DISCURSIVE PATTERNS IN FAKE ONLINE NEWS. AN ANALYSIS OF TIMESNEWROMAN.RO ARTICLES OVER FIVE YEARS

RADU MEZA[1]

ABSTRACT. This research takes a big data quantitative content analysis approach to studying discursive patterns in online satirical news parody or "fake news" in Romania. In the context of a global increase in the interest towards news parody, as demonstrated by shows like The Daily Show with John Stewart and The Colbert Report – U.S. based shows whose content is being syndicated or distributed globally, but also The Onion fake news website, many national cultures have gone through different formats in an attempt to satisfy this increasing need, possibly stimulated by distrust in the traditional media formats. The paper presents an investigation of discursive and publishing patterns in over five years of publishing history of the most popular Romanian satirical news parody website – timesnewroman.ro.

Key words: online satire, parody, fake news, new media, automated data collection

The recent rise of satirical news parody

The last decades have seen a significant increase in the rise of satirical news parody or "fake news" formats, mainly on TV and on the Web. Other than well-known globally syndicated U.S. shows like *The Daily Show with John Stewart* or *The Colbert Report*, "news parody appears as a truly universal phenomenon" according to recent scholarly work that means to make an account of "the global flow of parody formats, and the multiple ways in which news parody adapts to differing political, economic and regulatory contexts"(Baym and Jones 2013).

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[1] Ph.D. Lecturer, Journalism Department, College of Political, Administrative and Communication Sciences, Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, meza@fspac.ro

Emerging TV news parody formats have gotten increasing attention globally, from Australia (Harrington 2012) to France (Doyle 2012), Italy (Cosentino 2012) or Germany (Kleinen-von Königslöw and Keel 2012) – with a localization of *The Daily Show*. The scholarship on Romanian TV satire and parody shows published in this context (Baym and Jones 2013) focuses on the popular show Tattler's Tale (in Romanian "Cronica cârcotașilor") (Bardan 2012) – which does feature satirical treatment of TV news (and also other TV shows), but does not exactly keep to a strict satirical TV news parody format and would not fall in the "fake news" genre. There were however some pioneers in the Romanian TV "fake news" genre in the late 90s – "Știrile de sâmbăta asta" – a show produced by regional Romanian Public Television subsidiary, TVR Cluj, which, following its success, was later distributed nationally.

Although most of the scholarship on the subject focuses on U.S. TV news parody, most prominently on the already mentioned *The Daily Show with John Stewart* and *The Colbert Report* (Amarasingam 2011, Gray, Jones, and Thompson 2009), online news satire – a form arguably accessible to a larger number of potential producers, not necessarily attached to the traditional media industry, is also receiving some attention from researchers (Kaye 2010, Waisanen 2011). These articles refer to probably the most visible online "fake news" website based in the U.S. – theonion.com and The Onion News Network (who publish video newscasts online). The Onion (theonion.com – launched in 1996) has a monthly readership of about 8.4 million unique visitors from the U.S. and 11.3 million globally, while the four websites Onion Network total an approximate 20 million unique visitors globally[2], but that is of course building on a national print brand (the print satirical newspaper was circulated nationally from 1988 to 2013).

Most scholarship on the topic of satirical news parody or, in a stricter sense, the "fake news" formats more prominently studied in the area of television, explains the recent rise in popularity of these formats in correlation with a decline in the audience's trust in the news media and its authoritative treatment of an unpredictable reality. Some also note that this might be a reaction to increasingly perceiving the big media institutions as part of the power block, as contributing to the discourse of power.

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[2] Source: quantcast.com

Theoretical framework

This paper takes into consideration the broad *Uses and Gratifications* framework in conjunction with the more recent *Spiral of Cynicism* (Cappella and Jamieson 1997) theory – taking into account the relation between media, politics and the development of cynical attitudes in citizens reconsidered by newer research done in Europe (Brants et al. 2009, De Vreese 2005) – to explain an increase in the popularity of online satirical news parody or the "fake news" format, both globally and in the Romanian national context. This paper's position is based on assumptions drawn from the two theories – that readers (especially young educated adults) look for a way to keep in touch with current events and cultural trends, while at the same time refuse to accept accounts of social and political reality as delivered by most of the mainstream media which they perceive as being biased and driven by the economic and political interest of business people and especially political interest groups. Some interest in exploring the relation between cynicism (and kynicism) and ideology in contemporary society can also be observed in the works of philosophers such as Sloterdijk and Zizek (Sloterdijk, Eldred, and Adelson 1984, Sloterdijk and Eldred 1987, Zizek 1989). We might note that Sloterdijk and subsequently Zizek employ a distinction between kynicism, which "represents the popular, plebeian rejection of the official culture by means of irony and sarcasm" and cynicism which "is the answer of the ruling culture to this kynical subversion: it recognizes, it takes into account, the particular interest behind the ideological universality, the distance between the ideological mask and the reality, but it still finds reasons to retain the mask"(Zizek 1989).

In terms of discursive patterns, we need to take into account that the "fake news" genre is a subgenre of satire, it is parodic as it makes use of conventions of the journalistic texts, and it makes generous use of ironical tropes.

"Parody is one of the most delightful forms of satire, one of the most natural, perhaps the most satisfying, and often the most effective. It springs from the very heart of our sense of comedy, which is the happy perception of incongruity" according to (Highet 1962). In Highet's *Anatomy of Satire* (1962) – the most famous and representative product of satiric parody is the hoax, which he clearly sets apart from the swindle: "Hoaxes are lies or exaggerations intended to deceive. Swindles are lies or exaggerations intended to deceive. The purpose, it is the purpose that defines them. The

hoaxer wants to prove something. The swindler wants to get something. The swindler wants to deceive everyone permanently (or at least until he has died in triumph). The hoaxer wishes at some time to be exposed, or to reveal his own jest. The result of a successful swindle is gain for the swindler. The result of a successful hoax is a hearty laughter – although it is the laughter of satire, in which the victim rarely joins."

Satire, as a broad type of emplotment according to (White 1975), as a macro-structure, represents reality and characters in its account of reality as being incapable of changing and becoming something more than helpless beings tied to circumstantiality, as being stuck in an absurd social reality, just like everybody else.

Parody emphasizes the conventions and tropes associated with genre. In this case, it is the structures associated with reporting the news based on different accounts or sources (e.g. "who said what", eye-witness accounts, press conferences or press releases) which form the core of the recognizable forms of informative journalism – which has become a global professional standard of writing being taught in Journalism schools throughout the 20th century. Tabloid journalism uses sensationalist clichés to anticipate or amplify reader reaction or emotion – these however speculate about the nature of their audience's interest – make assumptions about the reader's curiosities and attitudes. On the other hand, the so-called "quality press", generally associated with the informative and interpretive authoritative approach imposed by the New York Times model and enforced as a norm by formal journalism education, uses expertise (e.g. experts, specialists, researchers) which builds on the ultimate authority in contemporary society – science.

Irony is a negational (White 1975) stylistic trope which generates comedic effects through absurd juxtapositions (such as oxymorons). It turns meaning around to its reverse, it amplifies the inescapable absurdity of social existence, by playing on contradiction.

Literature review

Earlier studies on satirical news parody looked at this content by making use of Boorstin's concept of pseudo-events (McKain 2005).

Studies done in the last years have also tried to take a uses and gratifications approach to explaining the success of satirical news parody in the context of increasing cynicism towards the media and politics – sometimes seeing the enjoyment of such content as "relief in hard times" (Lance Bennett

2007). Researchers are split between cynicism and critical thinking -whether this kind of treatment of both socio-political reality and the news form itself serves to develop a better understanding of politics, or it just feeds a pre-existent cynical attitude (Brewer and Marquardt 2007). More recent studies have focused on the interplay between real news and "fake news" – either by looking at the perceived realism of "fake news"(Balmas 2012), or by looking at what real news say about "fake news"(Brewer, Young, and Morreale 2013). The research on discursive patterns in news parody (Druick 2009) focus again mostly on the very popular *The Daily Show*. According to (Druick 2009) "news parody has proved popular with comedians and audiences alike [..] precisely because it lampoons an official and sober discourse. […] although one may certainly laugh at the news one moment and then turn to it for information the next, news parodies indicate the always potentially subversive political aspect of dialogism that suffuses culture."

Online satire in Romania

In the aftermath of the crisis of the print press catalysed by the global financial crisis, which saw a decline popularity for satirical weeklies coupled with the repeated disruptions of the best known Romanian satirical weekly, *Academia Cațavencu*, there was an apparent gap in this niche market, which magazines such as *Kamikaze* or *Cațavencii* never got to fill. Although these publications also have online versions, their satirical formats relied on semi-fictionlized accounts of real events coupled with humorous photo-montage and satirical cartoons. As their writers come from the media, they did not include a very strong media criticism component.

Times New Roman (timesnewroman.ro) started regularly publishing fake news in September 2009 with little visibility. It lacked connections with the mainstream media sector or a print brand to push it to prominence, and although they published up to around 180 articles per month (as the graphs below show) their growth was slow in the first quarters of activity, leading to a steep decline in content publishing, followed by a period of steady organic growth of popularity (as measured in number of likes on Facebook) coupled with an increase in articles published monthly.

The timesnewroman.ro formula is not very complex and suffers little variation. They mostly publish short fake news stories (generally ranging from 1000 to 1500 characters). They starting publishing collaboratively authored listicles in the last couple of years as the genre became globally popular.

They also publish a satirical cartoon section. Their recent increase in popularity has led to the production of a weekly "fake news" TV show on Prima TV, now in its second season, trying to capitalize on their online popularity. The episodes are also available online on tv.timesnewroman.ro and on their YouTube Channel. According to the Romanian Transmedia Audit Bureau, they generally range between 50.000 and 100.000 unique visitors per day[3]. The website reached a peak in popularity during the recent presidential elections in Romania, accumulating over 900.000 likes for November 2014 (as shown in Fig. 4) and an estimate of over 2 million unique visitors as stated by the publication's managing partner Alexandru Dona in a recent interview[4]. At the moment, the website is the undisputed leader on the online "fake news" and satire market.

An analysis of timesnewroman.ro articles over five years

The general purpose of this research is to identify patterns in the discourse of popular online satire over the whole publishing history (five years) of the best-known satirical website published in Romanian.

Research Design

This exploratory, mainly descriptive, big data research aims to answer the following research questions about the discursive patterns in the most successful Romanian online "fake news" website – timesnewroman.ro

RQ1: How are journalistic discursive patterns employed by timesnewroman.ro articles?

RQ2: What are the co-occurrence relationships between real public figures, fictional characters, power structures and common areas of media discourse?

RQ3: What are the stereotypes that can be identified through frequent co-occurrence of reference to region, ethnicity or nationality and areas of media discourse?

RQ4: How has the websites adapted its forms and publishing patterns over time?

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[3] http://www.brat.ro/sati/site/timesnewroman-ro/trafic-total/

[4] http://www.iqads.ro/articol/31119/pe-timesnewroman-au-ras-2-000-000-de-romani-in-noiembrie-alex-dona-pur-si-simplu

Methodology

Content analysis is the primary research method used. Taking into consideration the ambitions of the present research and the increasingly powerful trend towards working with bigger and bigger datasets, we chose to collect and analyse the data using automated tools. As such, we will be presenting quantitative approaches to the analysis of satirical fake news, which are mostly the results of using automation over the entire population of articles published by timesnewroman.ro. No sampling or selection was done, but a negligible number of records were deleted in the process of cleaning the dataset due to their incompleteness.

Data collection

The data set consisting of N=8040 records was collected by scraping the timesnewroman.ro website at the end of 2014. We used Helium Scraper – a visual scraping software that allows users to define patterns in HTML pages which are dynamically generated by a Web Content Management System – which is the kind of web application most (news) websites use to manage and display content. We scraped the 337 archive pages, each containing links to 24 individual articles published since the site was launched (September 2009) to the end of 2014 (over five years).

For each of the articles in the website's database we collected the following information:
- Title of article
- Full text of the article (articles have sizes around 1000 characters)
- Author
- Publishing day of the week, date and time
- Category
- Tags
- Number of likes on Facebook
- Number of tweets
- Number of shares of Google Plus

The dataset was divided into two parts and analysed separately. The full text of the articles was analysed using KH coder for co-occurrence patterns in the paragraphs of the text. The rest of the data was analysed using Tableau Public for publishing and reception patterns over time.

Analysis

Co-occurrence networks

For the purposes of producing visualisations of co-occurrence networks in order to emphasize patterns in the satirical discourse of fake news we coded several terms to concepts that are of particular interest in the study of media representations of reality, but also in the study of parodic structures employed by fake news when mimicking the style of real news.

Here are a few of the main concepts coded and recognized frequently in the large text corpus (approximately 9.2 million characters) processed with KH coder and appearing in the diagrams below (we've chosen to also keep the Romanian original labels for these concepts):

- Journalistic structures / *structuri jurnalistice*: terms and phrases that very common in the discourse of news, marking reported speech, statements, referencing sources, witnesses, press releases and press conferences;
- Sensationalist clichés / *clişee senzaţionaliste*: phrases that seek to trigger emotion and that are very common in the discourse of sensationalist tabloid news (e.g. "horror", "shocking", "scandalous" etc.);
- Expertise / *expertiza*: terms that signal the use of scientific authority very commonly in the discourse of news (e.g. "expert", "specialist", "researcher", "analist" etc.);
- Alcohol / *alcool*: references to drinking alcohol of any type, being drunk or alcoholism;
- Sexuality / *sexualitate*: terms and phrases that reference sex, sexual acts, sexual orientation, genitals etc;
- Money / *bani*: terms that relate to monetary value in Romanian lei, euros or dollars, but also valuable metals like gold or silver;
- Business / *afaceri*: terms that belong to the vocabulary of business and refer to financing, employing, investing, buying or selling;
- Justice / justiţie: terms that refer to judiciary processes and actors within it, such as the Romanian equivalents for "judge", "prosecutor", "lawyer", "trial", "sentence" etc;
- Corruption / *corupţie*: terms that refer to corruption within the public system, namely crimes such as bribery or influence trafficking – commonly found in the discourse of watchdog journalism;

- Stupidity / *prostie*: terms that are used to label stupidity, incompetence etc. in general, or particularly incompetent or stupid people;
- Violence / *violența*: terms that denote violent acts or behaviour ("rape", "murder", "beating");
- Theft / *furt*: terms that reference thievery;
- Political parties / *partide*: abreviations associated with the political parties and political alliances of the past five years in the Romanian political system;
- Government / *Guvern*: terms connected to governing and government, central public administration (i.e. references to the cabinet, ministers or the prime minister);
- The Church / *Biserica*: terms that denote Romanian Orthodox Church hierarchies and actors (e.g. "priest", "bishop", "archbishop" etc.);
- CNA: references to the National Audio-visual Council in Romania, and implicitly criticism of what is being broadcasted in the traditional audio-visual media.
- Religion / *Religie*: references to Christian religious rituals and holidays – Easter, Christmas, St. John, St. Mary etc.

We have also coded concepts referring to nationalities (British, German, Spanish, Italian, Russian, French, Hungarian/Magyar) and inhabitants of certain regions of Romania ("olteni", "moldoveni", "ardeleni" etc.) or even the cities or regions themselves (București, Constanța, Cluj, Județul Sălaj, județul Vaslui etc.) in an effort to capture stereotypical representations of such categories of people.

The rest of the coded terms are proper nouns referring to fictional characters (the two most frequent characters used by the timesnewroman.ro writers being Decebal Popescu and Robert Acrisor) or to real-life public figures involved in national politics, the media, tabloid celebrities, world leaders.

Figure 1 shows all of the concepts coded that have a high enough frequency. Nodes displayed as larger discs have higher frequencies, thicker edges denote more frequent co-occurrences of the pair of adjacent nodes. Different colours or shades mark the clusters identified in the corpus – sets of concepts that tend to co-occur with each other in the same paragraphs.

The next two figures, Figure 2 and Figure 3, adhere to the same notations, but have had some elements excluded in order to emphasize relations between the remaining ones and improve visibility.

It is immediately visible that at the centre of the co-occurrence network we have the patterns of journalistic discourse mimicked by the fake news published by the site. It is not an unusual result, as parody is expected to enforce, or rather emphasize the style and conventions of a genre – in this case – the short news story. Thus, the highest betweenness-centrality coefficient for "journalistic structures" shows that the parodic form ties together the satiric content in the increasingly popular fake news genre.

Closest to the position of these structures in the diagram, we can observe concepts such as "Sexuality", "Money", "Alcohol", "Education", and "Business". This blend of concepts clearly points out towards the moralizing discourse of satire – criticizing vice (through references to sexuality and alcoholism). "Money" is a very frequently used quantifier for value in journalistic discourse and as such, its place is not unusual. The same go for "Education" and "Business" – very important areas of common journalistic discourse.

The peculiarity here might be the connection between "education", "Bucuresti", "Money" and "sexuality", but this in facts relates to a topic sometimes approached by the satirical website when criticizing over-sexualized and materialistic teen behaviour by stereotypical and quite frequent representations of "female high schoolers in Bucharest".

The two fictional mainly characters used by the writers appear to be, as is expected, in close connection to the conventional structures that mimic the journalistic style. Whereas, Robert Acrisor seems to be strongly connected just with the core of "journalistic structures" as there is no definite pattern to the position he is mentioned in (as reporter, eye-witness, information source, interviewee etc.), Decebal Popescu on the other hand co-occurs with "expertise" as he is usually cast as an authority on every matter, serving as a specialist/expert source of statements.

The concepts of "expertise" and "sensationalist clichés" show up on different sides of the "journalistic structures" cluster as they represent two very different sets of tropes in newswriting – one represents the authoritarian treatment of news by the so-called "quality press", while the other represents "tabloid sensationalism", of course, in close connection to references of "sexuality".
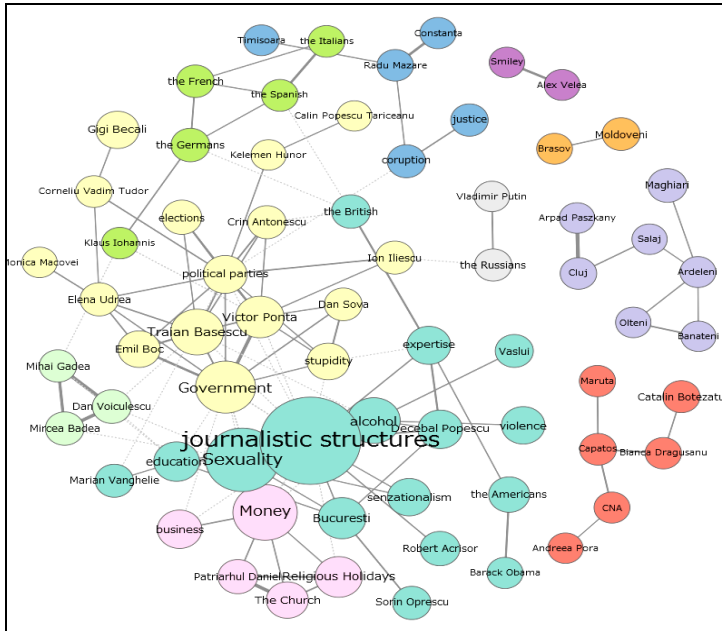
Fig. 1: An overview of concept co-occurrence in timesnewroman.ro articles
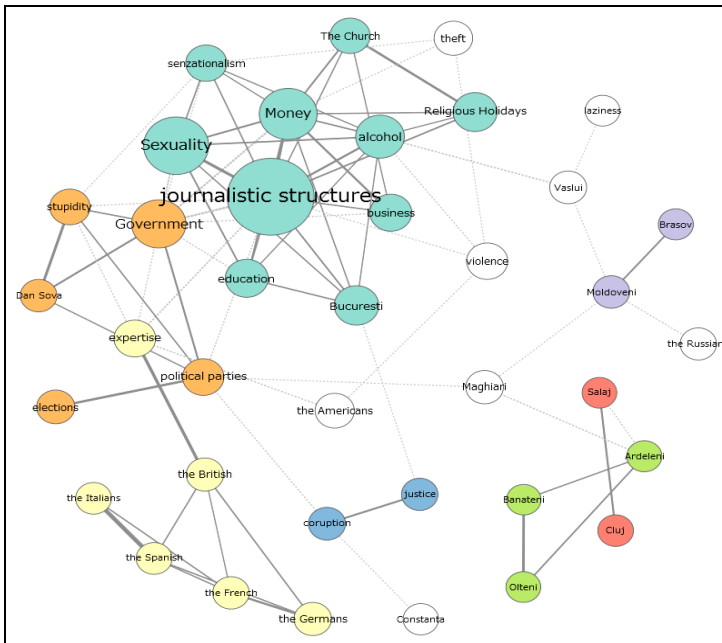
**Fig. 2:** Representations of nationality, region, ethnicity and the government

One of the other concepts relating to expertise is the "British" concept. This shows how the writers play on a familiar trope (a cliché in fact) in the Romanian media discourse – "British scientists" as the ultimate scientific authority, able to get away with even the most absurd discoveries or interpretations. This relates as well to a stereotypical representation of the British in Romanian and perhaps continental European culture. The "Americans" are also connected to "expertise", but to a smaller extent.

By leaving out any of the references to real-life public figures in Figure 2, we can have a closer look at the relationships between the other concepts.

We can see how "stupidity" co-occurs with both references to "education" and the "government". Also "theft / *furt*" and "violence / *violenţa*" which did not show up in Figure 1 (due to a lower frequency of occurrence), show up as being slightly connected – though "theft" also co-occurs, quite predictably with "Money", while "violence / *violenţa*" (comprising terms such as "rape", "murder", "beating") co-occurs with "theft", "alcohol" and "Americans".

References to foreign nationalities are clustered together – co-occuring only in the same contexts together, except references to the British and the Germans, the latter of which are associated with new President "Klaus Iohannis" – a German ethnic (Fig. 1). The former President Ion Iliescu is connected with the "Russians" as he is often presented as having had ties with the USSSR, Moscow and the KGB as high official in the late communist era and then leader of the most important political group after the Romanian Revolution of 1989, interim President and then first elected president of democratic post-communist Romania.

The concept of "corruption" – one favoured by the watchdog journalism model displays connections with "political parties", "Government" and "stupidity / incompetence", but the strongest connection with "justice". This mirrors recent events in Romania, as a stronger, more independent justice apparatus, especially devoted to fighting high-level corruption managed to make headlines by prosecuting and eventually jailing powerful figures (probably the most notable are former Prime Minister Adrian Nastase and media mogul Dan Voiculescu).
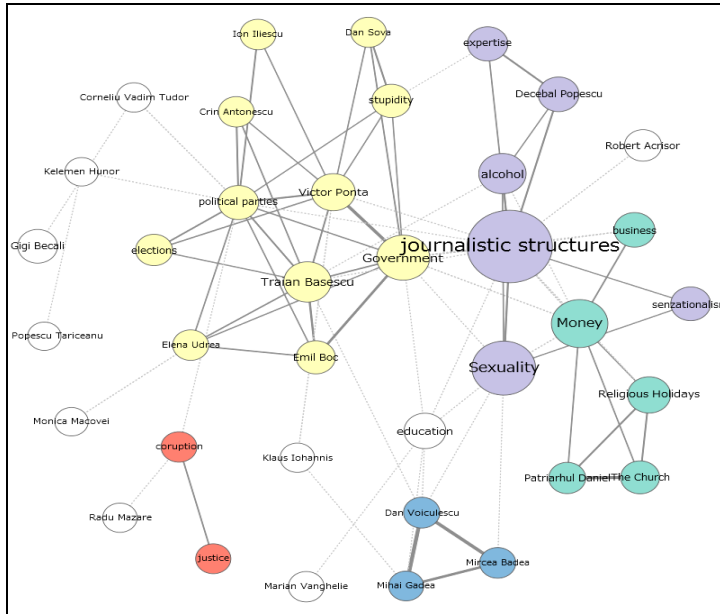
Fig. 3: Public figures and power structures

In Figure 3 we have excluded references to nationalities, ethnic groups or regions and focused on public figures mainly involved with politics and the media.

There are several interesting patterns displayed in Fig. 3. First, there is a very strong co-occurrence connection between three figures – jailed media mogul Dan Voiculescu and two of the show hosts in the media trust controlled by him – Mihai Gadea and Mircea Badea. And all three have some co-occurrence with terms denoting sexuality. In fact, most of the articles that have produced this result feature different takes on how the two show hosts are absurd, ridiculous, most often grossly portrayed, brown-noses. The connection to former President Traian Băsescu originates from representations of an antagonism between him and the media trust controlled by Voiculescu, especially news television Antena 3.

Another interesting co-occurrence pattern which can be observed in both figures 1 and 3, but is more clearly visible in Fig.3, is the one between "Patriarch Daniel", "Religion", "Church" and "Money". The criticism here is quite obvious from this connection. In fact, timesnewroman.ro has constructed Patriarch Daniel and the Romanian Orthodox Church as vapid, money hungry, confidence men. There is a large number of stories based on

fake statements supposedly issued by the Patriarch. One of such stories (about the Patriarch announcing the Church's intention to place a tax on having a Christian name) is actually by far the most liked story on the website with over 170.000 likes. Its success is mostly due to it becoming a quite successful media hoax as it was taken seriously by some people and even republished by small, local media outlets as serious news on St. Michael and St. Gabriel Day in 2012 (which are of course quite common Christian names in Romania). Given the publication date, we can assume that its spreadability – to use Henry Jenkins' concept (Jenkins, Ford, and Green 2013 - is mostly owed to circumstantial prank/hoax value.

There are four entities that frequently co-occur with the concept of "stupidity/incompetence". All are associated with the political system: "political parties" and the "Government" – Prime-Minister Ponta and Șova as a spokesman for the Government and later a Minister himself. This goes to prove that criticism of the political system is a common occurrence and it is one of the components associated with the rise of satire as the population grows increasingly distrustful and cynical.

Former President Traian Basescu's name co-occurs with many different concepts, although mostly with the political cluster, but also with media mogul Dan Voiculescu's cluster, "journalism structures", "sexuality" and "alcohol" nodes. The media trust control by Dan Voiculescu has been attacking President Basescu violently and regularly in the final years of his second term to the point where the efforts of the two show hosts and others could become a subject of ridicule in satirical discourse. The writers of the satirical website prefer to often portray the former president (a navy captain by profession) as a drunkard as a quite gentle form of criticism – hence the connection to alcohol.

Several politicians have connections with fewer concepts as they are constructed as flat characters, employed to denote the same thing every time they occur, re-enforcing stereotypes and representing larger categories as they stand for entire groups (framing through synechdoche): local baron Radu Mazăre, Mayor of Constanța, connected with "corruption", Vanghelie, Mayor of a sector of Buchares, in connection with education as the website (and sometimes other media outlets as well) point to his poor use of the Romanian language as a signifier for the low level of education in the political class, prominent nationalist extremist Corneliu Vadim Tudor is connected with the president of the political party representing the Hungarian ethnic minority in Romania – thus pointing out a pattern of ironic co-occurrence.

A new-comer in the political arena, President Klaus Iohannis has yet to feature in satirical articles enough to form clear connections (other than those to stereotypes about the German ethnics – as seen in Fig. 1). The two connections – with Victor Ponta, his counter-candidate in the elections of 2014, and with show host Mihai Gadea, have little significance.

Publishing patterns

The second part of the data analysis and interpretation will deal with publishing patterns studied longitudinally over a 5 year period of regular publication (from September 2009 to December 2014). We are interested in publishing frequency over different time intervals, the popularity or success of the posts as quantified by the number of Likes on Facebook for each article. Although we also collected the number of tweets and Google Plus shares for each article, we have chosen to discuss only the evolution of Likes on Facebook as this social media platform seems to be the predilect medium for distribution of published messages. The use of Twitter or Google Plus shares is sporadic at best (most of the articles score 0 for both of these) and as such bears little relevance.

Figure 4 displays the evolution of the number of articles published versus the sum of likes per month over the entire publishing history.
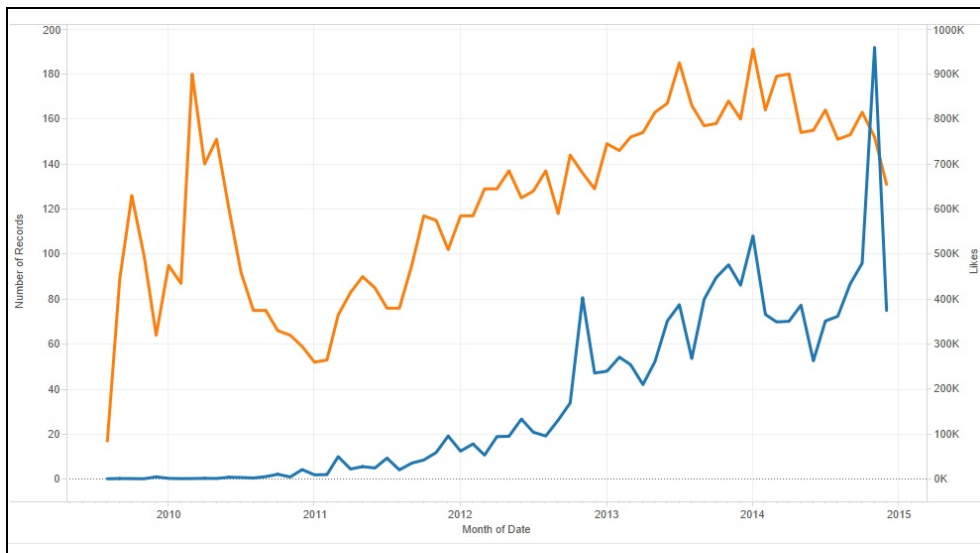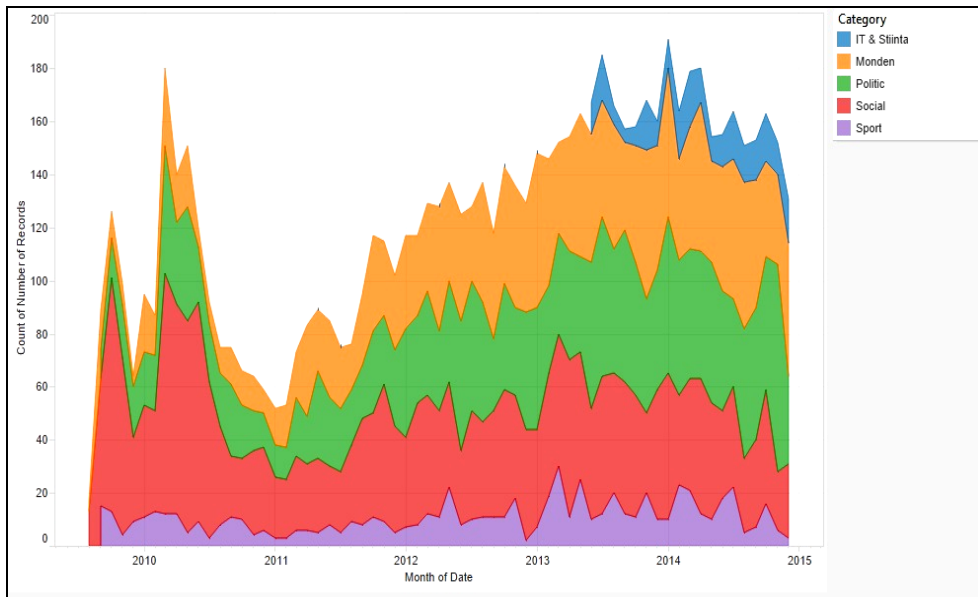

Fig. 4: The evolution of articles published versus Likes received per month over 5 years

One can notice several spikes in the early history of the website, in late 2009 and early 2010, peaking at 180 articles published per month in March 2010. This might be associated with the writers' initial enthusiasm, but as one can also notice from the diagram, in the early history of timesnewroman.ro there seems to have been little interest for the articles in social media.

After that first period, we can notice a steep fall followed by a steady growth which is this time reflected by a similar steady growth in terms of total number of likes per month. In 2013 and 2014 the number of articles published matches the initial period of enthusiasm (between 160 and 180 articles per month).

The large spike in terms of number of likes in the fall of 2014, peaking at over 900 thousands likes, points towards an increased interest in satire, especially on political topics during the presidential elections.


Fig. 5: The evolution of articles published under each of the website's main categories

Looking at the evolution of articles published under each of the website's main categories in Figure 5, one may notice, that the initial publishing period is characterised by a large number of articles being filed under the "Social" category. The steep fall in late 2010 and then the steady

growth that follows from 2011 to 2014 sees some sort of balance between three main categories ("Social" / Society, "Politic" / Politics and "Monden" / Celebrity News), an expected stability in the "Sport" category and an emerging fifth category "IT & Știință" since early 2013. Although these developments point towards the emergence of a stable formula as the site becomes more successful, one should not forget that some times articles are posted in a certain category with a sense of irony.
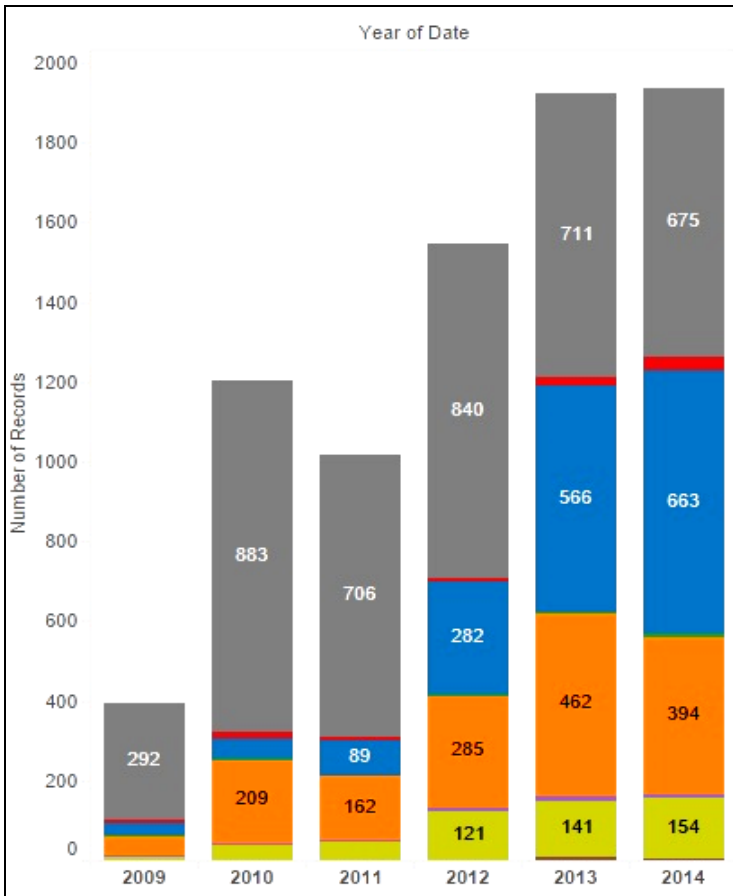
Fig. 6: Punctuation used in titles over 5 years: (from top to bottom) no punctuation (grey), interrogation (red), exclamation (blue), colon (orange), colon and exclamation (yellow) – the other combinations (colon and interrogation, interrogation and exclamation have small number of occurrences – shown in purple and brown).

The final point of our investigation of timesnewroman.ro's development of publishing patterns over time is looking at titles. Figure 6 shows the combination of punctuation being used in titles and Figure 7 shows the evolution of the sizes of titles (in numbers of characters) over the five year period.

In both images, we can definitely notice trends: as the average size of titles grows steadily over the five years, titles contain more exclamation marks (pointing out to an emphasis on emotion), more colons (generally indicating the presence of statements attributed to a source) and combinations of the two.
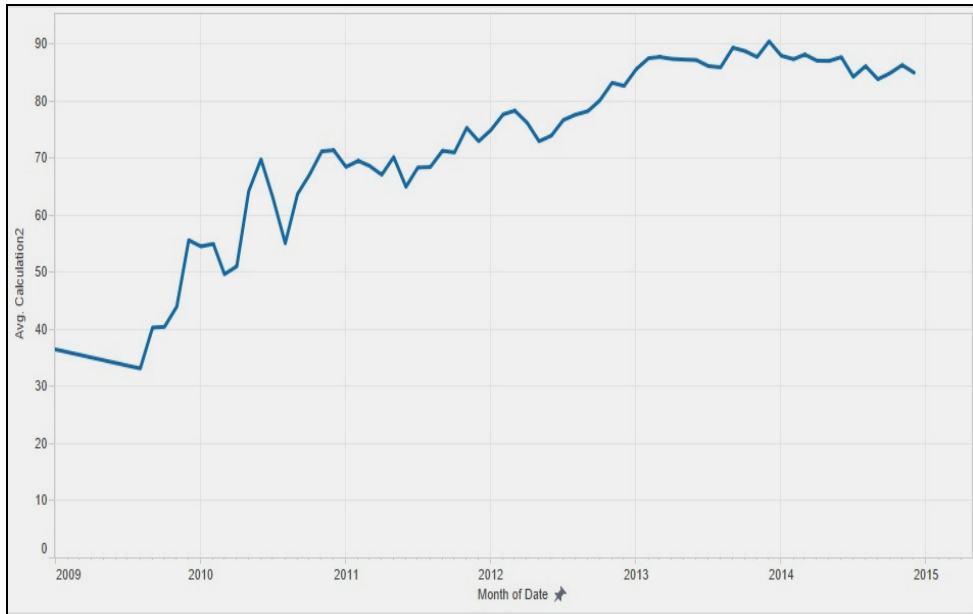
Fig. 7: The evolution of the average length of titles over five years
(in number of characters)

The publishing patterns of timesnewroman.ro (in terms of the evolution of titles) seem to follow a more general trend where online publications rely heavily on longer, more exciting, more attractive titles, generally accompanied by images, that are more *spreadable* (Jenkins, Ford, and Green 2013) in social media.

76

Findings

Journalistic structures associated with reporting on reality based on different information sources are at the core of the discursive patterns identified by doing co-occurrence analysis on the full text of all the (over 8000) articles published by timesnewroman.ro over the last five years. They appear with the highest frequency and also have a high betweenness-centrality coefficient – meaning they tend to connect most of the other structures (they co-occur with most of them most frequently). Sensationalist clichés and authoritative sourcing play their parts in consolidating parody of both the style and conventions of tabloid and informative news.

Real public figures co-occur in the same contexts they would in the real news. The patterns of connections with each other, the party system and the Government mirror social reality as it is depicted by the informative news media. However, the links between the "stupidity / incompetence" code and the Government and other public figures connected to the power structures within the last five years, show that these texts are openly critical, taking advantage of the special place the satirical press occupies. Tabloid celebrities are mostly isolated or form separate clusters that have little or no connection with timesnewroman.ro's representations of political or social reality.

The two most prominent fictional characters employed by the writers seem to be strongly connected to the journalistic patterns and are, as such, just tools in parodic satire. However, their re-use in different, but recognizable positions points towards the hoaxer's purpose – to be caught lying. *Decebal Popescu* shows a strong connection with expertise, with the frequently invoked authority of science which legitimises the interpretations of hard news.

There are several stereotypes that become visible in the co-occurrence analysis: the connection between the British and expertise, the connections between Religious Holidays and alcohol consumption, the connection between the inhabitants of Vaslui county and alcohol consumption, the connection between the Romanian Orthodox Church, The Patriarch and money, the connection between education, money, sexuality and Bucharest – referencing the stories about spoiled over-sexed high-schoolers in the capital. Some of these stereotypes mock clichés of the mainstream media, but most of them exaggerate reality to the absurd to emphasize social problems in the form of satire, which relies on stereotypical representations of behaviours and attitudes as it constructs social reality as inescapable, unchangeable and absurd.

A brief analysis of the websites' publishing history shows a steady organic growth in popularity and in numbers of articles published and a gradual stabilization between the weights of the three main categories used to publish articles under – a sign of a consolidated publication formula. The evolution of title size and punctuation in titles fits more general trends in the online press – longer titles – delivering information, emotion and often making use of statements, coupled with attractive, amusing or ambiguous images.

Conclusion

This analysis of discursive patterns in online parodic satire, or "fake news" website was meant to be exploratory in nature. Satire emerges as a powerful form, especially online, whether it emerges in popular culture forms that mimic artefacts of mass-culture like most image macro internet memes might be looked at as a parody of advertising, or it becomes pseudo-institutional and deals mainly in hoaxes – like in the case of "fake news" websites that are apparently rising to popularity over older satirical forms as they distance themselves from both the discourse of power, and the discourse of media, more and more seen as either biased or as "infoganda". These approaches seem to feed the needs of an increasingly polarized public that mistrusts politicians and, at least partially, the media.

Our analysis of timesnewroman.ro articles showed how it employs the conventions of journalism, both "quality" and tabloid (in different articles) to emphasize existing stereotypes and also to ambitiously create new ones. Its development shows growth and consolidation over the last couple of years. Possible future work (on this data set, in conjunction with possibly others) includes an analysis of topics over time in order to see how the satirical agenda relates to the mainstream media agenda.

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