of network agenda setting model during the COVID-19 pandemic based on latent dirichlet allocation topic modeling. *Frontiers in Psychology*, *13*. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.954576

Livingston, S., & Asmolov, G. (2010). Networks and the future of foreign affairs reporting. *Journalism Studies*, *11*(5), 745–760. https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2010.503024

Lopez-Escobar, E., Llamas, J. P., & McCombs, M. (1997). *The Spanish General Election in 1996: A further inquiry into second level agenda setting effects.* [Unpublished paper].

McCombs, Maxwell E. (2014). *Setting the agenda: The mass media and public opinion / Maxwell McCombs* (Second edition.). Polity Press Cambridge, UK?; Malden, MA, USA.

Meraz, S. (2016). An expanded perspective on network agenda setting between traditional media and Twitter political discussion groups in «every day talk». In L. Guo & M. E. McCombs (Hrsg.), *The power of information networks: New directions for agenda setting* (1. Aufl., S. 235–257). Routledge. http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&scope=site&db=nlebk&db=nlabk&AN=1124389

Mohammed, S. (2018). *Inter-media Agenda Setting Between Egyptian and International Online Newspapers within the Framework of Political Groups' Agenda*. [in Arabic]. Minia University, Faculty of Arts.

Mohammed, S. H. A., & McCombs, M. (2021). Intermedia Agenda Setting or International News Flow? Cross-Lagged Comparison of Elite International Newspapers. *International Journal of Communication*, *15*(0), Article 0.

Morales, P. S., & Menechelli, P. (2024). Communicating the authentic China: Partnership agreements and the use of Chinese sources and voices by Brazilian media. *Chinese Journal of Communication*, 1–17. https://doi.org/10.1080/17544750.2024.2335264

Orgeret, K. (2016). Women Making News. Conflict and Post Conflict in the Field. In K. Orgeret & W. Tayeebwa, *Journalism in Conflict and Post-Conflict Conditions: Worldwide Perspectives* (S. 99–114). Nordicom.

Qian, X. (2009). *Inter-media agenda-setting effects among Chinese newspapers, Chinese blogs and the New York Times during coverage of the Beijing 2008 Olympic Games* (S. 2807355) [Master of Science, Iowa State University, Digital Repository]. https://doi.org/10.31274/etd-180810-1058

Roberts, M., & McCombs, M. (1994). Agenda setting and political advertising: Origins of the news agenda. *Political Communication*, *11*(3), 249–262. https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.1994.9963030

Rosenthal, C. (2015). *Reconsidering agenda setting and intermedia agenda setting from aglobal perspective* [The University of London]. https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/93/630

Russell, A. (2011). The Arab Spring| Extra-National Information Flows, Social Media and the 2011 Egyptian Uprising. *International Journal of Communication*, *5*, Article 0.

Strauß, N. (2019). Financial journalism in today's high-frequency news and information era. *Journalism*, *20*(2), 274–291. https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884917753556

Su, Y., & Hu, J. (2020). A territorial dispute or an agenda war? A cross-national investigation of the network agenda-setting (NAS) model. *Journal of Information Technology & Politics*, *17*(4), 357–375. https://doi.org/10.1080/19331681.2020.1756553

Su, Y., Hu, J., & Lee, D. K. L. (2020). Delineating the Transnational Network Agenda-Setting Model of Mainstream Newspapers and Twitter: A Machine-Learning Approach. *Journalism Studies*, *21*(15), 2113–2134. https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2020.1812421

Tahamtan, I., Potnis, D., Mohammadi, E., Singh, V., & Miller, L. E. (2022). The Mutual Influence of the World Health Organization (WHO) and Twitter Users During COVID-19: Network Agenda-Setting Analysis. *J Med Internet Res*, *24*(4), e34321. https://doi.org/10.2196/34321

Tang, S. (2021). How the Media Shape Public Perceptions of China: A Network Agenda-Setting Analysis [Ph.D., Indiana University]. In *ProQuest Dissertations and Theses* (2595580863). ProQuest Dissertations & Theses A&I; ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global: The Humanities and Social Sciences Collection. https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/how-media-shape-public-perceptions-china-network/docview/2595580863/se-2?accountid=143299

Vargo, C. J., & Guo, L. (2017). Networks, Big Data, and Intermedia Agenda Setting: An Analysis of Traditional, Partisan, and Emerging Online U.S. News. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, *94*(4), 1031–1055. https://doi.org/10.1177/1077699016679976

Vliegenthart, R., & Walgrave, S. (2008). The Contingency of Intermedia Agenda Setting: A Longitudinal Study in Belgium. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, *85*(4), 860–877. https://doi.org/10.1177/107769900808500409

Vonbun, R., Königslöw, K. K., & Schoenbach, K. (2016). Intermedia agenda-setting in a multimedia news environment. *Journalism*, *17*(8), 1054–1073. https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884915595475

Vu, H. T., Guo, L., & McCombs, M. E. (2014). Exploring "the World Outside and the Pictures in Our Heads": A Network Agenda-Setting Study. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, *91*(4), 669–686. https://doi.org/10.1177/1077699014550090

Vu, H. T., Jiang, L., Chacón, L. M. C., Riedl, M. J., Tran, D. V., & Bobkowski, P. S. (2018). What influences media effects on public perception? A cross-national study of comparative agenda setting. *International Communication Gazette*, *81*(6–8), 580–601. https://doi.org/10.1177/1748048518817652

Walleråa, A. (2020). *The US' view on Just War: A content analysis of the Trump administration's justification of the attack on general Soleimani*. https://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:uu:diva-423445

Wang, G. (2013). *"China's Peaceful Rise", Competing Discourses in Newspaper Articles from China Daily and The Times*. Swansea University.

Wang, H., & Shi, J. (2022). Intermedia Agenda Setting amid the Pandemic: A Computational Analysis of China's Online News. *Computational Intelligence and Neuroscience*, *2022*, 2471681. https://doi.org/10.1155/2022/2471681

Weiss-Blatt, N., Guo, L., & McCombs, M. E. (2016). Role of tech bloggers in the flow of information. In *The power of information networks: New directions for agenda setting* (1. Aufl., S. 88–103). Routledge.

Wimmer, R. D., & Dominick, J. R. (2006). *Mass Media Research: An Introduction* (8. Aufl.). Thomson Wadsworth Publishing.

Zhao, B., & Zhang, H. (2023). Time Change in Agenda Setting: Time-Lag Analysis Based on Social Bots, Media and Public. *Chinese Journal of Journalism & Communication*, *45*(2), 52–80.

Appendix

Figure 1. Neutral Arabic newspaper network agenda (Al-Ahram)

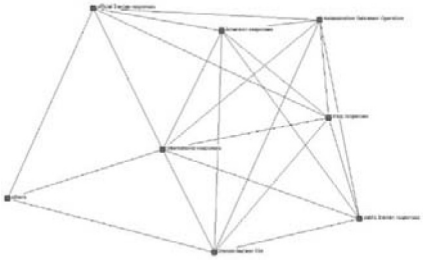


Figure 2. Pro-Iranian Arabic newspapersnetwork agenda (Al-Zawraa)

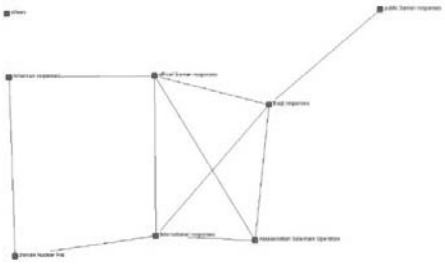


Figure 3. Pro-Iranian English newspapers network agenda (China Daily, Tehran Times)

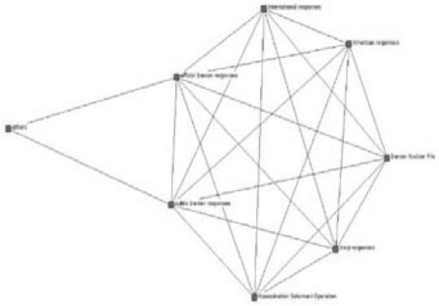


Figure 4. Neutral German newspapers network agenda (Der Standard, Neue Zürcher Zeitung)

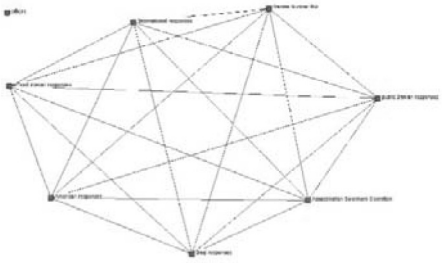


Figure 5. German newspapers in USside network agenda (Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung)

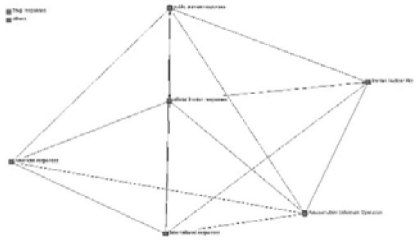


Figure 6. Pro-American English newspapers network agenda (New York Times, The Jerusalem Post)

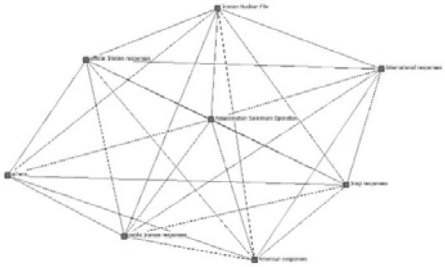


Figure 7. Pro-Iranian Russian newspapernetwork agenda (Rossiiskaia Gazeta)

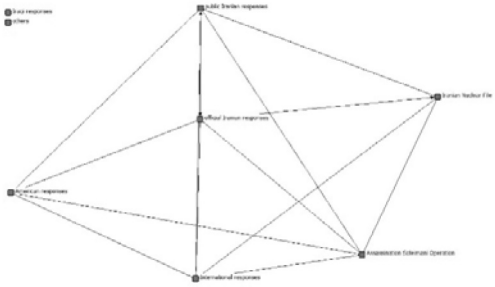
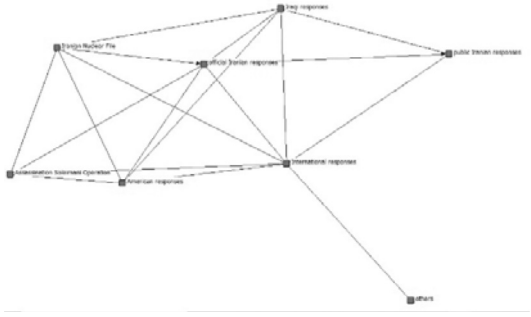


Figure 8. Pro-American Arabic newspaper network agenda (Al-Riyadh)



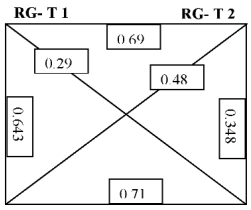


Figure 9: Relation between RG and

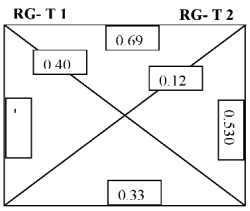


Figure 10: Relation between RG and

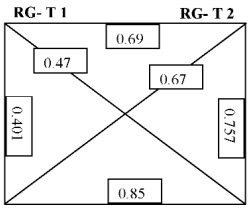


Figure 11: Relation between RG and

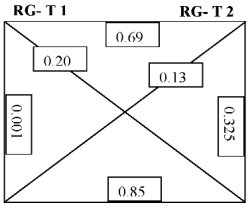


Figure 12: Relation between RG and

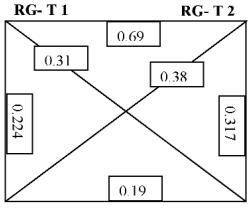


Figure 13: Relation between RG and

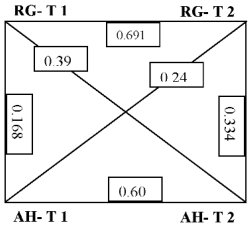


Figure 14: Relation between RG and

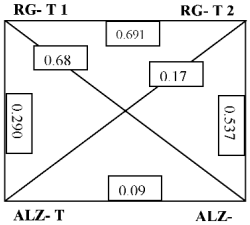


Figure 15: Relation between RG and

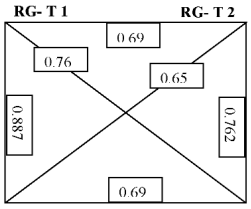


Figure 16: Relation between RG and

45

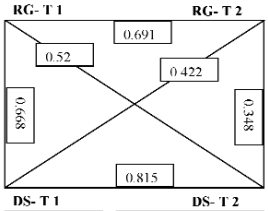


Figure 17: Relation between RG and DS

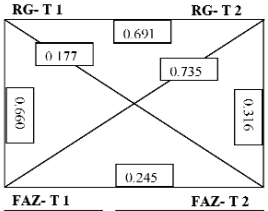


Figure 18: Relation between RG and FAZ

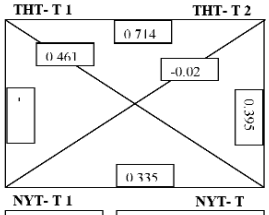


Figure 19: Relation between THTand NYT

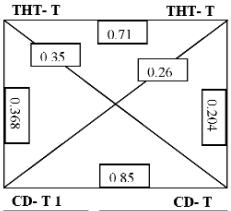


Figure 20: Relation between TIIT and

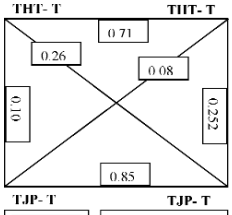


Figure 21: Relation between THT and

46

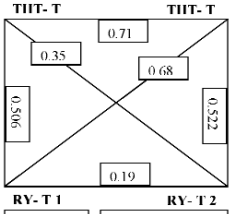


Figure 22: Relation between THT and

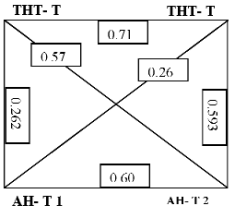
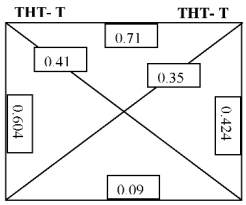
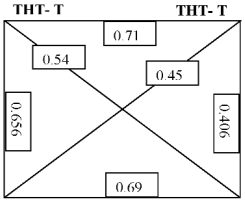


Figure 23: Relation between TIIT and



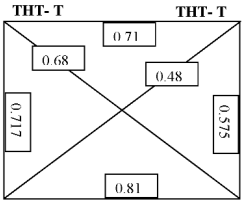
ALZ- T	ALZ-
RCB=	Reciprocal

Figure 24: Relation between THT and



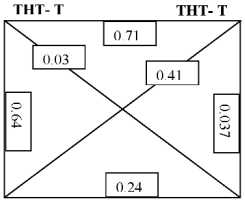
NZZ- T	NZZ- T
RCB=	Reciprocal

Figure 25: Relation between THT and



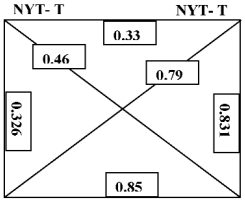
DS- T 1	DS- T 2
RCB=	THT → DS

Figure 26: Relation between THT and



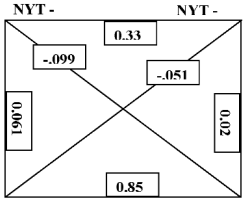
FAZ- T	FAZ-
RCB= 0.181	Reciprocal

Figure 27: Relation between THT and



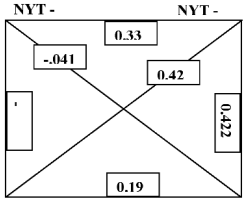
CD- T 1	CD- T 2
RCB=	Reciprocal

Figure 28: Relation between NYT and



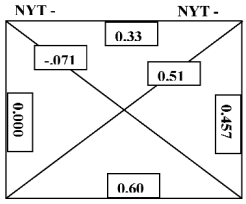
TJP- T	TJP - T
RCB=0.02	Reciprocal

Figure 29: Relation between NYT and



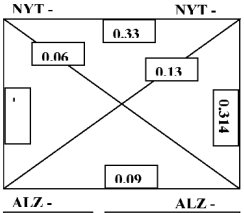
RY - T	RY - T
RCB=0.04	RY → NYT

Figure 30: Relation between NYT and



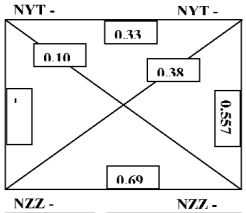
AH - T	AH -T2
RCB=	AH → NYT

Figure 31: Relation between NYT and



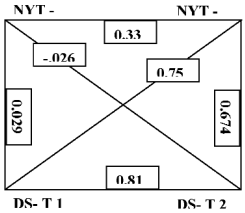
ALZ -	ALZ -
RCB=	Reciprocal

Figure32: Relation between NYT and



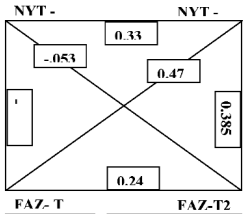
NZZ -	NZZ -
RCB=0.13	NZZ → NYT

Figure33: Relation between NYT and



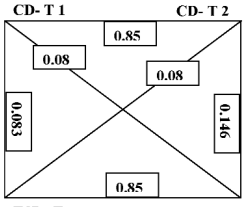
DS- T 1	DS- T 2
RCB=0.21	DS → NYT

Figure34: Relation between NYT and



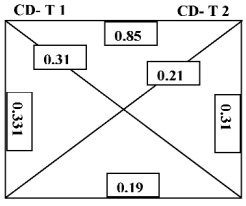
FAZ- T	FAZ-T2
RCB=	Reciprocal

Figure35: Relation between NYT and



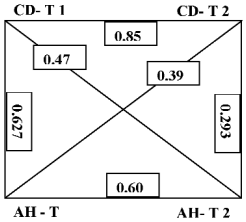
TJP - T	TJP- T
RCB=	No relation

Figure36: Relation between CD and



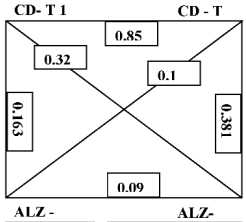
RY - T	RY - T
RCB=0.19	Reciprocal

Figure37: Relation between CD and RY



AH - T	AH- T 2
RCB=0.34	Reciprocal

Figure 38: Relation between CD and



ALZ -	ALZ-
RCB=	CD → ALZ

Figure39: Relation between CD and

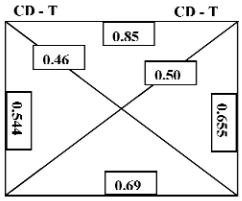


Figure40: Relation between CD and

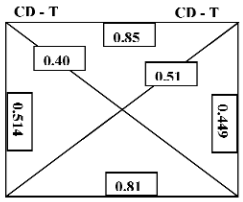


Figure41: Relation between CD and DS

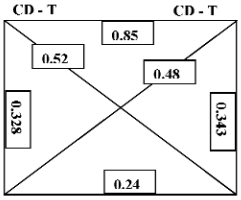


Figure42: Relation between CD and

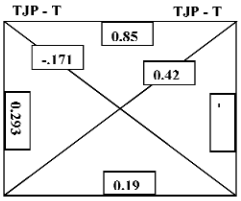


Figure43: Relation between TJP and

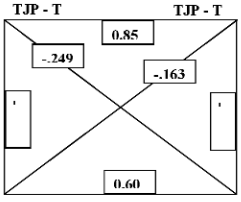


Figure44: Relation between TJP and

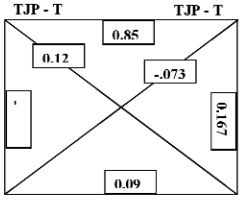


Figure45: Relation between TJP and

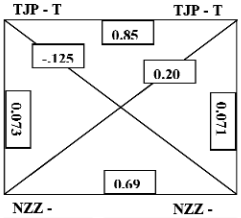


Figure46: Relation between TJP and

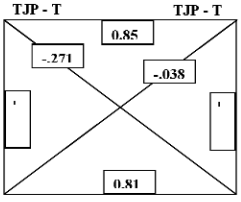


Figure47: Relation between TJP and

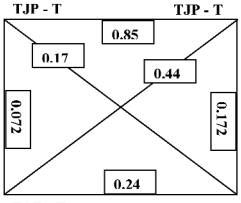


Figure48: Relation between TJP and

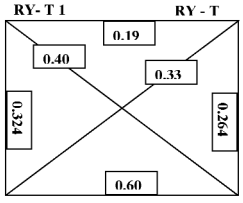


Figure49: Relation between RY and

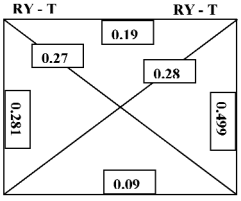


Figure50: Relation between RY and

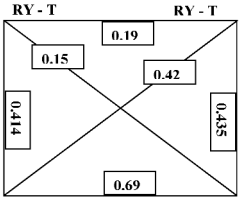


Figure51: Relation between RY and

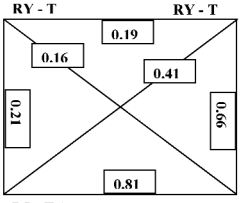


Figure52: Relation between RY and

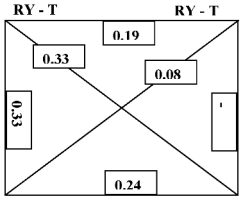


Figure53: Relation between RY and

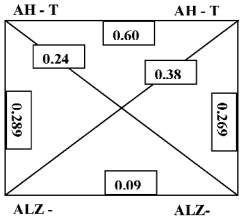


Figure 54: Relation between AH and

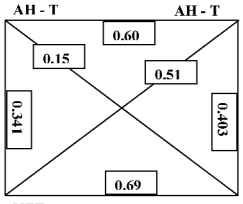
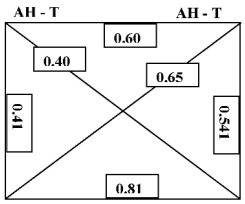


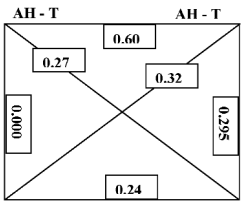
Figure55: Relation between AH and



DS - T 1 DS - T 2

RCB= Reciprocal

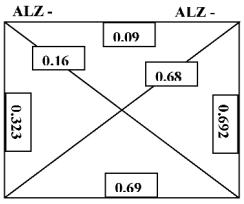
Figure56: Relation between AH and



FAZ - T FAZ - T

RCB=0,06 Reciprocal

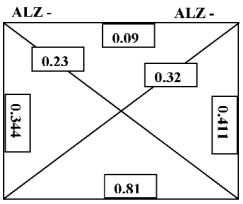
Figure57: Relation between AH and



NZZ - NZZ-

RCB=0.25 NZZ → ALZ

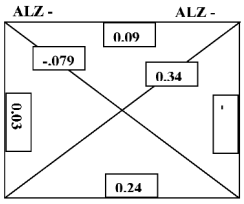
Figure58: Relation between ALZ and



DS - T 1 DS -T2

RCB= Reciprocal

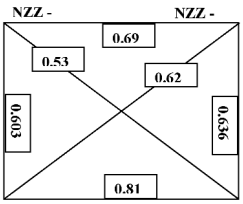
Figure59: Relation between ALZ and



FAZ - T FAZ- T

RCB= Reciprocal

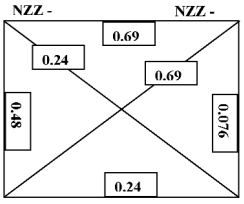
Figure60: Relation between ALZ and



DS - T 1 DS - T 2

RCB=0.46 Reciprocal

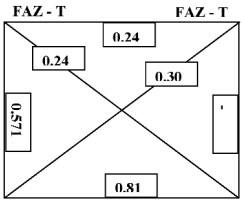
Figure61: Relation between NZZ and



FAZ - T FAZ-T2

RCB=0.14 Reciprocal

Figure62: Relation between NZZ and



DS - T 1 DS -T2

RCB= Reciprocal

Figure63: Relation between DS and

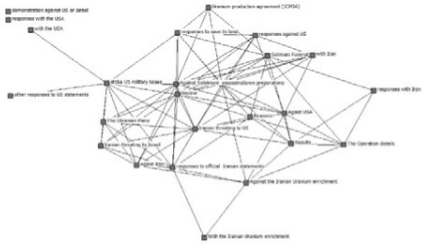


Figure64: Neutral Arabic newspaper network attribute agenda (Al-Ahram)

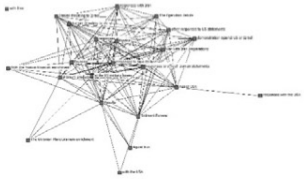


Figure66: Pro-Iranian English newspapers network attribute agenda (China Daily, Tehran Times)

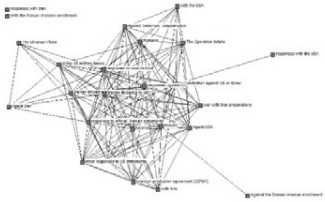
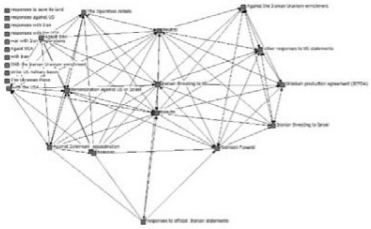
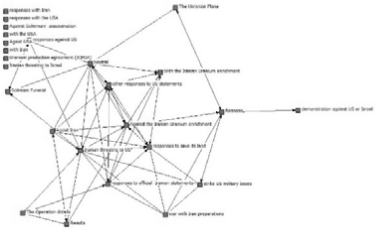


Figure 68: Neutral German newspapers network attribute agenda (Der Standard, Neue Zurcher Zeitung)





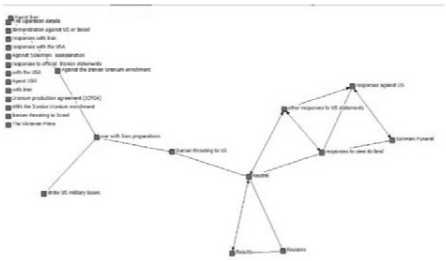


Figure65: Pro-Iranian Arabic newspapers network attribute agenda (Al-Zawraa)

Figure70: Pro-American German newspapers network attribute agenda (Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung)

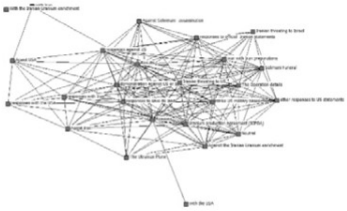


Figure67: Pro-American English newspapers network attribute agenda (New York Times, The Jerusalem Post)

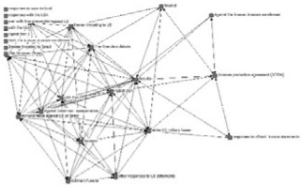


Figure69: Pro-Iranian Russian newspaper in Iranian side network attribute agenda (Rossiiskaia Gazeta)

Figure71: Pro-American Arabic newspaper network attribute agenda (Al-Riyadh)

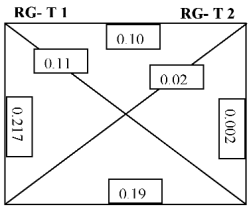


Figure 72: Relation between RG and

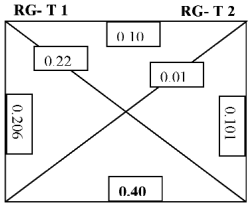


Figure 73: Relation between RG and

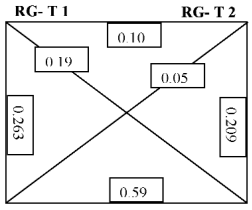


Figure74: Relation between RG and CD

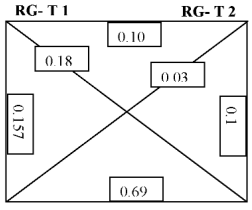


Figure 75: Relation between RG and

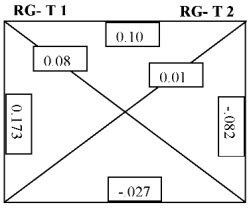


Figure 76: Relation between RG and

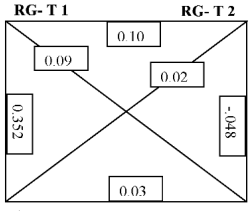


Figure 77: Relation between RG and

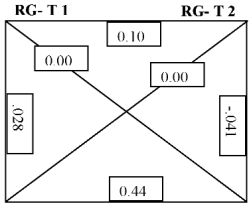


Figure78: Relation between RG and

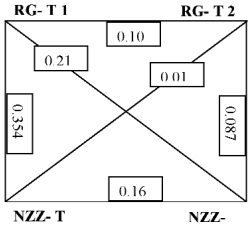


Figure79: Relation between RG and

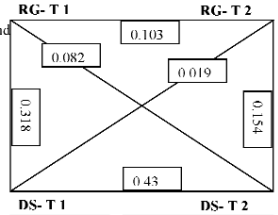


Figure 80: Relation between RG and DS

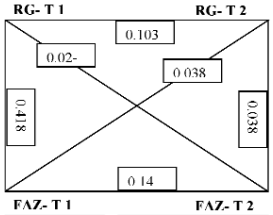


Figure 81: Relation between RG and FAZ

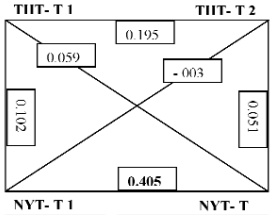


Figure 82: Relation between THT, NYT

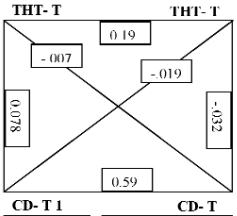


Figure 83: Relation between THT and

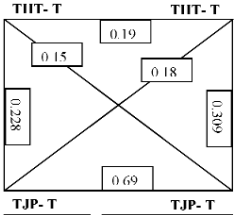


Figure 84: Relation between TIITand

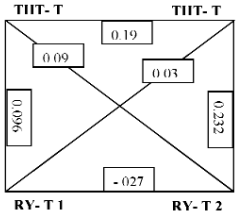


Figure85 : Relation between TIITand

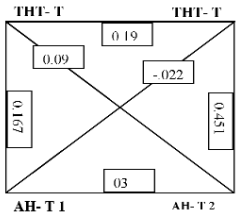


Figure 86: Relation between THT and

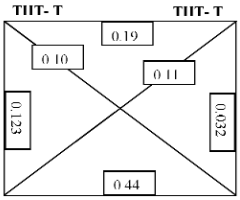


Figure87: Relation between THT and

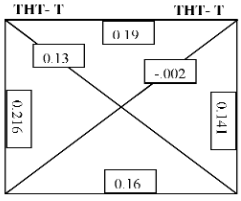


Figure 88: Relation between THT and

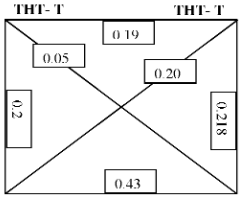


Figure 89: Relation between THT and

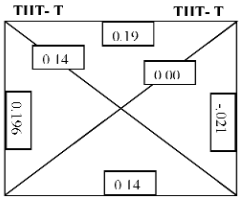


Figure 90: Relation between THT and

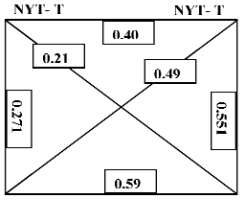


Figure91: Relation between NYT and

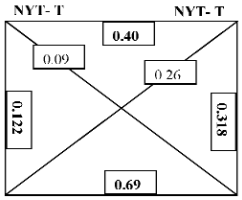


Figure 92: Relation between

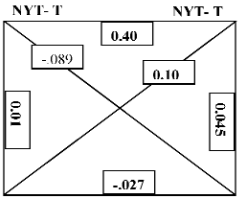


Figure93: Relation between NYT and

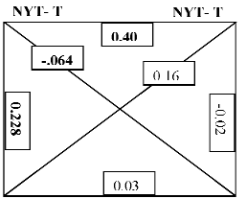


Figure 94: Relation between NYTand

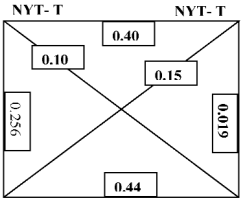


Figure95: Relation between NYT and

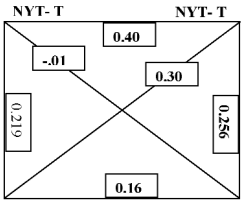


Figure96: Relation between NYT and

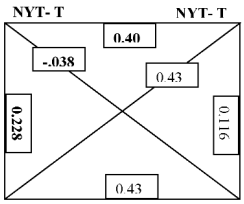


Figure97: Relation between NYT and

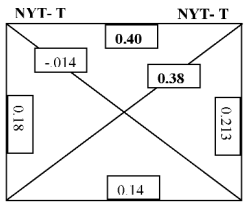


Figure98: Relation between NYT and

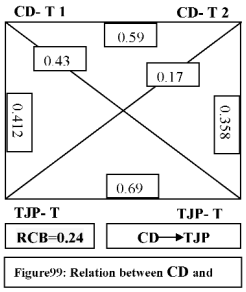


Figure99: Relation between CD and

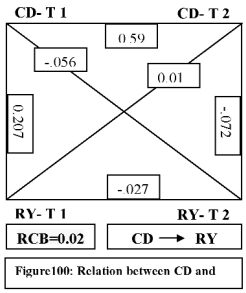


Figure100: Relation between CD and

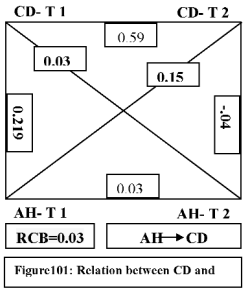


Figure101: Relation between CD and

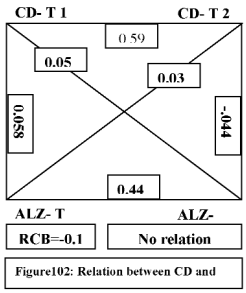


Figure102: Relation between CD and

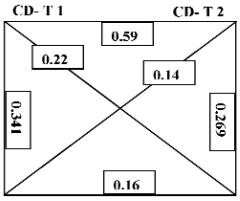


Figure103: Relation between CD and

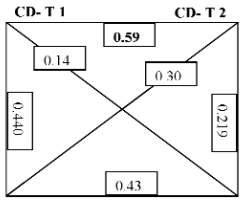


Figure104: Relation between CD and

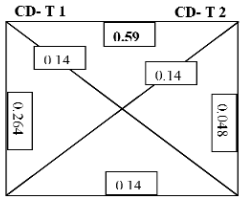


Figure105: Relation between CD and

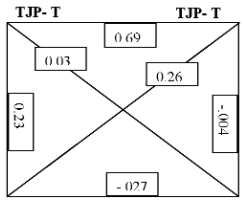


Figure106: Relation between TJPand

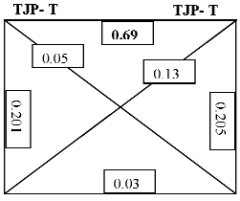


Figure107: Relation between TJPand

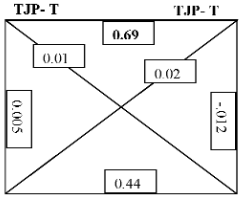


Figure108: Relation between

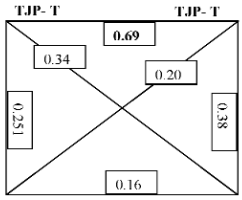


Figure109: Relation between TJP,

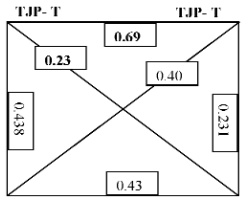


Figure110: Relation between TJP,DS

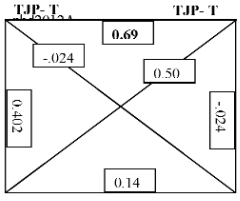


Figure111: Relation between TJP,

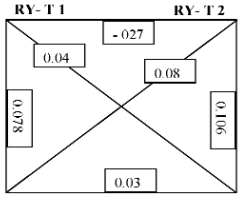


Figure112: Relation between RYand

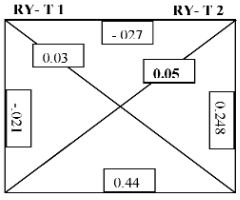


Figure113: Relation between RYand

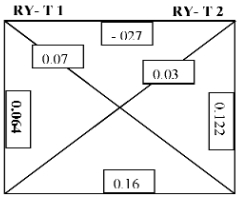


Figure114: Relation between RY,NZZ

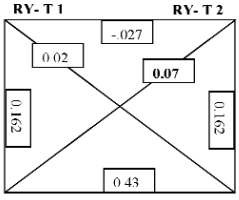


Figure115: Relation between RYand

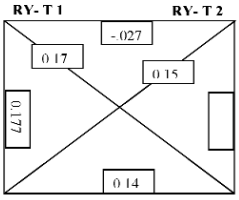


Figure116: Relation between RYand

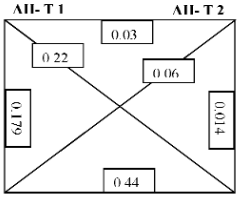


Figure 117: Relation between

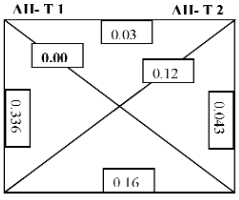
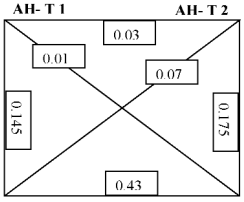
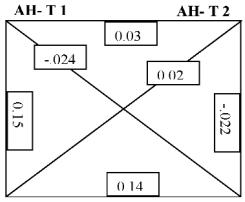


Figure118: Relation between AH,NZZ



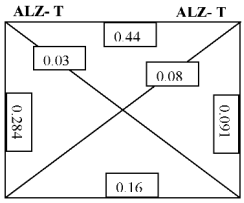
DS- T 1	DS- T 2
RCB=0.04	DS⟶AH

Figure119: Relation between AHand



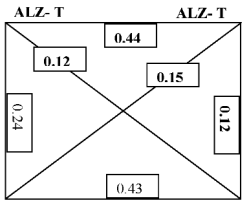
FAZ- T	FAZ- T
RCB=0.00	Reciprocal

Figure120: Relation between AH,



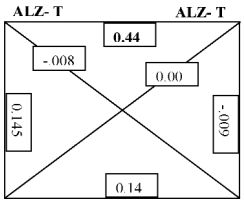
NZZ- T	NZZ-
RCB=0.06	NZZ⟶ ALZ

Figure121: Relation between



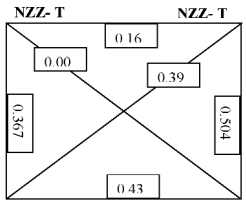
DS- T 1	DS-T2
Rcb=	Reciprocal

Figure122: Relation between ALZ,DS



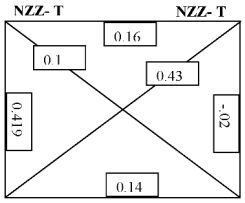
FAZ- T	FAZ- T
RCB=0.02	No relation

Figure123: Relation between



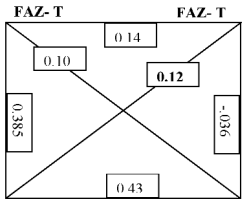
DS- T 1	DS- T 2
RCB=0.14	DS ⟶NZZ

Figure124: Relation between NZZ ,DS



FAZ- T	FAZ-T2
RCB=0.03	Reciprocal

Figure125: Relation between NZZ



DS- T 1	DS-T2
RCB=0.02	Reciprocal

Figure126: Relation between DS,FAZ

Romanian Journal of Communication and Public Relations
vol. 26, no. 2 (62) / July 2024, **57-75**
ISSN: 1454-8100/ E-ISSN: 2344-5440

Jessica ASPRER*
Eleanor Marie ESCALANTE**
Jeremaiah OPINIANO***

What causes reticence in publicly correcting false information online? A case study from the Philippines

Abstract

News audiences on social media succumb to filtering systems to navigate the overabundance of information. However, filtering systems get bolstered by echo chambers, increasing social media polarization, especially when false information hinders better-informed viewpoints. *Reticence,* though understudied, has the ability to hamper the spread of factual information. Hence, this study aims to investigate why social media users showcase reticence toward publicly correcting false information on their feeds, and how this disposition can affect ideological polarization. Eight interviews were conducted through criterion-based and referral sampling methods, and the resulting transcripts were analyzed through a combination of inductive and deductive approaches. Findings showed that reticence is driven by three interrelated factors: *relational, proximal,* and *cognitive and emotional*. This study contributes to the almost-forgotten research theme of reticence in communication and journalism studies, showing why such behavior and its considerations inadvertently contribute to polarization on social media.

Keywords: reticence, echo chambers, false information, social media polarization, Philippines

Introduction

Online news audiences use filtering systems to tailor information on the Internet, which has blown up over the past three decades (Beam & Kosicki, 2014). Filtering systems also get aligned with the preferences of news audiences. However, these systems may thrust news audiences into echo chambers where viewpoints are limited. As a result, filtering systems are often blamed (DiFranzo & Gloria-Garcia, 2017; Aida et al., 2020) for the prevalence of polarization. Ideological polarization, by operational definition, is the division among individuals based on their set of beliefs, which influences how they consume news and form their

* University of Santo Tomas (UST), The Philippines, jessicaasprer8@gmail.com, ORCID: 0009-0006-6540-9386
** University of Santo Tomas (UST), The Philippines, eleanormarieescalante@gmail.com, ORCID: 0009-0009-8007-8249
*** University of Santo Tomas (UST), The Philippines, jmopiniano@ust.edu.ph, ORCID: 0000-0003-3847-9494

stances. This restriction encourages biased interaction and a propensity for uncritical discussion online that follows polarized opinions (Zimmer et al., 2019). Hence, the thriving of fake news stems from active collaboration among deeply polarized users (Zimmer et al., 2019).

Misinformation is more likely to spread among homogenous cohorts (Narayanan et al., 2018) and thrives depending on how echo chambers are operationalized (Zimmer et al., 2019). However, little is still known about another mediating factor—*reticence*—in publicly correcting false information online (Gurgun et al., 2022) and how it could affect ideological polarization. Present in these polarized spaces are reticent communicators who do not publicly express their thoughts on false information. Consequently, passivity could hamper the spread of information (Romero et al., 2011), which could engender social media polarization (SMP), as inaction is not always a sign of a lack of agency (Casemajor et al., 2015; Lutz & Hoffmann, 2017). That being said, reticence towards publicly correcting false information may keep news audiences polarized because of unchallenged beliefs and inclination for reaffirming and erroneous information in their echo chambers.

In a sense, the paper of Casemajor and collaborators (2015) illustrated a concept that almost resembles reticence: *non-participation* in overall digital media. However, reticence remains underexplored in the context of online news, news audiences' participation, and the circulation of false information in echo chambers. This research mainly aims to ascertain why social media users receiving false information experience reticence and investigate the following:

1. What considerations surround the reticence of social media news audiences given their differing views on politics and political news?

2. What are the indicators of social media audiences' reticence toward politics and political news, based on their underlying reasons?

This study may provide future researchers a groundwork for exploring reticence rather than simply framing it as shyness (Keaten et al., 1997). This research also contributes to journalism by providing a better understanding of modern-day news audiences and their consumption and engagement patterns, allowing journalists and readers alike to better navigate the news environment.

Literature and theoretical framework

Reticence

Gerald Phillips introduced the term "reticence" to the field of communication in 1965 (Keaten et al., 1997). Philipps linked reticence to fear of public speaking and, later, inadequate communication skills. Building on a synthesis of seminal studies on reticence by Phillips (spanning 1968, 1977, 1984, 1986, and 1991), as analyzed by Keaten and collaborators (2000), cognitive elements—a strong adherence to a set of beliefs on dialogue—effectuate reticence then form difficulties in communication. The belief that the loss would be greater than the gain is generally why individuals avoid communication altogether. In 2000, Keaten and Kelly redefined reticence as the behavior "when people avoid communication because they believe it is better to remain silent than to risk appearing foolish" (p. 168).

According to Keaten and collaborators (2000), reticent people may feel that *quid pro quo* is not necessary as they perceive themselves to be effective as mere listeners . Alternatively, building on a 1996 paper of Kelly and collaborators, the authors note that reticent people may

behave in ways aimed at minimizing mistakes (Keaten et al., 2000).. According to Phillips (1984, 1986, 1991), others believe that they do not have the "gift" of communicating effectively (Keaten et al., 2000; Gurgun et al. 2022). To better understand the reasons behind reticence, Keaten and collaborators (2000) proposed a six-component model. The first component is *need*, wherein reticent communicators know the importance of communication in society. Secondly, they see themselves as *less competent* in key communication skills. Thirdly, they *feel helpless* toward controlling the outcomes because they believe failure is inevitable. Fourthly, reticent people experience *anxiety* of failing in situations where conversing is needed. The fifth component is *devaluation,* wherein they experience a paradox of devaluating the importance of communication on a personal level, despite agreeing that communication is valuable. Lastly, *withdrawal* occurs when they avoid communicating.

While active engagement is commonly used to measure the propagation and reach of a post, non-engagement could also determine its trajectory. Romero and collaborators (2011) found that the correlation between a source's popularity and its influence is weaker than expected. In addition, reticence is crucial in determining which topics dominate public opinion. On social media, followers and engagements measure the reach of a topic. Reticence, however, can also be a yardstick because it hinders the reach of information in a system that needs active engagement from audiences for news to propagate, thus reinforcing SMP.

Previous research concluded that lack of online participation is primarily disadvantageous, particularly political participation (Xenos et al., 2014; Boulianne, 2015). Yet not all forms of active participation accurately indicate users' agency and intent (Morozov, 2011; Fuchs, 2014; Yi, 2020). Inaction does not necessarily indicate a lack of agency (Casemajor et al., 2015) nor a negative response. It only becomes problematic when it prevents people from achieving their desired ends (Keaten & Kelly, 2000) and when people are being placed in situations where they are intentionally being silenced by another (Yi, 2020).

Social media polarization

This study on reticence online operates in a milieu of continued social media polarization (SMP). Researchers define SMP, based on its operational definition (Winne, 2022), as polarization caused by users' overexposure on social media, where they consume news and engage in discussions influenced by bias.. This inclination towards like-minded news might push them toward groups reaffirming these biases, which researchers think can manifest reticence.

Social media tools have been studied to understand their impact on polarization and news consumption. Algorithms of a modifiable social networking site change homophilous patterns in network structure and biases toward like-minded news (Cinelli, et al., 2021), and suppress alternative viewpoints (DiFranzo & Gloria-Garcia, 2017). These tools, including social media, have also generated echo chambers, an environment where only information and opinions that reinforce one's beliefs are welcomed. Political engagement, supposedly informative and harmless, was linked with social media use and may deepen polarization (Lee et al., 2017).

However, while algorithms are unavoidable, some think it may be incorrect to pin the blame for polarization solely on the medium or source. It is still up to how the user examines and responds to the information they encounter (Zimmer et al., 2019). Yet even if user control can mediate algorithm curation, the hazards of polarization are still present.

The threat of polarization seems to be felt inside echo chambers where users become more vulnerable to false information. DiFranzo and Gloria-Garcia (2017, p. 6) emphasized that

echo chambers magnify the chances of "confusion about causation, and thus encourage speculation, rumors, and mistrust". They added that fake news would most likely dwell within one circle, leaving little-to-no effect on outsiders. This could strengthen polarized views among communities exposed to fake news, having *affirmative* information to back their beliefs. Furthermore, SMP threatens democracy over time (Spohr, 2017) if information is selected poorly and propagated imprudently. It can then become a causal pathway to extreme ideology (Prasetya & Murata, 2020) and repulsion.

On the contrary, several studies have found that polarization is not present among online news audiences because sources were found to have diverse audiences. Kitchens and collaborators (2020) said there is no evidence that information sources are limited because of social media use. Fletcher and colleagues (2019) noted that the extent of polarized news patterns, algorithmic filter bubbles, and echo chambers may be overestimated. Instead, the changing media landscape is both a driver and propagator of the ossification (or formation) of polarization (Campante & Hojman, 2013).

Information behavior and its cultural nuances

This concept involves users' news consumption patterns on social media, the cognitive processes they undergo when selecting content, and their reaction to information. The assemblage, rearrangement, and assimilation of ideas shape people's responses to the world because they rely heavily on contextualized information (Lippmann, 1922). This process is not void of biases and personal prejudices, whether unintentionally or intentionally gained.

The human mind is one inherent filter, subconsciously and subjectively refining information. Case-building, innately occurring at a subliminal level, works as a defense mechanism to maintain consistency in thought, practice, and belief (Spohr, 2017). Since discomfort unsettles people, they tend to avoid information they subconsciously classify as false, regardless of its actual truth. This is better explained by the interplay of psychological and sociological factors that influence the formation of polarization: individual biases, deep-seated cultural prejudices, attachment of identity to social groups, inclination to consistency, self-censorship, etc. (Qureshi et al., 2021).

The above being said, culture is also a facet of users' information behavior, which may help explain their reticence. Here we account for Filipino culture as an example. Filipino communities maintain harmony through mechanisms such as hierarchical arrangements based on seniority, a pattern that is deeply rooted in families, the smallest social unit. (Mulder, 1994). This is primarily founded on relative inequality based on age (Mulder, 1994). Regarding this social stratum, people ought to approach relationships—especially ones with elders—with respect and good manners (Mulder, 1994). Not fulfilling these moral obligations causes discomfort or shame, as disrespect would be viewed as a breach of established order (Mulder, 1994). Relatedly, *pakikisama* (comradeship) is where one is bent on pleasing their *kapwa* or the group they belong to. This comes from their utmost regard for the group, even at the expense of one's own interests or needs (Bautista, 1999; Nadal, 2021 as cited in Chan & Litam, 2021). Studies have shown that the desire to maintain relationships plays a significant role in withholding interpersonal feedback or hesitating to counteract misinformation, especially if it is perceived to cause potential harm or offense to the other person (Gurgun et al., 2022).

These moralistic worldviews and collectivist notions interplay with other cultural components like *amor propio* (Chan & Litam, 2021). Considerations of being shamed and *amor propio* are embedded among Filipinos: Gong and coauthors (2003), as cited in Chan and Litam (2021), note that these are related to the East Asian notions of saving face. Shame or *hiya* is associated with fear of losing face, while *amor propio* is linked with self-esteem and the desire to maintain social acceptance (Chan & Litam,2021). They explained that to experience *amor propio* would make a Filipino a subject of gossip, which is considered shameful. Gurgun and collaborators (2022) explained that people monitor and manage their self-presentation in social environments to create positive impressions in the eyes of others, even to the extent of avoiding controversial topics. Furthermore, the more a culture sees corrective action as deviation from what is socially desirable or normative, the less motivated people are to challenge and correct false information online.

Information behavior comes with its social-scale consequences on individuals. About 61% of millennials from the US get their news from Facebook (DiFranzo & Gloria-Garcia, 2017). This impacts their political self-expression, attitudes, actions, information-seeking practices, and voting behavior (DiFranzo & Gloria-Garcia, 2017). Propaganda, disinformation, and misinformation inflame echo chambers and impact behavior, making room for more social ills (Qureshi et al., 2021). Put simply, information behavior influences people's interactions with society and vice versa.

Homophily and partisan source affiliation

Other possible factors emerge in the display of reticence online. One possible factor is homophily, or the human tendency to jump into circles with the same perspectives and opinions (Gillani et al., 2018), therefore localizing information transmission (McPherson et al., 2001). This phenomenon is evident on social networks, even amplifying echo chambers that trample on the quality and diversity of discourse (Gillani et al., 2018; Cinelli et al., 2021). These *closed spaces* are often subliminally formed through similarities in background (e.g., age, race, educational attainment). Homophily also transpires offline and extends to other personal relationships (McPherson et al., 2001). News sharers account for characteristics that may not be fixed, apparent, or defined by distinct social categories (e.g., political dispositions, socioeconomic status, personalities, or interests) (Kim & Ihm, 2020).

In connection with homophily, the partisan source affiliation of online users can induce reticence. Such affiliation happens when news audiences get information from sources with the same ideological leaning as theirs. Kim and Ihm (2020) found that news showing a personal similarity with the audience is more likely to be shared by users on symmetrical social media (individuals' social distance is mutually equivalent [Paul & Friginal, 2019]) than on asymmetrical. The latter operates on the assumption that audiences do not have personal feelings for them due to the difficulty in assessment and management. Gillani and colleagues (2018) support this observation, saying that affective polarization (individuals' evident, strong negative emotions toward another) taints civic discourse as it allows the sidestepping of the rational exchange of ideas.

Media portrayal of subjects can induce an emotion (like or dislike) that readers can project toward the subject (Wu & Shen 2020), especially on issues with high politicization and for audiences with political leaning. Gillani and collaborators (2018) found that highly politicized issues and concerns tend to strengthen polarities and group identities, with interest in

politics being a determinant of polarization (Melki & Sekeris, 2019). Affiliation with certain sources affirms the stance of news audiences and, consequently, divides them further.

Online polarization as the 'habitat' of reticence

Communities where fake news burgeons and echo chambers border them exist (Zimmer et al., 2019). Delimiting the spread of information provides opportunities for ideological polarization to occur (primarily when public opinion is classified into drastically opposing viewpoints). Often, ideological polarization emerges in homophilous communities where negative views are being quashed (Aida et al., 2020) and false information can thrive.

The prevalence of polarization and echo chambers, which sidelines challenging viewpoints (Aida et al., 2020) and drives false information to circulate (Narayanan et al., 2018), could be attributed to algorithms (DiFranzo & Gloria-Garcia, 2017; Aida et al., 2020), online information behavior like homophily (McPherson et al., 2001), or status (Kim & Ihm, 2020) and affirmation from personal leanings (Messing & Westwood 2012; DiFranzo & Gloria-Garcia, 2017).

Researchers believe, though, that *passiveness* (a concept almost synonymous with reticence) can buttress SMP and hinder the reach of information. Echo chambers and homophilous communities also become the habitat for reticence to thrive. In the case of the spread of false information, reticence in correcting these falsehoods can hamper the spread of factual information (Romero et al., 2011). Reticence may also be a free ticket for "false" information to circulate. Hence, researchers think the underexplored variable of reticence becomes worth studying given observations that some news audiences showcase difficulties in rectifying false information in echo chambers and homophilous online communities. What may also be necessary is to understand the causes of reticence and how this behavior may affect ideological polarization.

Theoretical framework

There is an inadequacy in exploring the adverse outcomes created by communities bordered by echo chambers (Qureshi et al., 2020). Causes and consequences of SMP may be better grasped through two theoretical anchors: the Muted Group Theory and the Cognitive Dissonance Theory.

Cultural anthropologist Edwin Ardener and feminist researcher Shirley Ardener developed the Muted Group Theory (in Meares et al., 2004). This communication theory states that there is an inequality in language wherein people from marginalized cohorts are unable to express themselves, silenced by dominant groups that somewhat have greater control over language. The dynamics between subdominant and dominant groups underscore unequal participation, wherein muted groups respond by remaining engaged or resorting to reticence and apathy (Meares et al., 2004; Barkman, 2018). This may cause the mislaying or perversion of information that could strengthen polarization in the long run (Qureshi et al., 2020).

For its part, Leon Festinger's Cognitive Dissonance theory holds that people are more inclined to accept reaffirming information because it conveys positive emotions (Qureshi et al., 2020). People naturally seek consistent information (Spohr, 2017); reticence to correct false information may stem from dissonance, driven by the human tendency to seek information that aligns with preexisting beliefs.. This leads to persistent polarized behavior (Qureshi et al., 2020).

The above theories being said, social media polarization has seen some news audiences become reticent, allowing themselves to be muted by dominant parties in echo chambers and homophilous communities, and accepting the false information as a form of cognitive dissonance (even if inadvertent). These theoretical lenses may be starting points for understanding the dynamics of reticence in the universe of social media polarization and fake news propagation.

Methods and design

This study investigated why some users become reticent to publicly correct false information in their echo chambers. Researchers here employed a qualitative study design, which "investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident" (Yin, 2009, as cited in Farquhar, 2012, p. 3). Given the nature of reticence (i.e., staying reserved and not interacting), this behavior could be better analyzed based on users' reasoning, perspectives, lived experiences, and the possible outcomes (or lack thereof) when refusing to rectify false information publicly.

Research participants were social media users from Metro Manila (the capital region of the Philippines), who were likely frequent users of social media. Through criterion and referral sampling, participants were eligible to participate if: a) they limit news sources on social media primarily to those whom/which share the same beliefs, opinions, and ideologies as theirs; and b) they encounter false information on their feed from any source and do not correct them in public (e.g., comment section). The researchers interviewed eight Filipino social media users (initially there were nine participants, one of which belonged to the older age group, but her interview answers revealed later on that she did not qualify for the second criterion.). All respondents were aged 18-to-26 years old (six of them are female). All eight participants own Facebook and Instagram accounts, but six of them primarily use Facebook for browsing news [*see Table 1*].

Table 1. Demographic and social media profiles of respondents

Age	**Males (N)**	**Females (N)**	**Total**
18-26	2	6	8
Social media platform	**Platforms used (N)**	**Platforms most used for browsing news (N)**	
Facebook	8	6	
Twitter	7	1	
YouTube	6	0	
Instagram	8	0	
TikTok	5	1	

Source: Robotfoto or demographic profile sheets

Researchers employed a two-part questionnaire, first using a *robotfoto* that asked respondents' demographic and social media profiles. Afterwards, the actual key informant interviews (KIIs) were done while using an *aide memoire* (interview guide). *Aide memoire* questions are based on the related literature, including Keaten and Kelly's (2000) six-component model.

Given that this research was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic (January 2021 to February 2022), participants were recruited online through a posted publication material (*pubmat*) that carried a Google Form link. The Google Meet video conferencing app was used in the KIIs, which averaged about 45 minutes. Researchers secured research ethics clearance from a Philippine journalism school's institutional review board (with approval number JRNERC-202122-47). The *pubmat* contained participant information sheets and informed consent forms, which all participants signed before being interviewed. Respondents' identities were assigned codes (e.g., P1, P2). Researchers transcribed these interviews themselves, as these transcripts and video recordings were kept and encrypted in the data storage website Figshare.

Researchers combined inductive and deductive thematic analyses (TA) to code and thematize interview answers and interpret respondents' patterns of thought (Braun & Clarke, 2017). Since reticence emerged as unstudied in journalism studies, inductive TA allowed more flexibility by analyzing themes that occurred in the interviews (Braun & Clarke, 2017). Deductive TA then guided researchers' analysis of interview answers with aid from the related literature, particularly *a priori codes* derived from the six-component model of Keaten and Kelly (2000). Arranged data from transcripts alongside observational field notes were analyzed and corroborated before distinguishing constructs and deriving solid conclusions. Through this approach, retracing concepts learned, forming new ones, and defining relationships among categories became possible (Suter, 2012). Researchers validated the themes and sub-themes that emerged from the interview transcripts using the critical friend technique.

Findings

Major considerations for reticent dispositions

The breadth of respondents' interview answers yielded three major themes—*considerations*—to explain their reticence when false information is shared in groups. These themes (see Table 2) are the following: (1) *Relational considerations* in which reticent users regard family and kinship dynamics; (2) *Proximal considerations* or the level of association between the reticent user and the views depicted in false information; and (3) *Cognitive and Emotional considerations* which refer to the participants impressions of the source of false information, and emotions toward false information and publicly correcting them. These main considerations indicate avoidance of being called out where others may give critical attention to a person's intolerable acts or mistakes; avoidance of conflict where the clash of different standpoints causes argument; avoidance of cutting ties or putting an end to relationships.

Table 2. Considerations for reticence and its indications

Reasons for being reticent		Indications of reticence		
Themes	**Manifestations**	**Avoidance of call out**	**Avoidance of conflict**	**Avoidance of cutting ties**
Relational Considerations	Closeness in relationship Familial ties Respect for elders	✓	✓	✓
Proximal Considerations	Divergent views Preferred topic Preferred medium		✓	✓
Cognitive and Emotional Considerations	Impression Perceived incompetence Helplessness Anxiety and fear Shyness	✓	✓	

Source: Key informant interviews

Relational considerations: Degree of closeness to indicate reticent behavior

Relational considerations manifest in the level of one's closeness, the (absence of) motivation to correct, difficulty or ease in correcting family members, and their respect for elders. This kind of consideration gets manifested in three ways:

– *Closeness in relationship*: most of the participants pointed out that the degree of closeness with the individual who posted or shared false information is a major determinant. One participant (P3) said choosing whom to interact with gave her a sense of control over the conversation. This participant's reticence on this score indicates the want to evade conflict for the sake of keeping relationships intact. On the contrary, limited closeness can stir reticence. Another participant revealed that he does not feel responsible for correcting those he is not close with:

"I'm not responsible for their stupidity. For me, if they choose to believe, that's on them. What I care about is for those close to me not to look stupid." [P4]

– *Familial ties*: familial ties also influence respondents' reticence. These ties can either make it easier to correct other people online (P1, P3, P4) because participants feel comfortable opening up to them, or more difficult because of family members' expectations (P2) and strong influence over beliefs. P2, for example, felt that she grew up ("*doon ako lumaki*" in Filipino) in that filter bubble and she thus ruminates on whether or not family members might call her out for a reaction. Due to this, P2 ends up scrolling down her Facebook news feed.

– *Respect for elders*: age is also a heavy influence on participants' decision-making to become reticent. Participants believe older people do not take information from younger ones. P7 said those who are older carry pride and think they know more than younger audiences. Some participants get intimidated when arguing with elders who appear more knowledgeable. This response relates to nuances of Filipino cultural practices, like respect for elders (P4). For example, P2 shared: *"I didn't argue anymore because it might destroy our relationship and I might be deemed disrespectful to elders".* This reasoning indicates the reticent individual's worry of either being called out for being "disrespectful" or severing the relationship when conflict arises in the process of attempting correction.

Other participants believe those from the same age group are easier to communicate with.

Discussions are relatively healthier because members of Gen Z are known to check facts more frequently (P8). However, it would still depend on how firmly they hold on to their beliefs and disregard those of others ("*wala akong paki-alam sa'yo*" in Filipino [P7]). "Fanatics" are very difficult to correct because of their strong inclination to believe their "idols" (P8). Others find people who believe in false information funny (P4) or shameful (P7).

Proximal considerations: viewpoints and preferences that stir reticent behavior

Participants consider their proximal stance from others' viewpoints, their preferred news topic and medium for communicating. On this score, reticence gets shown in the following:

– *Divergent views:* participants' positions toward others' viewpoints are interlaced with their initiative to seek updates or verification from other sources. All participants said they empathize more with posts holding viewpoints similar to theirs because they believe them to be more credible, able to validate what they know. Such viewpoints are perceived as relatable, and appear more frequently on their feed (P4). P4 also said that bias is normal. There is also empathy for those who share information from sources they follow but not for those who just share opinions (P8).

Some participants become irritated when they face views different from theirs, especially when the posts are problematic or not fact-based. P3 explained a reason for the dissociation with those who believe and post opposing and unverified views:

"It's [stressful] to deal with them. So, I prefer to just keep people who are on the same page as we believe… [I]f your opinion is not based on anything factual, it says a lot about you as a person, the values you uphold. So, I don't like to be associated with people who have problematic stances."

For other participants, having to confront opposing views is "toxic" (P1) and anxiety-inducing, especially when they are lengthy (P2). P1 said it is better to disengage to avoid the "toxic" task of having to correct the person, indicating that it is better to step away from the possibility of conflict.

Despite the frustration over false information still spreading and many believing them when there are fact-checking websites, pity still arose in some participants:

"I pity them because maybe they are not getting sufficient education or their decisions are merely being influenced by their families." [P8]

Participants' initiative to seek updates or verification from other sources is generally low, as five respondents indicated. For example, P5 does not have any initiative at all and simply waits for updates while scrolling through their news feed. When participants feel the need to look for more up-to-date information, they will cross-check with sources they trust. Cross-checking, said P2, is "to validate mostly my curiosity or second thoughts about what the popular media is giving us". Some only cross-check when they themselves share false information. P3 searches a news item online to check if the information and her understanding of it is right, then shares the correct information.

– *Preferred topic*: another consideration that is proximal is how participants feel toward the subject in discussion. Participants consider the extent of their knowledge on a certain topic when considering whether to rectify false information or not. Most of the news topics participants avoid online are politics, business and economics, history, and religion. Politics, which is also the subject of most false information they encounter, is the topic they least prefer to correct because of the current political climate of the Philippines at the time this paper

was written (the May 2022 national elections), where many were vocal about how they disagreed with one's candidate choice. That is why some respondents find politics a sensitive topic (P8) that provokes difficult, heated discussions or debates (P5), hinting at avoidance of conflict and thus, reticence. Consequently, respondents prefer topics related to sociological issues, arts, science and health, weather, sports, and pop culture. One's familiarity with the subject (P1 & P6) is why participants prefer to only engage with certain topics that feel close to them.

Overall, the perceived worthiness of a topic affects how participants would react; some participants would not comment if the topic was not valuable to them. P2 applies this as a barometer:

"I evaluate if this (post) is worth my time; is this information that important for me to comment or not?"

– *Preferred medium*: The medium where the message will be delivered affects their decision to correct false information or not. Despite their reticence, almost all participants (except for P7) correct privately, in person, or online. One participant (P6) did not correct publicly prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, corrected others at the onset of the pandemic, and then stopped in mid-2021.

Almost all participants (except P7) usually encounter false information on Facebook, others on TikTok. False information particularly comes from Facebook pages, groups, and private individuals—its algorithms push users' topics of interest (P8). With the prevalence of false information, majority of the participants have expressed that they prefer to correct it privately to avoid shaming the source. In relation, it is easier for some and more convincing for others, to correct in person because one can see their interlocutor's reactions and check if the receiver is paying attention. In contrast, some participants prefer to correct publicly because they have no personal relationship with the source of the false information and make others in the comment section aware of it. The downside is that communicating online is more prone to misunderstandings (P6). Nevertheless, it may be easier to correct online because it protects the identity of users and thus avoids labeling (P2).

Cognitive and emotional considerations: emotions sway one's reticent disposition

These considerations cover certain notions and emotions when they encounter false information, affecting their decision to publicly rectify such falseness. Here, participants gave five specific considerations that reflect how cognition and emotion drive their reticence.

– *Impression*: participants' reasons for their reticence and conditions if they choose to correct also depend on how they view those who share false information. Participants are aware that correcting is important despite their conscious decision to avoid doing so. For the most part, they argue that it would be a useless endeavor to speak words that would fall on deaf ears. For example, P3 sees correcting as a "battle" not too concerning to take up arms:

"[I]t's important, but you also have to choose your battles because sometimes, many people correct others and then they will not believe them. So, what's the use?"

Many participants already carry assumptions about the discussion's outcome and perceive that others are close-minded, unyielding to correction, too lazy to verify, or, as P3 said, egotistic. Egotism arises when one carries a high ego, "they believe what they want to believe even if it's not true" (P3). Some assume they might simply be misunderstood. Reticent news audiences consider what the person being corrected would feel, concerned that the latter might

appear foolish or react in a hostile manner. Such a reaction, P4 explained, might arise because "they feel they are being put to shame [on] their own wall."

– *Perceived incompetence*. Communication skills also play a role for the participants, with majority of them believing they can effectively deliver their messages. However, most of them think they still need to enhance their communication skills to correct false information (thus, the feeling that they are less competent persists). Some of these skills include *improving how to approach others* (P2 & P5), *communicating with strangers* (P4), *practicing how not to be taken negatively* (P6) or *angrily* (P4) as their intention is only to *correct* (P7), and *refining their fluency in English* (P8). An example of such perceived skill inadequacy comes from one participant:

"I am honest that I am not that good at communicating especially in English because I am not fluent, while some people who argue are fluent in English. It looks like Filipinos are "grammar Nazis." [P8]

– *Helplessness*: when asked if the participants feel that they lose control of how the conversation will go, the reasons stem from their impression of others, ability to convince, and closeness to the receiver (P4). Three-fourths of participants have expressed that they sometimes lose control over the conversation. One participant (P2) said she experienced feeling powerless in convincing the one being corrected, while another participant (P7) was unsure how the conversation would go. This sense of helplessness stems from the receiver's close-mindedness and the participant's belief that they have no control over conversations with certain groups: individuals they are not close to (P4), elders who appear more knowledgeable (P2), or those who believe false information because it is shared more frequently than accurate information (P5).

– *Anxiety and fear*: participants feel anxious about publicly rectifying false information, and in relation, fear is also present. Some participants expressed anxiety about dealing with false information online, such as uncertainty about how to respond to a 'keyboard warrior' (P2) or fear of becoming the subject of discussion on Facebook (P8). The researchers also asked the possible reasons why participants (do not) fear correcting false information. Reticent individuals are afraid to make a mistake (P3, P8) and have others question how certain they are to tell who is right or wrong (P5, P8) or if they themselves have sufficient information (P8).

However, their fear of publicly correcting lies more in the prospective negative outcomes. There is fear that the argument might go viral, which can cause stress (P8), or cause participants to be judged (P2), shamed online and exposed on Facebook (P7), "canceled" (P8), or worse, "hacked" or even "red-tagged" (P8). According to Tuazon and Torres (2020), red-tagging or red-baiting, is "a form of harassment or persecution of a person identified or suspected as a communist sympathizer" (p. 22). This emotion implies fear of conflict, as expressed by P8 when she explained why she corrects in private:

"More people are involved online, whether you know them or not, since it is public. If an argument escalates, it can get stressful because it would be more widespread, also considering the fear that the argument might go viral."

– *Shyness*: when addressing allegedly false information, participants' relationships and level of closeness influence their reluctance to speak up. For instance, one participant (P1) noted that being close to the source makes her hesitant to correct them, as she fears being perceived as self-righteous. Others are shy to correct those whom they are not close with (P8), especially strangers, because there is no guarantee they will listen (P6). Some participants are

embarrassed to make a mistake (P2) or turn out to be wrong when correcting others (P6). This contradicting imagined scenario poses avoidance of conflict, like what P8 expressed:

"There is a possibility that when I say something, it might only be a one-sided perspective and they could say something that would counter what I said."

Other means to express

Although the participants are reticent to correct false information publicly, they resort to other means to express themselves. Some participants (P2, P8) react to posts because it is the most convenient way to express themselves. Others report the post because there is no assurance that the receiver will listen and doing this would not embarrass the participant on Facebook (P7). One participant unfriends, unfollows, or blocks them. For some, they hope that others (P2, P4) or the "right people" (P3) will do the correction.

Despite not correcting publicly, participants are aware that it could affect others and the truth – that is, false information would continue to spread, and it would affect more people. Two participants believe that belief in false information could determine wrong decisions. One of the respondents said the following about people making choices based on false information:

"We will end up having more problems, especially in politics, because you (those who believe in false information) end up electing someone who is problematic and will further ruin the society, the country. So in the end, it will also backfire [on] them through the choices they make." [P3]

A participant (P2) also expressed her concern over the possibility that not rectifying publicly false information might cause further division among people. She noted that in the Philippines, viewpoints, substantially on politics, already differ. The effects of not correcting will also be present in the journalism field—the decision to withhold corrections would cause a lack of trust in journalists and would blur the truth (rendering that truth "subjective") (P2).

Discussion and conclusion

This qualitative study sought to determine reasons for online news consumers' reticence and reluctance to correct false information online. Findings from this interview-based study of eight reticent young social media users (who do not publicly correct false information) show that reticence is dependent on a web of factors besides Keaten and Kelly's (2000) six components of their model of reticence. Research participants' reticence is tied to three sets of considerations—*relational*, *proximal*, and *cognitive and emotional*—that blend these online news users' approaches to dealing with others and their adherence to some (Filipino) cultural nuances that drive their reticent behaviors.

Dissonant and muted: the barriers of age and tradition

In a sense, some of these findings fit the Cognitive Dissonance and Muted Group theories, with proximal considerations jiving with cognitive dissonance and relational considerations fitting the muted group theory. Findings suggest that reticent individuals experience cognitive dissonance when refusing to publicly correct false information despite knowing the importance of communication and the outcomes of not doing so. The Cognitive Dissonance

theory holds that people are more inclined to settle for what appeases like contradictory notions held at the same time by succumbing to opinion-reinforcing information, hence leading to polarization (Qureshi et al., 2020). So, when online news audiences encounter information that contradict what they know, instead of rectifying what is false, they simply look for reaffirming information for consistency and positive emotions (Spohr, 2017; Qureshi et al., 2020). Findings show that participants resort to another compromise—finding alternatives—to settle this conflict. In both ways of responding to dissonance, polarization could remain because false information is not addressed upfront.

Findings have shown a perceived generational rift among age groups. Participants, aged 20 to 26 years old, expressed that it is a long-respected Filipino tradition to show fastened respect for elders, and the latter take pride in this treatment. Participants believe older people might argue that they are more knowledgeable and experienced. As one participant said, superiority makes older people headstrong, refusing to accept that they are wrong. This observation may stem from the fact that dominant groups, due to their position of power, often fail to recognize the silencing of reticent individuals from younger generations. (Barkman, 2018). Others expressed that their opinions or corrections are often dismissed because of older people's common Filipino reasoning: "*napagdaanan ko na 'yan*" ("Been there, done that"). Issues of power are entangled in cases as such where one party feels they are being silenced (Yi, 2020). These lived experiences from participants fit with the thrust of the Muted Group theory: that there is an inequality wherein sub-dominant groups are somewhat silenced by dominant groups who have more control over language. They are able to create and define the terms, whereas the sub-dominant groups' ideas are less respected, marginalized, stigmatized, or muted (Barkman, 2018).

In Filipino culture, communities have a hierarchical organization that respects status and seniority to maintain order (Mulder, 1994). It explains the deep-rooted value of respect for elders that reticent individuals carry. Relative inequality based on age is a primary trait of the hierarchy that instills in Filipinos an obligation to internalize and not merely reciprocate moral behavior (Mulder, 1994). This is evident in Filipino family structures: family is a double-edged sword. Participants either find it easier to call out belief in false information because of closeness or find it more difficult to call it out because of their family's rigid views and influence over the individual's beliefs. Not being able to obey or "disrespecting" the belief of family members, more so the elders, causes discomfort or shame (Mulder, 1994) for not practicing *pakikisama* (comradeship). Reticent individuals hold back from correcting in order not to risk offending or embarrassing those who post false information (Gurgun et al., 2022). Sessa and colleagues (2020) found that reticent communicators feel empathy for receivers and imagine the possible unpleasant result of displeasing truth. This suggests that *pakikisama* (comradeship) keeps them from correcting because of their utmost regard for the feelings of others (Chan & Litam, 2021). Consequently, opinions get voiced out with much careful deliberation to avoid controversy (Mulder, 1994; Gurgun et. al, 2022).

With careful analysis, reticent news audiences could be characterized as "angrily disengaged", wherein their response to being muted is to withdraw in disconcertment. They may also be characterized as "resigned," wherein they grow apathetic and disengage (Meares et al., 2004, pp. 15–17). Since the subdominant younger group is unable to express their sentiments and correct false information posted or shared by older groups, false information could eventually strengthen polarization (Qureshi et al., 2020). Hierarchy, obligation, immersion in a group, and shared origin are strong identity markers (Mulder, 1994). Relationships and social circles also affect muting opinions (Barkman, 2018).

Homophily's grip on polarization

Reticent individuals become more empathetic toward those with similar views and see those who have different views otherwise. One participant seemed to show stronger outgroup antipathy and did not want to be associated with those who had "problematic stances". In the same way, reticent individuals also think that those who would be corrected might react in a hostile manner toward them. A clear sign of firm, uncompromising beliefs highlights an "us-versus-them" notion that pushes the possibility of empathetic relations with opposing views further away (Lee et al., 2017; Aida et al. 2020). This attitude is characterized by two types of segregation: "ingroup favoritism" for those who share the same ideology and "outgroup antipathy" toward those with opposing beliefs (Lee et al., 2017). This repulsive outlook obstructs civil discussion online and could keep reticent individuals in their echo chambers (Lee et al., 2017; Aida et al., 2020).

This situation makes it unlikely that reticent news audiences would go to great lengths to look for opposing views and diverse news sources, especially with homophily buttressing echo chambers. A participant said not publicly correcting false information would further divide society, pushing groups to believe the opposite of another group's beliefs. Majority of the participants said their decision not to correct depends on the influence of family and their closeness with the person who shared it. They found it easier to communicate with those from the same age group.

These findings also build on existing evidence: associations with those from similar backgrounds and characteristics, including age, localize the spread of information, and restrict diversity (McPherson et al., 2001; Gillani et al., 2018; Cinelli et al., 2021). This phenomenon powers echo chambers because similar perspectives only move in the same circle (Gillani et al., 2018). Additionally, highly politicized topics strengthen group identities in homogeneous circles (Gillani et al., 2018), and then strengthen polarization (Melki & Sekeris, 2019). The study's findings corroborate these: participants find it most difficult to engage with political news because of others' strongly held beliefs, making the situation more difficult to correct wrong views. Reticent individuals avoid arguing over politics because of its controversial nature among Filipinos. The confinement of information is opportunistic for the reinforcement of ideological polarization (Aida et al., 2020).

Building on an existing model of reticence

The findings of this study partially affirmed and challenged Keaten and Kelly (2000) model's six components applied in the context of publicly correcting false information. Keaten and Kelly (2000) said that reticent people are aware that "communication is needed to survive in a social world" (p. 170). The participants, as news audiences, believe that communication is important because it guides them and are fully aware of the result of not publicly correcting false information. Furthermore, most participants said they would consider publicly correcting under given circumstances. This study shows that, in practice, despite these beliefs of reticent news audiences, there are greater considerations, emotions, and beliefs that reticent individuals add to the scale.

Most participants said they are able to deliver their messages, contrary to what Keaten and Kelly (2000) noted about reticent people reporting problems in delivery. However, they believe that they need to improve certain communication skills to publicly rectify false information, particularly how to approach others effectively. Meanwhile, it is said that reticent

communicators experience helplessness. Most of them partly affirm this. However, this inability to control the conversation was mainly attributed to the participants' perceived condition of the receiver, but not necessarily because they view failure as an unavoidable result of talking, as stated in the model.

The reason for the anxiety of reticent communicators was the "fear" of "negative evaluation," as supported by the findings of this research. The common causes of anxiety and fear are being judged and embarrassed, which is common among Filipinos in the cultures of shame (*hiya*) and *amor propio*. They are afraid to make mistakes, be questioned, and be the subject of discussion on social media. *Amor propio* is linked with the fear of being "canceled." Gurgun and coauthors (2022) said facing this sort of cyber aggression or possibility of being ostracized could be a factor for reticence. In relation to social acceptance, a more serious concern is the fear of being "red-tagged."

Keaten and Kelly (2000) said devaluation happens when the value of communication in a personal setting is reduced. The participants are aware that communication is important in addressing misunderstandings. Another way to devalue communication, according to the model, is through shyness: reticent communicators believe they are just the way they are. Shyness in publicly correcting false information stems from the same reason as what causes anxiety and fear: negative evaluation and closeness to the source of false information. For this study, the mere perception of oneself as shy cannot be seen entirely as a reason to avoid publicly correcting false information.

Finally, given the self-perceived incompetence, anxiety, and beliefs of reticent individuals, they withdraw from situations where they need to talk (Keaten & Kelly, 2000). However, this study's participants withdrew from publicly correcting mainly for peace of mind, avoidance of escalating arguments, or the belief that it is not their responsibility to correct certain people.

Apart from the factors that push for withdrawal provided by Keaten and Kelly (2000), the medium of communication affects decisions by reticent news audiences to correct false information. The majority of the participants prefer to correct privately. This preference is primarily due to how open one perceives the receiver to be and the participants' extent of knowledge. The outcomes of participants' experiences with privately correcting others varied: the correction was accepted, completely rejected with the source's views unchanged, or acknowledged but opposing beliefs were still maintained.

The researchers express the limitation that eight participants, especially coming from the same age cohort, may be a small sample size to see other (divergent) experiences of reticent social media news audiences. Recruitment of participants became a challenge for the following reasons: the restrictions of the COVID-19 pandemic in an online education setting; hardships in recruiting online participants from the older cohort of Filipinos; and the difficulty of finding participants who willingly admit experiencing "reticence" given the nature of this kind of behavior. Another limitation of this paper is its focus on political views stemming from political news reportage. We do recognize that reticence by social media news audiences can occur in non-political issues (e.g., sports, entertainment).

The researchers also acknowledge that the cultural nuances that arise in this study are limited to the participants from a specific geo-cultural setting, the Philippines. Nevertheless, we think the different themes and sub-themes that surfaced in this paper may emerge with different sample groups. Yi (2020) emphasized that while culture and language inevitably have a part to play in any sort of discourse, sociocultural origins should not be the default attribu-

tion for one's reticence. She added that culture will provide context to reticent individuals' reasoning, but it is encouraged to study it in light of situation-specific factors, local contexts, and individual narratives (Yi, 2020).

It is also beyond the scope of this study to address what reticent individuals' alternative responses specifically do to the propagation of (false) information. Nonetheless, this research reveals the factors affecting the decision of news audiences to be reticent to publicly correct false information from their social media feeds. This study also humbly provides a groundwork for an underexplored variable in news consumption. Through the insights and experiences of interviewed reticent news audiences, this research wove the existence of false information in echo chambers with the reasons behind the reticence of these interviewed online news audiences.

Future research can quantitatively measure the hierarchical value of factors affecting reticence and the specific effects of reticence on polarization. Reticence can also be studied in different cultural contexts of journalism's engagement with news audiences. Studies on how newsrooms can help minimize reticence online and the possible need for psychological and cultural solutions are also recommended. Nonetheless, this research has provided a unique starting point for the underexplored niche of reticence vis-à-vis the thriving false information inside echo chambers and how this reticence–false information dynamic could further ideological polarization.

Contributor Roles Taxonomy (CRediT) declaration by authors

Authors 1 and 2 – study conceptualization; investigation; formal quantitative analysis; writing, original draft; writing, final draft; data validation

Author 3 – writing, original draft; editing; writing, final draft; data validation

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors. This research also received no funding.

References

Aida, M., Hirakura, N., & Kawashima, K. (2020). *A model of polarization on social media caused by empathy and repulsion* [Conference paper]. 2020 International Conference on Emerging Technologies for Communications. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/346556757_A_Model_of_Polarization_on_Social_Media_Caused_by_Empathy_and_Repulsion

Barkman, L. (2018). Muted Group Theory: A tool for hearing marginalized voices. *Priscilla Papers*, *32*(4), 3-7.

Beam, M., & Kosicki, G. (2014). Personalized news portals: filtering systems and increased news exposure. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly, 91*(1), 59–77. https://doi.org/10.1177/1077699013514411

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2017). Thematic analysis. *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, *12*(3), 297-298. https://doi.org/10.1080/17439760.2016.1262613

Campante, F., & Hojman, D. (2013). Media and polarization: evidence from the introduction of broadcast TV in the United States. *Journal of Public Economics, 100,* 79–92. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jpubeco.2013.02.006

Casemajor, N., Couture, S., Delfin, M., Goerzen, M., & Delfanti, A. (2015). Non-participation in digital media: toward a framework of mediated political action. *Media, Culture & Society, 37*(6), 850-866. https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443715584098

Chan, C. D., & Litam, S. D. A. (2021). Mental health equity of Filipino communities in COVID-19: A framework for practice and advocacy. *The Professional Counselor*, *11*(1), 73–85.

Cinelli, M., De Francisci Morales, G., Galeazzi, A., Quattrociocchi, W., & Starnini, M. (2021). The echo chamber effect on social media. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, *118*(9), e2023301118. https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2023301118

DiFranzo, D., & Gloria-Garcia, K. (2017). Filter bubbles and fake news. *XRDS: Crossroads, The ACM Magazine for Students, 23*(3), 32–35. https://doi.org/10.1145/3055153

Fletcher, R., Cornia, A., & Nielsen, R. K. (2019). How polarized are online and offline news audiences? A comparative analysis of twelve countries. *The International Journal of Press/Politics, 25*(2), 169–195. https://doi.org/10.1177/1940161219892768

Farquhar, J. (2012). *Case study research for business.* SAGE Publications.

Gillani, N., Yuan, A., Saveski, M., Vosoughi, S., & Roy, D. (2018, April 23-27). Me, my echo chamber, and I: introspection on social media polarization [Conference paper]. *WWW '18: Proceedings of the 2018 World Wide Web Conference,* 823–831. https://doi.org/10.1145/3178876.3186130

Gurgun, S., Arden-Close, E., Phalp, K., & Ali, R. (2022). Online silence: why do people not challenge others when posting misinformation? *Internet Research,* 33(5), 1928–1948. https://doi.org/10.1108/intr-06-2022-0407

Keaten, J. A., Kelly, L., & Finch, C. (1997). Development of an instrument to measure reticence. *Communication Quarterly*, *45*(1), 37–54. https://doi.org/10.1080/01463379709370043

Keaten, J. A., Kelly, L., & Finch, C. (2000). Effectiveness of the Penn State program in changing beliefs associated with reticence. *Communication Education*, *49*(2), 134–145. https://doi.org/10.1080/03634520009379201

Keaten, J. A., & Kelly, L. (2000). Reticence: An affirmation and revision. *Communication Education*, *49*(2), 165–177. https://doi.org/10.1080/03634520009379203

Kim, E. M., & Ihm, J. (2020). Online news sharing in the face of mixed audiences: Context collapse, homophily, and types of social media. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media, 64*(5), 756–776. https://doi.org/10.1080/08838151.2020.1835429

Kitchens, B., Johnson, S. L., & Gray, P. (2020). Understanding echo chambers and filter bubbles: the impact of social media on diversification and partisan shifts in news consumption. *MIS Quarterly, 44*(4), 1619–1649. https://doi.org/10.25300/misq/2020/16371

Lee, C., Shin, J., & Hong, A. (2017). Does social media use really make people politically polarized? Direct and indirect effects of social media use on political polarization in South Korea. *Telematics and Informatics, 35(*1), 245–254. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tele.2017.11.005

Lippmann, W. (1922). *Public Opinion*. Harcourt. https://wps.pearsoncustom.com/wps/media/objects/2429/2487430/pdfs/lippmann.pdf

Lutz, C., & Hoffmann, C. P. (2017). The dark side of online participation: exploring non-passive and negative participation. *Information, Communication & Society, 20*(6), 876–897. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118x.2017.1293129

McPherson, M., Smith-Lovin, L., & Cook, J. M. (2001). Birds of a feather: homophily in social networks. *Annual Review of Sociology, 27*(1), 415–444. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.soc.27.1.415

Meares, M. M., Oetzel, J. G., Torres, A., Derkacs, D., & Ginossar, T. (2004). Employee mistreatment and muted voices in the culturally diverse workplace. *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, *32*(1), 4–27. https://doi.org/10.1080/0090988042000178121

Melki, M., & Sekeris, P. G. (2019). Media-driven polarization. Evidence from the US. *Economics: The Open-Access, Open-Assessment E-Journal, 13*(2019-34), 1-13.

Messing, S., & Westwood, S. J. (2012). Selective exposure in the age of social media: endorsements trump partisan source affiliation when selecting news online. *Communication Research, 41*(8)*,* 1042–1063. https://doi.org/10.1177/0093650212466406

Morozov, E. (2011). *The net delusion: The dark side of Internet freedom*. Public Affairs.

Mulder, N. (1994). Filipino culture and social analysis. *Philippine Studies*, *42*(1), 80–90.

Narayanan, V., Barash, V., Kelly, J., Kollanyi, B., Neudert, L., & Howard, P. N. (2018). Polarization, partisanship and junk news consumption over social media in the US. *OII Project on Computational Propaganda*. Retrieved from https://demtech.oii.ox.ac.uk/research/posts/polarization-partisanship-and-junk-news-consumption-over-social-media-in-the-us/

Paul, J., & Friginal, E. (2019). The effects of symmetric and asymmetric social networks on second language communication. *Computer Assisted Language Learning, 32*(5–6), 587–618. https://doi.org/10.1080/09588221.2018.1527364

Prasetya, H., & Murata, T. (2020). A model of opinion and propagation structure polarization in social media. *Computational Social Networks, 7,* article 2. https://doi.org/10.1186/s40649-019-0076-z

Qureshi, I., Bhatt, B., Gupta, S., & Tiwari, A. A. (2020). Causes, symptoms and consequences of social media induced polarization (SMIP). *Information Systems Journal, 11*. https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/pb-assets/assets/13652575/ISJ_SMIP_CFP-1586861685850.pdf

Romero, D., Galuba, W., Asur, S., & Huberman, B. (2011). Influence and passivity in social media. In: Gunopulos, D., Hofmann, T., Malerba, D., Vazirgiannis, M. (eds), *Machine learning and knowledge discovery in databases.* ECML PKDD 2011. Lecture Notes in Computer Science, vol 6913. Heidelberg: Springer.

Sessa, I., D'Errico, F., Poggi, I., & Leone, G. (2020). Attachment styles and communication of displeasing truths. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 11, 1065.

Spohr, D. (2017). Fake news and ideological polarization: Filter bubbles and selective exposure on social media. *Business Information Review*, *34*(3), 150–160. https://doi.org/10.1177/0266382117722446

Suter, W. N. (2012). Qualitative data, analysis, and design. *In Introduction to educational research: A critical thinking approach* (pp. 342-386). SAGE Publications, Inc. https://www.doi.org/10.4135/9781483384443

Tuazon, R., & Torres, T. P. (2020). Digital threats and attacks on the Philippine alternative press. In S. Jamil (ed.), *Handbook of research on combating threats to media freedom and journalist safety* (pp. 1–22). IGI-Global.

Wu, Y., & Shen, F. (2020). Negativity makes us polarized: A longitudinal study of media tone and opinion polarization in Hong Kong. *Asian Journal of Communication, 30*(3-4), 199–220. https://doi.org/10.1080/01292986.2020.1784968

Xenos, M., Vromen, A., & Loader, B. D. (2014). The great equalizer? Patterns of social media use and youth political engagement in three advanced democracies. *Information, Communication & Society, 17*(2), 151-167. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2013.871318

Yi, J. (2020) Reticence as participation: Discourses of resistance from Asians in America, *Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies, 42*(2), 120-140, DOI: 10.1080/10714413.2020.1757959

Zimmer, F., Scheibe, K., Stock, M., & Stock, W. (2019, January 3-5). *Echo chambers and filter bubbles of fake news in social media: man-made or produced by algorithms?* [Conference paper]. 8th Annual Arts, Humanities, Social Sciences & Education Conference, Honolulu, Hawai'i. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/331071348_Echo_Chambers_and_Filter_Bubbles_of_Fake_News_in_Social_Media_Man-made_or_produced_by_algorithms

Book review

Romanian Journal of Communication and Public Relations
vol. 26, no. 2 (62) / July 2024, **79-81**
ISSN: 1454-8100/ E-ISSN: 2344-5440

Florența TOADER*

Book Review Digital Fever: *Taming the Big Business of Disinformation*, by Bernhard Poerksen, Palgrave Macmillan, 2022, 219 pages

The book titled *Digital Fever: Taming the Big Business of Disinformation*, written by Bernard Poerksen offers a critical analysis of the many crises public discourse faces in the digital age. In addressing the shifting media landscape heavily influenced by the advent of social media, the book reflects on trends like digital disinformation, emotional manipulation, or the erosion of traditional media gatekeepers. Poerksen is a media theorist, who teaches Media studies at the University of Tu¨bingen, and whose works on the new media age have largely been appreciated in Germany. The book in question scrutinizes significant issues in today's emotionally lead social media world by discussing a "decisive change in the global organization of information, the switch from a more strongly audience – and context-specific segmentation to integrative confrontation" (p. 6).

In the opening section of the book, titled *Clash of Codes: or the Age of Indiscreet Media*, Poerksen discusses the way the digital media has transformed communication and society, by centering the debate on the dissolution of boundaries between the private and public life, which leads to a constant state of "digital fever", the guiding metaphor of the book. This "fever" is brought by the advent of an indiscrete media, that has created an environment where information and events cand go viral instantly by means of emotional contagion. This leads to a permanent state of excitement. In this new media landscape, traditional gatekeepers, like journalists, are no longer the sole actors who have the control to decide what topic is deemed newsworthy. As the author notably writes, „the fourth power of traditional journalism has been joined by the fifth power of the networked Many" (p. XII).

This leads to a world where information is shared without the traditional editorial oversight, allowing rumors, half-truths, and fake news to spread as factual news. Moreso, the line between information and emotion is often blurred, as well as private and public spheres merge in a general atmosphere of indiscretion and exposure. The fragmented and polarized nature of social media is also scrutinized as the author notes the clash of values, perceptions, and ideologies that happens online and is then translated in offline action. The coexistence of several viewpoints in the online environment facilitates an atmosphere of constant irritation that can lead to a clash of communication codes.

* National University of Political Studies and Public Administration (Romania),
florenta.toader@comunicare.ro, https://orcid.org/0009-0004-6321-4396

The book is then structured in five chapters, each addressing a crisis that the modern media landscape is facing: the crisis of truth, the crisis of discourse, the crisis of authority, the crisis of complacency, and the crisis of reputation. The first crisis, labelled the one of truth, implies that digital platforms foster environments of suspicion, misinformation, and confirmation bias. In the author's words, "certainties have increasingly become questionable in a time of falsified images and videos, hired trolls, secret service activities, forged profiles, social bots and perfectly orchestrated propaganda" (p. 9).

The crisis of discourse is generated by the loss of traditional gatekeepers, such as journalists, or media editors. As a result, a more chaotic and polarized public discourse emerges, where the lines between fact and emotion are blurred, and the power to shape narratives has shifted to a networked public, rather than traditional media alone. This shift creates a public space where radical discourse can flourish and hate speech can be spread with ease under the protection of anonymity or with the help of algorithms.

The crisis of authority is described by the loss of control over information in the digital age which makes it difficult for public figures to maintain control over their image. This challenges their authority, as their personal flaws are exposed and publicly scrutinized, thus making them into ordinary individuals. Poerksen notes that the demand for transparency has led to a crisis of authority where traditional leaders and institutions are increasingly questioned and delegitimized.

When discussing the crisis of complacency, Poerksen criticizes the concept of filter bubbles, conceptualized by Pariser (2011), by arguing that this is an oversimplified idea that does not accurately reflect on the diversity of ideas that coexist and sometimes clash online. In fact, the author notes, the digital environment is characterized by a "simultaneity of the disparate" (p. 92.), where people both search for views that confirm their ideas, but also are faced with opposing viewpoints that they cannot avoid. This leads to a "fitler clash" (p. 89) where opposing worldviews and opinions collide with greater intensity than ever before. As a result, the digital world disrupts the sense of security and order, making individuals and societies more susceptible to emotional manipulation, disinformation, and constant exposure to global crises.

Lastly, the digital age fostered a crisis of reputation by providing a platform for anyone, no matter how obscure, to raise into the spotlight and be trusted, or having their reputation harmed by others. In discussing each of these five crises, the author makes use of several real-life examples meant to exemplify the extent to which the current digital media landscape has changed, moving from a "media democracy to an outrage democracy" (p. 10).

The book closes with a section that proposes a debate on the concept of the "editorial society" (p. 147), dubbed by the author a utopian concept, in which journalistic ethics and responsibility are adopted by the broader public. In the editorial society, citizens adopt the values traditionally associated with good journalism, such as truth orientation, skepticism, proportionality, and transparency, and they critically assess how they communicate to make sure the public discourse is fact driven, balanced and respects ethical guidelines.

According to Poerksen, education plays an important role in this process as these principles should be taught in schools and universities, to create a framework that applies not only to journalists, but to all citizens engaged in the public sphere with the help of social media. The author anticipates possible objections to this approach – the promotion of an elitist or paternalistic model where journalists or media professionals dictate norms for public communication; or that this vision is too idealistic and impractical given the sensationalist and profit-driven nature of modern media. However, Poerksen insists, discussing and striving for these ideals is necessary for improving public discourse and combating misinformation.

Overall, this book is an essential read for any scholar, student or professional interested in an in depth understanding of the media landscape in today's world. The book brings several elements of novelty to a debate started by media studies scholars such as Sustein (2001), Fuchs (2014), Couldry and Hepp (2016), or Pariser (2011). One element of novelty is the idea of the editorial society, albeit a utopian view, a necessary discussion regarding the need for further education and accountability for everyone who uses social media. Another notable idea is the nuanced view over the debate on filter bubbles, by the addition of the concept of filter clash, that describes how digital media exposes individuals to conflicting viewpoints. Poerksen also offers an insightful analysis of how digital platforms profit from emotional manipulation, as a result of the „emotionalization" of content, thus adding depth to the discussion on the characteristics of digital capitalism.

The book provides a reflection on several largely debated subjects in the scientific literature, such as the impact of technology on human perception and behavior, the way social media influences and transforms the public sphere, or the way media platforms shape how we understand the world, blurring the lines between what is real and what is mediated. In doing so, Poerksen provides a wealth of examples from all over the world to support his claims and illustrate the intricate ways in which the social media environment works. Another strong point of the book is the way it challenges classical concepts and enriches them by looking at current days events. For first time readers this book is a good resource to both understand the intricate way in which the digital media works, but it is also a reach source to master the vocabulary necessary to describe and name what we are currently living.

While the book deepens old discussions and opens the door to new ideas on the topic of media literacy, future debates on the topic of the impact of the digital world should also explore other explanations for today's digital media landscape that surpass the idea of technology being the root cause of societal issues. One should also consider political, cultural, or economic factors into the discussion. Lastly, for the sake of nuance that this books so richly brings to the discussion, future debates need also consider the digital media environment outside Western democracies. Disinformation, digital manipulation, and media crises are global challenges, and we need as many perspectives as possible to make sense of today's media landscape.

In conclusion, Poerksen places the discussion in *Digital fever* within several large societal trends that have emerged in the digital age. These include the collapse of traditional media gatekeeping, the fragmentation of the public sphere, the rise of emotional and sensational content, the erosion of authority, the crisis of truth, the empowerment of individuals, or the commercialization of attention. In the light of current events, such as the role of social media in elections, the COVID-19 pandemic's „infodemic", the rise of populism, or the impact of AI on communication, this is a necessary and relevant book for readers concerned with democracy, media literacy, and the future of the digital environment.

References

Couldry, N., & Hepp, A. (2016). *The mediated construction of reality*. Polity.

Fuchs, C. (2014). *Social media: A critical introduction*. London Sage

Pariser, E. (2011). *The filter bubble: How the new personalized web is changing what we read and how we think*. Penguin.

Poerksen, B., Koeck, A. R., & Koeck, W. K. (2022). *Digital Fever: Taming the Big Business of Disinformation*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Sunstein, C. R. (2001). *Republic.com*. Princeton university press.

Romanian Journal of Communication and Public Relations
www.journalofcommunication.ro

The *Romanian Journal of Communication and Public Relations* (RJCPR) is now seeking manuscripts for its upcoming issues. We welcome scholarly contributions from the broad field of communication studies, from public relations research, as well as from related areas. RJCPR also accepts relevant contributions for its permanent book review section.

Prospective authors should submit original papers which meet the customary academic standards in the social sciences. These materials should be methodologically sound, thoroughly argued, and well crafted. They must not have been published elsewhere, or be currently under review for any other publication.

All manuscripts are subject to a blind review process before publication. The author(s) name(s) should not appear on any page except the title page of the submitted paper, and electronic identification data should be removed before submission.

Important Dates:

The Journal is issued three times per year, in April, July, and December. Here are the submission deadlines:

- April issue: March 1;
- July issue: May 1;
- December issue: October 1.

Submission

Submissions must follow the Guidelines for Authors, available on the Journal's website (www.journalofcommunication.ro/guidelines). For further inquiries, please contact the editor, dr. Elena Negrea-Busuioc, elena.negrea@comunicare.ro.

More information on the *Journal of Communication and Public Relations* can be found at www.journalofcommunication.ro.

ISSN 1454-8100
E-ISSN 2344-5440