

## **THE EVOLUTION OF CORONAVIRUS RELATED NEWS IN ROMANIAN MEDIA**

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### **Abstract**

This paper examines the evolution of COVID-19 news coverage in Romanian media throughout 2020, analyzing how various media outlets responded to the unprecedented public health crisis. The research explores five key dimensions: the relationship between mainstream and independent media, the spread of misinformation alongside factual reporting, public trust in media sources, government influence on media coverage, and the accuracy of scientific reporting. The study reveals that Romanian media initially aligned closely with government messaging during the early emergency phase, but later developed more diverse approaches as the pandemic progressed. While some outlets maintained responsible journalism standards, others drifted toward sensationalism or became platforms for conspiracy theories. Government interventions, including emergency decrees to combat "fake news" and financial support for media organizations, raised concerns about press freedom and independence. The "infodemic" of misinformation significantly influenced public behavior, with surveys indicating troubling levels of belief in conspiracy theories among Romanians. By the end of 2020,

public trust in media had become notably polarized, with implications for subsequent public health initiatives. This analysis underscores the crucial role of responsible journalism during health emergencies and highlights the delicate balance between combating misinformation and preserving press freedom.

**Keywords:** COVID-19 Media Coverage, Romanian Journalism, Misinformation, Media Trust, Government Influence

### **Introduction**

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020 posed an unprecedented challenge not only to public health systems, but also to information ecosystems worldwide. In Romania, as in other countries, media outlets became a primary source of news about the novel coronavirus, its spread, and the measures needed to combat it. Romanian media – including print newspapers, online news sites, television broadcasts, and radio – were tasked with keeping the public informed under rapidly changing circumstances. At the same time, they had to navigate an "infodemic" of misinformation and public anxiety. This research paper examines how coronavirus-related news coverage evolved in the Romanian media up, analyzing the interplay between various types of media and the broader social context.

Multiple dimensions of this evolution are explored in the study, including: The role of mainstream vs. independent media in disseminating COVID-19 news; The spread of misinformation and disinformation (the so-called "infodemic") alongside factual reporting; Public perception and trust in media during the health crisis; Government influence and official narratives, including emergency measures affecting the press; and Scientific reporting and accuracy in communicating health information.

By exploring these themes, the paper aims to provide a coherent understanding of how Romanian media coverage of the coronavirus developed over the course of 2020. It draws on news reports, surveys, and analyses published during that year to highlight key trends. The findings reveal a media landscape striving to inform the public and support health measures, yet hindered at times by sensationalism, political interference, and false information. Clear patterns emerge of an initial phase of alarm and compliance, followed by growing challenges related to misinformation and public skepticism. The analysis underscores the crucial role of responsible journalism in a public health emergency, as well as the delicate balance between combating fake news and upholding press freedom.

### **Early Coverage of COVID-19 in Romania**

Romanian media first began reporting on the coronavirus in January 2020, when the outbreak was largely confined to China. Early coverage was limited to international news segments describing the situation in Wuhan and initial precautions. As COVID-19 spread to Europe – notably with the significant outbreak in Italy in February 2020 – Romanian outlets increased their reporting, recognizing the imminent threat. The first confirmed COVID-19 case in Romania was reported on February 26, 2020, which prompted a sharp rise in domestic media attention. Throughout late February and early March, news coverage intensified, with daily reports on new cases, expert warnings, and government preparatory actions.

This initial stage of coverage was marked by an urgent and often alarmist tone. By early March, Romanian news broadcasts and headlines were dominated by dramatic framing of the virus. Sensational phrases such as “killer virus” became common in some mainstream outlets, fueling public anxiety (Newman et al., 2020, p. 98). For weeks leading up to the official declaration of a state of emergency, television news bulletins opened with

ominous reports on the coronavirus threat. This persistent emphasis on the danger contributed to a climate of fear, but also arguably prepared the public for drastic measures. When President Klaus Iohannis announced a nationwide state of emergency on March 14, 2020, it came after days of wall-to-wall coverage that had primed the public for lockdown measures. In fact, political observers noted that the level of public concern was so high that all major parties in Parliament – government and opposition alike – rallied in support of the emergency measures, reflecting a rare moment of consensus (Newman et al., 2020, p. 97).

While the tone was often urgent, most mainstream media in this early phase aligned closely with public health messaging. Journalists largely relayed information from authorities and health experts about the need for hygiene, social distancing, and eventual lockdown. Live televised statements by officials, such as the health minister or the head of the Department for Emergency Situations (Dr. Raed Arafat), were covered extensively. This alignment of media with official guidance helped to amplify critical health directives. Compliance with initial restrictions was reportedly high, in part due to the unified message across media and politics that the pandemic was a serious threat requiring collective action.

However, even in these early weeks, some cracks in the information environment began to appear. A few fringe online platforms and social media posts started spreading rumors or false claims about the virus before the first cases hit Romania. For example, in mid-March 2020, just as the state of emergency came into effect, a website called [stiridemoment.ro](http://stiridemoment.ro) published alarmist false stories – one claiming that major supermarket chains were shutting down, and another alleging that the government was “secretly” planning a mass operation to bring Romanians abroad back into the country. (Euractiv Network, 2020) These unfounded reports were widely shared on Facebook and WhatsApp, creating confusion until officials debunked them.

In response, Romanian authorities took the unprecedented step of shutting down that website on March 18, 2020, under the new emergency decree provisions. It was the first instance in Romania's history of a news site being closed by authorities for spreading fake news.

### **The State of Emergency: Official Narratives and Media Freedom**

On March 16, 2020, President Iohannis signed an emergency decree that included special provisions to counter the spread of COVID-19 disinformation online. Under this decree, authorities were empowered to order the removal of online content deemed to be “false news” about the pandemic and even to shut down entire websites hosting such content. (OSCE, 2020) The implementation of these measures was entrusted to the National Authority for Management and Regulation in Communications (ANCOM), a body that previously had little experience in policing online content. ANCOM acted on recommendations from a Strategic Communication Group set up by the government to manage pandemic information on a daily basis.

During the two-month state of emergency (March 16 – May 14, 2020), the Romanian government tightly controlled the flow of official information. The Strategic Communication Group became the central source of data on new cases, deaths, and regulations, issuing daily press releases. Notably, the membership of this Strategic Communication Group was kept secret, which later raised questions about transparency and accountability. Journalists, often confined to newsrooms or home offices by lockdown, were almost entirely reliant on these official updates for information on the pandemic. In practice, this centralized system meant that most news outlets – mainstream and independent alike – repeated the same figures and announcements each day, with limited opportunities to ask questions or seek additional data. (Newman et al., 2020, p. 99)

While centralizing information helped streamline public messaging, it also stirred concerns about press freedom. The decree's broad censorship powers alarmed free speech advocates. In late March 2020, the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media cautioned that Romania's approach, though motivated by a legitimate need to combat false information, risked overreach. (OSCE, 2020) He noted that removing content without clear criteria or judicial review "poses a risk of undue restriction to the work of journalists" and could lead to self-censorship in newsrooms. Romanian civil society and even the national Ombudsman echoed these concerns, urging the government to ensure any content removals were transparent and had defined justifications. The lack of an appeal mechanism for websites shut down under the emergency decree was a particular point of criticism.

Despite these warnings, authorities did invoke the decree multiple times. Several websites known for propagating conspiracy theories or sensational misinformation were blocked in April 2020. From the government's perspective, these actions were necessary to prevent dangerous rumors from undermining the pandemic response. Indeed, officials argued that certain false narratives (for instance, that COVID-19 was a harmless cold or that hospitals were installing 5G antennas under the pretext of the pandemic) could lead people to ignore life-saving health advice. Nonetheless, the effect of this aggressive approach was limited. Observers noted that only a small number of websites were actually taken down, and those could easily resurface under new domains. Once the state of emergency ended in May, the legal basis for such shutdowns lapsed and the blocked sites became accessible again.

During the emergency period, mainstream media generally complied with the official narrative out of public interest and legal obligation. Television channels and newspapers disseminated the guidelines on lockdown rules, travel restrictions, and hygiene measures as they were handed down. Public service announcements and informational graphics became common in

broadcasts and on front pages. However, journalists sometimes grew frustrated with the limited access to independent sources. Some investigative reporters complained of delayed or unanswered requests for information on issues like medical supply acquisitions and the situation in overwhelmed hospitals. The government's communication was occasionally perceived as one-way, with officials preferring to broadcast statements rather than engage in in-depth questioning by the press.

Independent media outlets and NGOs kept a watchful eye on the balance between necessary health messaging and government overreach. Organizations like ActiveWatch (a Romanian press freedom group) and international observers monitored any undue limitations on journalists. By May 2020, as the first wave eased and Romania transitioned to a “state of alert” (a less restrictive emergency), the consensus was that the government's clampdown on misinformation had a temporary and limited effect. It may have signaled that blatant fake news would not be tolerated, but it did not stop misinformation at its source. Meanwhile, the mainstream press emerged from the state of emergency with a mixed reputation – it had helped convey crucial information, but its heavy reliance on official sources and occasional sensationalism also drew some public criticism.

### **Mainstream Media vs. Independent Media Coverage**

Romania's media landscape is diverse, but uneven in reach and influence. Mainstream media – particularly national television networks and well-established news publications – command the largest audiences. Television is still the most familiar source of information in the country, especially for older generations, with around 186 TV channels available at national or local level. By contrast, independent media outlets, often digital-born and smaller in scale, target niche audiences with investigative journalism or fact-checking initiatives. The pandemic put both mainstream and

independent media to the test, revealing differences in their roles and approaches.

In 2020, the top television stations like Pro TV, Antena 1, and the 24-hour news channel Digi24 were primary conveyors of coronavirus updates. Pro TV and Digi24, in particular, were noted for providing frequent news reports and live updates on the pandemic. These outlets also scored relatively high in audience trust – surveys found them among the most trusted brands in Romanian media. Media analysts attributed this trust to their consistent, factual reporting style during the crisis. For example, Digi24 often invited medical experts or officials to explain the latest developments, maintaining a moderate tone rather than indulging in panic or conspiracy. The public radio station Radio România Actualități similarly gained listeners by offering sober, objective news and was one of the most-followed radio sources in summer 2020.

Nevertheless, a significant portion of Romanian news coverage remained sensationalist or politicized, even amidst the pandemic. Outrage-driven commentary is “stock in trade” for many Romanian talk shows and tabloids. Some private TV channels and online outlets have a tabloid or partisan bent and continued this style during the pandemic. For instance, channels like România TV (a popular news station) and certain talk shows on Antena 3 are known for a more sensational and sometimes speculative approach. Media researchers observed that these entertainment-oriented formats – emphasizing scandal, dramatic personal stories, and emotional debates – could exacerbate fear and insecurity during the pandemic. In fact, the continuous coverage of alarming news without sufficient context may have led parts of the audience to feel overwhelmed or distrustful of official reassurances

Independent media tried to fill gaps that mainstream coverage left. Outlets such as PressOne, Recorder, Rise Project, and G4Media continued



their work of investigative reporting and myth-busting in the COVID-19 context. For example, PressOne, an independent news site, took a significant interest in exposing false information; it published a series of articles debunking COVID-19 fake news and highlighting the sources of disinformation.

These outlets often tackled stories that larger media did not, such as detailed analyses of how fringe conspiracy theories were spreading on Facebook, or fact-checks of dubious claims made by public figures. In doing so, independent journalists played an important watchdog role, both over government actions and over the accuracy of information circulating in society.

One notable difference between mainstream and independent media was their susceptibility to political and commercial pressures. Major TV stations and newspapers in Romania are frequently tied to business interests or even direct funding from political actors. This can subtly (or not so subtly) influence their editorial line. During 2020, there were reports that some national outlets toned down criticism of authorities, possibly related to the government's financial aid to media (discussed later) or to existing contracts for political advertising. (eurotopics.net, 2020). Independent outlets, by contrast, often have clearer editorial independence but struggle with funding and reach. They rely on grants, subscriptions, or crowdfunding, which limits their scale. Thus, while independents might produce high-quality, critical journalism, their audience is mostly the urban online readership, and their impact on mass public opinion is smaller compared to prime-time TV news.

In summary, mainstream media served as the primary information pipeline to the Romanian public about COVID-19, with varying degrees of quality and responsibility. Some mainstream outlets rose to the occasion with diligent reporting, while others occasionally drifted into sensationalism or partisan framing. Independent media, though smaller in voice, contributed by

investigating underreported angles and challenging misinformation. Together, both sectors formed the information ecosystem in which Romanians navigated the pandemic news – an ecosystem that would soon be tested by an onslaught of false information and conspiracy narratives.

### **The Infodemic: Misinformation and Disinformation Spreading**

Alongside the public health crisis, Romania – like all countries – faced an “infodemic” in 2020: a surge of misinformation and disinformation about COVID-19. False or misleading information spread rapidly through social media, messaging apps, and sometimes even through mainstream channels, complicating the public’s understanding of the virus. The evolution of Romanian media coverage cannot be understood without examining how these false narratives emerged and how they were handled (or, at times, enabled) by media.

In the initial months (February–March 2020), misinformation was present but not yet dominant. However, as the pandemic progressed into the summer, COVID-19 conspiracy theories began to enter the mainstream discourse. (Disinformation Fuels Romania’s Coronavirus Spike, 2020). By mid-2020, surveys indicated a troubling level of belief in such theories among the Romanian public. For example, one poll found that 41% of Romanians believed COVID-19 was a man-made bioweapon created by the United States. This astonishing statistic points to the reach of a specific disinformation narrative that had circulated online since the early days of the pandemic. Romanian fact-checkers traced that claim to assorted fringe websites and foreign propaganda outlets, but its uptake by a large portion of the public suggested that mainstream discussions had not fully countered it.

Several major strands of COVID-19-related misinformation could be identified in Romania by mid to late 2020. These included:

Denial or Trivialization of the Virus: Claims that the coronavirus was a “hoax” or that its dangers were grossly exaggerated were propagated on social media and occasionally on talk shows. Some commentators insisted COVID-19 was “just a common cold” or “no worse than the flu,” contradicting official data on hospitalizations and deaths. Such narratives often went hand-in-hand with accusations that the media was needlessly scaring people.

Conspiracy Theories about Origin and Purpose: Multiple theories alleged nefarious origins of the virus. A prominent one held that the virus was artificially created as a biological weapon by a great power (the U.S. or China, depending on the variant). (Buturoiu et al., 2020) Others suggested the pandemic was orchestrated by global elites (such as a “New World Order”) to control populations or to profit from vaccines. In Romania’s information space, these theories were popular on fringe websites and Facebook groups, but occasionally found their way into mainstream coverage when, for instance, a politician or public figure mentioned them.

Misinformation about Government Actions: As seen with the stiridemoment.ro case, false stories about government plans or secret operations gained traction. Later in 2020, whenever new restrictions were anticipated, rumors would precede them – such as unfounded claims that the army would enforce a total lockdown or that grocery stores were about to close nationwide. The Strategic Communication Group often had to debunk such stories in press conferences.

Anti-mask and Anti-lockdown Narratives: When the government introduced mask mandates and social distancing rules, a counter-movement of skepticism formed. Disinformation campaigns targeted these health measures, arguing they were ineffective or violated personal freedoms. Notably, officials observed well-financed efforts aimed at young people, urging them to defy mask-wearing recommendations. Online videos and influencers promoted the

idea that masks were harmful or that COVID restrictions were a prelude to dictatorship. By the summer, small protests against masks and lockdowns took place, fueled in part by these messages.

Disinformation in Romania was amplified by a mix of domestic and foreign actors. Domestically, several politicians and media personalities gave voice to misleading narratives. An analysis by the Center for European Policy Analysis noted that some mainstream Romanian politicians “amplified and gave weight to online disinformation” (Disinformation Fuels Romania’s Coronavirus Spike, 2020) as part of their opposition to the government. In fact, one security expert pointed out that Romania’s largest opposition party at the time (the Social Democratic Party, PSD) harbored a significant number of outspoken coronavirus skeptics and deniers. Such figures used media appearances to question official COVID-19 statistics or to allege that restrictions were politically motivated. These messages, coming from familiar public figures, likely lent credence to conspiratorial ideas in the eyes of some citizens.

Foreign disinformation also played a role. Romanian-language platforms of foreign state media became active in sowing doubt. The most cited example was the Romanian edition of Sputnik (a Russian state-run outlet), which consistently promoted content undermining the severity of the virus and the legitimacy of Romania’s response. Sputnik ran stories suggesting that the virus’s effects were exaggerated by authorities and gave favorable coverage to anti-lockdown protests and conspiracy proponents. This mirrored tactics seen in other Eastern European countries, where Russian media sought to exploit the pandemic to erode trust in Western governments. The presence of these narratives required Romanian media consumers to discern between credible news and propaganda, a task that not everyone was prepared for.

Mainstream media's relationship with misinformation was complicated. On one hand, major news organizations frequently debunked rumors and gave airtime to doctors and scientists to dispel myths. On the other hand, in some instances they inadvertently became channels for questionable information. For example, national TV talk shows sometimes hosted guests who espoused conspiracy theories or promoted unproven remedies. Raed Arafat lamented that certain individuals "appeared in the mass media with opinions that lacked scientific basis, including doctors who are not specialized in COVID-related fields, arguing against preventive measures". These appearances could confuse viewers, especially when presented in a debate format without clear fact-checking by the hosts. Moreover, the drive for ratings may have led some shows to feature controversial figures for shock value, blurring the line between reporting on misinformation and amplifying it.

The Romanian government and fact-checkers tried to combat the infodemic through multiple means. The government's approach combined public warnings – officials often implored citizens to ignore "unofficial sources" spreading virus misinformation – with the more heavy-handed tactic of ordering website closures as described earlier. Authorities also launched a dedicated online platform to provide verified news ([stirioficial.ro](http://stirioficial.ro), "official news"), aiming to create a one-stop hub for accurate information and to rebut falsehoods circulating online. Meanwhile, independent fact-checking organizations and media projects sprang into action. Journalists translated and amplified international fact-checks for local audiences, and media literacy guides on how to spot fake COVID-19 news were shared by outlets. ([romania-insider.com](http://romania-insider.com), 2020). Despite these efforts, misinformation had a tangible impact on public behavior by mid-2020. As new cases surged in Romania over the summer, officials partially attributed the spike to poor adherence to rules caused by false beliefs. Arafat stated that disinformation "definitely had an

impact on the population, creating confusion and recruiting a number of people who stopped following the rules, stopped wearing masks and began propagating conspiracy theories,” thereby contributing to wider virus spread. This assessment indicates that the infodemic was not just a side-effect of the pandemic, but a factor that worsened the crisis. It underscores why the quality of media coverage – especially efforts to counteract disinformation – was so critical.

Studies of the Romanian public found clear correlations between media consumption and belief in COVID-19 conspiracies. One survey in 2020 showed that individuals with a higher tendency to believe conspiracy theories were more likely to rely on social media and information from friends/family, and less likely to trust traditional media or official sources. (Buturoiu et al., 2020). In other words, people who distrusted mainstream media often turned to alternative channels, which sometimes fed them even more misinformation, creating a vicious cycle. This dynamic presented a major challenge: how could credible information reach those segments of the population that were tuning out or doubting the mainstream press? Romanian independent outlets and some mainstream journalists worked to break this cycle by actively debunking conspiracies, but success was only partial.

### **Public Perception and Trust in the Media**

Public perception of the media’s performance during the pandemic was mixed and evolved over time. Trust in media is a longstanding issue in Romania – even before COVID-19, confidence in journalists and news institutions had been relatively low compared to European averages. The pandemic, however, put media trust to the test in a new way: people’s lives depended on accurate information, so the credibility of news could directly influence compliance with health guidelines. How the Romanian public viewed the media’s COVID-19 coverage by the end of 2020 was shaped by

both the media's actions and the tidal wave of misinformation described above.

Surveys conducted in 2020 provide insights into whom Romanians trusted for information about the coronavirus. In a national poll from late March 2020 (just after lockdown began), trust in official government sources was notably high. On a 7-point scale, respondents rated their trust in government-provided information (such as official statistics and specialized public health websites) at an average of 5.36. By contrast, trust in "legacy media" (TV, radio, newspapers, and journalists as a whole) was moderate, averaging 4.18 out of 7. Social media fared worst, with an average trust score of only 3.25. This early snapshot suggests that in the immediate crisis, many Romanians looked first to authoritative sources for guidance, and were wary of what they saw on Facebook or other social platforms. The low trust in social media aligns with people's perception of those platforms as hotbeds of "questionable information". (Buturoiu et al., 2020)

Despite only moderate trust ratings, mainstream news outlets were still a primary source of COVID-19 news for most citizens. The majority of people reported following pandemic news daily, mainly via television and online news sites. As long as media messages reinforced the official narrative (e.g., the necessity of lockdown), public opinion tended to follow suit. Indeed, during the strict lockdown in spring 2020, polls showed broad approval of the government's measures and a generally serious attitude toward the virus. This implies that the media's largely serious stance in that phase (coupled with the gravity of events in countries like Italy) effectively convinced the public of the risk.

However, as the year wore on, public trust in media became more polarized. Those who were predisposed to trust media and authorities continued to consume mainstream news and generally complied with recommendations. Others grew more skeptical, influenced by misinformation

or fatigue with restrictions. By the second half of 2020, one could observe divergent segments of the population: one segment that believed the pandemic was real and serious (often aligning with trusting mainstream news), and another segment that was doubtful or cynical (often aligning with alternative narratives). The latter group's outlook was reinforced by the echo chambers of social media. If a person fell into a social network rife with conspiracy theories, they were likely to encounter reinforcing content and see mainstream media as part of a cover-up or propaganda machine.

The reasons for low trust are not solely pandemic-related – they also stem from years of political influence over media, sensationalism, and corruption scandals in journalism. But the pandemic may have further eroded trust among some groups. Frequent changes in rules and recommendations (for example, shifting messages about mask usage or travel restrictions as scientific understanding evolved) made some people feel the media was “flip-flopping” or not providing clear answers, even when the changes were justified by new evidence. Additionally, instances where media exaggerated aspects of the crisis for dramatic effect could have backfired; if later those were seen as overblown, audiences might become cynical.

On the other hand, it's worth noting that trust in specific outlets actually increased for certain high-quality media by the end of 2020. Research by the Reuters Institute noted an “extraordinarily high degree of consensus” in Romania around COVID-19 containment measures by late 2020, which may have contributed to increased trust levels for most media brands surveyed. Essentially, when facing a common threat, people tended to rally around sources that consistently provided useful information. In Romania's case, outlets like Digi24, Pro TV, and Europa FM likely gained goodwill by being reliable and informative during the crisis. Many Romanians could see the difference between media that tried to inform and those that mainly



agitated or spread confusion. The former were rewarded with trust, the latter perhaps gained an audience among skeptics but not broad respect.

Public perception was also shaped by how media handled contentious issues such as the economic fallout and the conduct of authorities. News coverage of hospitals overwhelmed by patients, or of officials caught violating their own rules, affected whether people felt the media was holding power to account or not. Throughout 2020, Romanian media did report on problems like insufficient medical supplies, doctors speaking out about conditions, and other critical stories. These reports assured some in the public that the media was not just a mouthpiece for the government, but also scrutinizing the pandemic response. Nonetheless, those inclined to distrust might have viewed critical reports as confirmation that “something was being hidden” or, conversely, might dismiss them as media exaggeration.

By the end 2020, Romania had a public whose trust in media was notably divided. Many Romanians still tuned in regularly to TV news and trusted that the mainstream media was conveying the important facts – these people tended to accept health measures and acknowledge COVID-19’s seriousness. A significant minority, however, distrusted mainstream media deeply; they saw COVID coverage as either exaggerated or deceptive, and they gravitated to alternative voices. This split would have implications for the subsequent vaccination campaign and ongoing public health efforts. It also highlights how crucial the media’s credibility is during a crisis: once lost, it is very hard to regain among skeptics.

### **Government Influence and Financial Pressures on Media**

The Romanian government’s influence over media coverage during the pandemic was both direct and indirect. Directly, through its control of information flows and legal measures, the government shaped much of what was reported about COVID-19. Indirectly, through financial initiatives and

political ties, it affected media behavior and raised questions about independence.

One significant government intervention was the financial aid package for media launched in May 2020. The government created a fund of €40 million to pay media outlets for running public information campaigns about COVID-19 prevention. This program was ostensibly meant to support a struggling media industry (which had lost advertising revenue due to the economic slowdown) and to amplify health messages. Funds were disbursed as payments for advertising the state's COVID-19 safety campaign. Allocations were based on audience size, which meant some worried the scheme rewarded sensational and click-bait outlets simply because they had large audiences. While this infusion of money provided relief to many organizations – especially local newspapers and TV stations that were financially hurting – it was met with controversy. Media watchdogs immediately raised concerns about the lack of transparency and qualitative criteria for how the money was allocated. It turned out that a number of outlets with reputations for ethical lapses were among the beneficiaries, which critics argued could “end up favouring media outlets with a reputation for ethical lapses, and encouraging self-censorship” (Free Press Unlimited, 2020).

Opposition politicians and independent journalists accused the government (led by the National Liberal Party, PNL) of using the COVID-19 media campaign as a way to buy positive coverage in an election year. Romania had local elections in late 2020 and parliamentary elections in December 2020, so the timing of these payments raised suspicions of ulterior motives. Some termed it a “bribe” to the press. The government defended the program as a necessary public health measure and noted that contracts required media to run official health advertisements, not to alter their own reporting. Nonetheless, the perception lingered that certain media might go

soft on criticizing government policies because they were effectively on the government's payroll through year's end.

Aside from the funding scheme, it is important to note that even before the pandemic, many Romanian media outlets had close ties to political figures or parties. Investigations (such as Recorder.ro's 2019 exposé "The Price of Silence") revealed that both major parties – PSD and PNL – had funneled significant money to media via intermediaries in exchange for favourable or at least toned-down coverage. (eurotopics.net, 2020). In 2020, these practices likely continued behind the scenes. This meant some news organizations were financially motivated to align with either government or opposition narratives. During the pandemic, that could influence how statistics were interpreted or how blame was assigned. For example, an outlet sympathetic to the opposition might highlight missteps by the PNL-led government in handling the crisis, whereas a pro-government outlet might focus blame on citizens' behavior or on local authorities (many of whom were from PSD). Thus, the political leanings of media intersected with pandemic coverage.

Government influence also came through the control of the official narrative by the Strategic Communication Group, as discussed earlier. The fact that journalists were basically limited to official communiqués for core facts gave the government tremendous agenda-setting power. They decided what data to release and when. There were instances where reporters questioned the accuracy or completeness of official data – for example, concerns about under-testing or delays in reporting – but investigating those was challenging when all roads led back to government sources.

On the regulatory side, the National Audiovisual Council (CNA), which oversees broadcast media, took steps during 2020 to respond to pandemic coverage. The CNA issued recommendations to TV and radio channels to ensure accurate information and at times sanctioned broadcasters for spreading false or harmful claims. For instance, if a television station aired

a talk show where a guest claimed “COVID-19 doesn’t exist” or promoted panic, the CNA could fine the station for disseminating information contrary to official health advice. These fines did occur, adding a layer of accountability (though CNA decisions often came after the fact). In essence, state institutions actively policed media content to keep it aligned with public health needs – an action that, while arguably justified in a health emergency, raised debates about censorship.

The combined effect of these influences was complex. On one hand, the Romanian public did receive a steady stream of information campaigns and mostly uniform messaging about COVID-19 precautions, which likely contributed to higher awareness. On the other hand, the media’s dependence on official information and funding might have made some outlets less aggressive in investigative reporting or less critical of authorities. An example of potential self-censorship was the relative scarcity of stories investigating government procurement of medical supplies or questioning high-level decision-making – topics which independent media touched upon, but many mainstream outlets did not pursue in depth. Journalists aware of their outlet’s financial ties may have avoided “biting the hand that feeds,” consciously or not.

It’s also worth noting that not all government interactions with the media were heavy-handed; some were part of a natural crisis response. Media benefited from government briefings as ready content, and the government relied on media to disseminate urgent announcements (like curfews or school closures) widely and quickly. There were instances of effective collaboration, such as coordinated campaigns to encourage mask usage or to counter early vaccine misinformation, where media outlets and authorities worked in tandem for public benefit.

Overall, government influence permeated the COVID-19 media coverage through both regulation and financial support. While much of the

information provided by authorities was valuable and accurate, the environment in which Romanian journalism operated was constrained. This raises the question: did the media truly hold power accountable during the pandemic, or were they too closely integrated into the official narrative? The answer likely varies by outlet. Some independent voices maintained a critical stance, whereas much of the mainstream press walked a line between public service and pliancy to officialdom.

### **Scientific Reporting and Accuracy of Information**

The COVID-19 pandemic was as much a scientific story as it was a political or social one. Communicating complex epidemiological information, virology insights, and evolving medical guidelines to the public was a formidable task for journalists. Romanian media had to rapidly educate themselves and their audiences on concepts like virus transmission, exponential case growth, and clinical trial results. The accuracy and clarity of scientific reporting were crucial for public understanding and for dispelling myths.

In Romania, as in many countries, early scientific reporting leaned heavily on international sources. When the virus was new, Romanian outlets largely relayed findings from the World Health Organization (WHO), the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC), and reports from countries hit earlier by the virus. There was an emphasis on explaining what COVID-19 is, how it spreads, and why measures like hand washing and lockdowns were necessary. Visual explainers and infographics (often adapted from international agencies) appeared in newspapers and TV segments to illustrate concepts like flattening the curve and the importance of not overwhelming hospitals.

As the local medical community gained more experience with COVID-19 patients, Romanian experts began featuring more prominently in

the media. Epidemiologists and infectious disease doctors from major hospitals became regular guests on news programs. For example, Dr. Alexandru Rafila, a well-known microbiologist (and Romania's representative to the WHO at the time), appeared frequently on television to provide updates and answer questions. These experts often corrected misconceptions in real time – if a rumor spread that a certain drug was a “cure,” doctors would explain on TV that it was unproven or dangerous. In many instances, journalists deferred to medical authority, which generally helped maintain scientific accuracy and consistency.

However, conveying scientific nuance to the general public is challenging, and not all coverage hit the mark. One issue was the fast-changing nature of scientific knowledge about COVID-19. Guidance that was given in March might be updated by June as more was learned (for example, early on there was ambiguity about mask use, but by mid-2020 masks were strongly recommended). Some media reports did not always clearly communicate the uncertainty or rationale behind changing guidelines, leading to confusion. For instance, if one week the news said “scientists aren't sure about mask efficacy” and a month later it said “masks are essential,” some audience members perceived a contradiction and lost trust.

Another challenge was the presence of pseudo-experts and conflicting opinions. While many programs featured qualified experts, there were also cases where individuals with medical titles but lacking relevant expertise offered misleading commentary. Romanian media occasionally gave airtime to contrarian voices under the banner of providing balance or covering controversy. As noted, even doctors not specialized in epidemiology sometimes downplayed the virus or spread false claims. For example, a doctor of alternative medicine might have been interviewed and cast doubt on vaccines or promoted an unverified treatment. Such segments, if not clearly contextualized, could misinform viewers. Moreover, in live debates,

journalists were not always prepared to fact-check scientific falsehoods on the spot, which meant incorrect statements could slip through unchallenged.

Overall, many Romanian journalists strove for accuracy. Major news outlets frequently consulted the Ministry of Health or the Department for Emergency Situations for the latest verified information. When reporting on potential treatments (like the much-discussed drug hydroxychloroquine), the more responsible outlets noted when something was experimental or not yet approved by health authorities. There was also an effort to localize the science: for instance, covering Romanian researchers involved in international vaccine trials, or interviewing local specialists about their clinical experiences, which helped bring authority and relevance to the coverage.

One notable aspect of scientific communication was the handling of statistics. Every day's new case numbers, death tolls, and test counts became a staple of news coverage. Media reported these diligently, but the interpretation varied. Some outlets provided context – comparing case numbers to the number of tests done, explaining what a positivity rate means, or using simple charts to show trends over time. Others simply reported the raw figures, which could be misleading without context (for instance, 1,000 cases in a day might not mean the same thing in July as it did in March, if testing had increased significantly). The public's understanding of the pandemic's trajectory depended heavily on how well media explained these numbers.

By late 2020, with vaccine developments making headlines, scientific reporting took on a new challenge: addressing vaccine information and misinformation. Romanian media reported on the progress of leading vaccine candidates and the national plans for vaccination, which began in the final days of 2020. In doing so, they also started to tackle emerging vaccine skepticism. Outlets published explainer pieces about how the new mRNA vaccines work (and clarifying that they do not alter DNA, countering a myth),

and news programs featured doctors debunking false claims about microchips in vaccines – all to preempt the inevitable wave of vaccine-related misinformation.

In summary, the accuracy of scientific reporting in Romanian media up to December 2020 was a mixed but generally earnest effort. The mainstream media largely conveyed the core scientific facts about COVID-19: that it is a serious and contagious disease, that masks and distancing help, and that collective action is needed to curb its spread. They did so by leveraging expert voices and official sources, which helped keep outright scientific falsehoods at the margins of their news coverage. The lapses mostly came in the form of giving a platform to unqualified voices or occasionally sensationalizing scientific developments. Nonetheless, considering the magnitude of the task, Romanian media helped educate millions of people about an entirely new disease in a short span – an accomplishment that likely saved lives by informing people how to protect themselves. The lesson going forward is that rigorous, clear science communication needs to be a priority in journalism to maintain public trust and ensure compliance with health recommendations.

### **Conclusions**

By the end of 2020, Romania's media has undergone a profound trial by fire in covering the COVID-19 pandemic. The evolution of news coverage, from the first whispers of a distant outbreak to the all-consuming domestic crisis, tested the capacity and integrity of the press. In many ways, the media's role was indispensable – it kept the public continuously informed about restrictions, health advice, and the progression of the virus. At the same time, the pandemic exposed and sometimes amplified underlying weaknesses in the media ecosystem, from tendencies toward sensationalism to vulnerabilities to political influence and misinformation.



Several key themes emerge from this analysis:

**Unified Messaging vs. Pluralism:** In the early crisis, a relatively unified media message (echoing official guidelines) helped reinforce urgent public health directives. Over time, however, pluralism in media reasserted itself – with some outlets maintaining a sober tone and others injecting skepticism or political spin. The balance between speaking with one voice for public safety and allowing open debate was continually tested.

**The Infodemic and Countermeasures:** Misinformation and conspiracy theories proliferated alongside factual news. This infodemic required active responses: some media took on the challenge by fact-checking and debunking falsehoods, while others (including authorities) resorted to censorship measures. The Romanian experience showed that fake news can significantly sway public behavior, making it vital for media and officials to counter false narratives without undermining free expression.

**Public Trust and Media Credibility:** Trust in media proved to be both fragile and vital. Quality, consistent reporting earned increased trust for some outlets, whereas evident biases or errors fueled public skepticism. The pandemic highlighted that trust is the result of long-term credibility – and that in times of crisis, people will gravitate to sources they find reliable, while tuning out those they suspect.

**Government Relations with the Media:** The Romanian government became a major player in the information space, from controlling data releases to funding media campaigns. This heavy involvement helped disseminate essential information but also posed risks to media independence, as noted by international observers who warned against undue restrictions. The interplay of government influence and media freedom was a defining tension in Romania's pandemic story.

**The Role of Independent Media:** Independent outlets, though smaller in reach, played a crucial role in broadening the coverage – investigating

authorities, exposing disinformation, and representing alternative voices. Their work underscored the importance of media pluralism: a media landscape dominated solely by large, influential outlets might have missed important stories or failed to check those in power.

Overall, the evolution of coronavirus-related news in Romanian media reveals a media sector that is adaptive and resilient yet fraught with challenges. Romanian media managed to keep the public continuously informed in the face of a fast-moving and deadly pandemic – an accomplishment in itself. But the journey was uneven, marked by periods of exemplary journalism as well as moments of faltering under pressure from political, economic, or social forces. The COVID-19 experience in Romania highlights the importance of bolstering journalistic standards and independence, improving collaboration between media and authorities with respect for free expression, and investing in public media literacy. These steps are crucial to ensure that when the next crisis hits, the media can perform its democratic duty effectively, earning and maintaining the public’s trust. Ultimately, a well-informed society is better equipped to handle a pandemic, and the media are the key intermediaries in that knowledge process – a fact made clearer than ever by the events of 2020 in Romania.

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