Framing a Kidnapping: Frame Convergence between Online Newspaper Coverage and Reader Discussion Posts of Three Kidnapped Romanian Journalists

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Abstract

In late March 2005, three Romanian journalists were kidnapped by an obscure group of Iraqi militants near Baghdad. Several unusual details about the circumstances of the kidnapping prompted the Romanian media to investigate the speculation regarding the authenticity and motives of this high profile case. This thesis project extends framing theory to incorporate macro-level frames such as cynicism, speculation and metacommunication as dominant reporting styles in this evolving democracy. A systematic content analysis was performed on 255 news stories spanning 75 days from *Evenimentul Zilei* and *Jurnalul National*. Additionally, 2,941 of their subsequent online reader discussion posts were content analyzed using the same categories as the news stories to serve as a point of comparison between media reports and public discussion about this case. Results support evidence of generic media framing and extend the theory to demonstrate media’s reliance on speculation and metacommunication as overarching reporting styles. Online deliberation between readers in this evolving democracy demonstrates difficulties in citizens’ abilities to emerge from the spiral of cynicism characteristic of the post-communist Romania. While media establish the issues for public dialogue, they do not appear responsible for setting the tone.
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To my dear mom - my mentor and role model

To my beloved husband - my kindred spirit and best friend
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I. Statement of Purpose

There appears to be widespread agreement in the communication discipline that media frames exert certain influences upon the audience (i.e. Capella & Jamieson, 1996; de Vreese, 2003; Gamson & Modigliani, 1989; Iyengar & Simon, 1993; Price, Tewksbury, & Powers, 1997; Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000). Some researchers have repeatedly signaled the existence of recurrent media frames and how they may influence how people think about the issues reported (i.e. Price, Tewksbury, & Powers, 1997; Valkenburg, Semetko, & de Vreese, 1999).

However, as Scheufele (1999) pointed out, scant significant research has been designed to provide a better understanding of this transfer of frames, from media to the audience. Few studies exist with media frames as a predictor variable and audience frames as a dependent variable (see Scheufele, 1999 for a notable exception). Robert Entman (1993) defined framing as a way in which “influence over human consciousness is exerted by the transfer … of information from one location – such as a speech, utterance, news report, or novel – to that consciousness” (p. 51-52). This research project uses Entman’s definition of framing and aims to contribute to the academic literature by comparing media frames to the audience frames in order to analyze the relationships and differences that may exist between the two. This project also intends to extend the existing research on generic frames – “responsibility,” “human interest,” “consequences,” “morality,” and “conflict” (see Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000) by proposing three additional generic “macro-frames” – “cynicism,” “speculations,” and “metacommunication.” Furthermore, this thesis aims to integrate the Internet as a tool of quantitative research on individual frames. Additionally, exploring framing within a young and developing European democracy such as Romania, with its rapidly evolving privatized media will provide a fresh look into the framing process beyond the American model that dominates much of the framing literature.
The choice of the event is not random. The kidnapping of the three Romanian journalists provides a specific case worthy of intensive analysis. On the national level, this event received wide coverage by the Romanian electronic and print media. The issue coverage was so extensive because it spanned a range of social, political, and economic consequences. At an international level, it spurred debates regarding Romania’s role in the Iraqi conflict and its relationships with the US and European Union. Finally, the online newspapers became a central player in disseminating the latest news on the case as well as creating a space for public comment. In this respect, monitoring reports of web traffic for the most widely circulated Romanian online newspapers showed increases of up to 200% for page viewings on the date the event occurred (http://www.trafic.ro, 2005).

The availability and access to online news and audience posts, the event’s multiple developments, and the issue resolution created a rich and extensive case for a framing analysis. While the significance of the kidnapping event may not typify events of national or international importance among journalists or Romanian citizens, its significance created a multitude of public responses available for an analysis of frame comparison between media and public response. The time span for the issue stages, from emergence through resolution, also created a finite period for a complete investigation of the issue. These elements, along with the opportunity to enrich and expand framing theory and processes, serve as strong justifications for this study.

Bearing these considerations in mind, as well as the wide national media coverage, this event may be considered an ideal starting point for furthering the existing scholarship in framing effects toward the online media. This project traces 75 days of online news stories and public forum posts surrounding the kidnapping of the three journalists.
II. The Event of the Decade – An Overview

*The Kidnapping*

The news announcing the unprecedented case of kidnapping of three Romanian journalists in Iraq appeared to stun much of Romania. One male cameraman (Sorin Miscoci) and one female reporter (Marie-Jeanne Ion) from *Prima TV*, and one male journalist (Ovidiu Ohanesian) from the national daily newspaper *Romania Libera* were captured near Baghdad on March 28, 2005 while they were preparing to interview an Iraqi official. Their “guide,” Muhamad Munaf, a dual citizen of Iraq and the U.S., also was taken hostage. During the abduction, the female journalist managed to send a text message announcing their kidnapping to one of her colleagues at *Prima TV*. She was also heard begging the kidnappers to set them free during a cell phone conversation made during the early moments of the capturing. The next day, the kidnappers demanded a $4 million ransom from Omar Hayssam, a Syrian businessman living in Romania. Two days after the kidnapping, the Arab-speaking TV station *Al Jazeera* released a video tape showing the three journalists along with their guide. The tape spurred a host of speculations made by the Romanian media because of its unusual and atypical content. For instance, the setting of the video shooting was highly uncommon for kidnapping tapes, while the shooting itself seemed professional and directed (Ciocan & Comanescu, 2005). The kidnappers did not make any comments regarding the ransom on the tape.

Immediately after learning Hayssam was contacted by the kidnappers, *Evenimentul Zilei*, one of the most popular and widely circulated Romanian daily newspapers, published several of its own investigative stories dating back from late 2004 exposing Hayssam’s questionable and
legally suspect business with the former Romanian government and then leading Social Democratic Party\textsuperscript{1} (PSD).

\textit{The Crisis Stage and Negotiations}

On April 3, the newly established “crisis squad” led by President Traian Basescu made the first contact with the kidnappers. The “crisis squad” comprised of top political figures such as the prime minister, the foreign affairs minister, and the defense minister, as well as several officials representing the Romanian Foreign Intelligence Service. Hayssam’s brother became involved in the rescue efforts and traveled to Baghdad to get in touch with the kidnappers. A proof of life was given two days later, and the kidnappers’ negotiator requested the retreat of Romanian troops from Iraq. Omar Hayssam was arrested on the same day for his illegal business and possible connections with the kidnappers. In the meantime, the media uncovered an alleged business relationship between the kidnapped female reporter’s father, Senator Vasile Ion, and Omar Hayssam.

After two tense weeks of painstaking silence by the government, on April 22 the kidnappers released a second tape threatening to kill the hostages unless the Romanian government gave a $30 million ransom and withdrew all of the Romanian troops from Iraq. There was no mention of the fourth hostage, Munaf. The kidnappers set an April 26 deadline for their demands. It was also the first time the kidnappers identified themselves as the Muadh bin Jabel group. When the deadlines came, the kidnappers continually agreed to extend additional 24 hour periods. In the meantime, the Romanian government agreed not to give in to any of the kidnappers’ threats and not to pull the 800 Romanian troops from Iraq. The crisis squad

\textsuperscript{1} In the August 13\textsuperscript{th} 2004 issue, \textit{Evenimentul Zilei} unveiled Hayssam’s shady purchase of a Romanian electronic components factory and its auxiliary land, at a price reportedly 30 times lower than their official value. In the November 9\textsuperscript{th} 2004 issue, \textit{Evenimentul Zilei} published an interview with Hayssam regarding an ongoing investigation probing allegations such as undermining the national security and fraud.
convincing the Iraqi Council of Wise Muslims to act as negotiators in the crisis, and they first unsuccessfu­lly attempted to convince the kidnappers to let the female reporter go on religious grounds. The Council of Wise Muslims was a group of Iraqi spiritual leaders traditionally influential on social and political matters. On May 3, the first attempt to free the journalists failed. Silence followed for the next ten days, and the Romanian officials did not release any information to the media except for the grim news that the contact with the kidnappers had become very difficult. A second proof of life was given on May 8. During the following days, the Romanian Secret Service began a ground operation in Iraq to free the hostages, which ended successfully on May 22. The next day, the three journalists were brought home to their families.

_Freed Journalists’ Statements_

On June 2, the three journalists held their first press conference following their release. According to a story published by the daily newspaper _Jurnalul National_, the three did not give any new information and they seemed to deepen the suspicion surrounding their involvement in the kidnapping (Stancu, Nedea & Florea, 2005). More precisely, _Jurnalul National_ speculated that the female reporter might have known about the kidnapping plan through her father’s acquaintance with Omar Hayssam. She was also suspected by media of being involved in a romantic relationship with Hayssam in the past.

Several other supposedly questionable and suspicious statements were highlighted by _Jurnalul National_, including speculation about the fourth hostage’s situation (Mohamad Munaf), the three journalists’ ability to obtain Iraqi visas on short notice, the kidnappers’ affiliation and origin of the Muadh bin Jabel group, and whether one of the journalists had been beaten during the detention (Stancu, Nedea & Florea, 2005).
Sealed Investigation

A few days after the journalists met with the media, President Traian Basescu held his own press conference. His statements ignited a host of other speculations, especially after the President declared that the entire content of the investigation would be classified for at least 50 years (“Rapitorii au cerut”, 2005). However, President Basescu confirmed that Omar Hayssam planned the kidnapping in order to exonerate himself from involvement in numerous corruption trials and to get $4 million out of Romania. The President also reported that Mohamad Munaf, the fourth hostage, lived in Romania and was responsible for the kidnappings. President Basescu asserted that there was no evidence supporting the journalists’ prior knowledge of the framed kidnapping, but he called the journalists irresponsible because of their departure to Iraq.

One of the last developments in the crisis was the June 11, 2005 freeing of French journalist Florence Aubernas who was held hostage in Iraq for 157 days. As French President Jacques Chiraq stated, the freeing of Aubernas was a direct result of the information provided by the Romanian journalists and the operations of the Romanian secret services. Even though Aubernas’ initial statements denied that she had shared the same cell with the Romanian reporters for a brief period of time, official French sources confirmed this information (Ulmanu, Bulat & Bellu, 2005).

President’s Role

Throughout the unfolding of the event, a special role was played by President Traian Basescu. His political past, recent election as a president (November, 2004), as well as his straightforward personality put President Basescu under intense media and public scrutiny. According to the official Presidential website, Basescu had several appointments as commercial ship captain between 1976 and 1987, and then held a few administrative positions in the Ministry
of Transportation between 1989 and 1991. In 1991, Basescu began his political career in the Democratic Party and was appointed Minister of Transportation. In 1992, he was elected deputy in the Romanian Parliament until 1996 when he was again appointed Minister of Transportation under three successive governments. Between November 2000 and November 2004, Traian Basescu was Mayor of Bucharest, the capital of Romania, where he embarked on a program of rapid renovation and reform in the city.

Basescu’s candidacy for president in November 2004 was surprising to many media and citizens alike. Theodor Stolojan, the common candidate for the Democratic Party and National Liberal Party, withdrew from the presidential race announced in early October 2004 due to health problems. Stolojan’s announcement created a political void and unique opportunity for Basescu. A week later, the representatives of the two-party alliance named Traian Basescu as Stolojan’s replacement to the presidential race. The announcement stunned much of the media and public. As one popular newspaper wrote shortly after the announcement, Basescu had to prove he was worthy of being a good president due to his notorious rugged personality and former years as a commercial ship captain (Boda, 2004). But despite skepticism among Romanian media, many foreign media sources approved of Basescu’s candidacy and subsequent election as a president because of his “pro-western” views (i.e. BBC, 2004; Shepherd, 2004).

The fact that this kidnapping incident was a media event is ironic, given the position of Romania just slightly more than a decade previously. As the next section will demonstrate, this media event would not have been possible in communist Romania.
III. Post-communist Romania: A Brief Account of Print Media and Public Opinion

Media’s Growing Pains

The Romanian mass media landscape has been a territory of rapid and spectacular changes after the anti-communist movement in 1989. For example, the latest statistical data regarding the evolution of print media between 1990 and 2003 show an irregular trend in the total number of daily newspapers titles: the lowest points in this trend were in 1990, 1997 and 2003, while the highest were in 1992, 1996 and 1999 (see Figure 1). In the period immediately following 1989, there was only one state-owned TV station. Fifteen years later, in 2004, there were 189 licensed TV channels, including a 24-hour news channel (IREX, 2005).

However, these changes were defined by a major lag in print and electronic media development. In early post-communist Romania, print media was the first mass medium to undergo major transformations toward democracy and free speech, mostly due to rapid growth of print titles and quick privatization of press institutions. The electronic media followed this trend only several years after Ceaușescu’s five-decade long communist regime was overthrown. For example, the first private TV station began broadcasting in late 1995, and it was slowly followed by other private stations in subsequent years (Carey, 1996). This delay in the private and open Romanian mass media could be explained by the economic, political, and cultural constraints that define the transition from a centralized and coercive power system to a democratic and free society.

The emergence of a free and responsible print media in Romania’s young democratic political system had a slow and uneasy start. Ceaușescu envisioned the press as “an instrument of

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2 The data was obtained from the Romanian National Statistical Institute (www.insse.ro)
3 According to the 2005 Media Sustainability Index report by the International Research & Exchanges Board – Independent Media, not all of the 189 licensed TV stations actually function.
the [communist] party which should disseminate the party’s political views throughout all the domains of activity” (cited in Petcu, 2000, p. 18). In this authoritarian and dogmatic context, the journalistic practice was only meant to cultivate Ceaușescu’s personality, to explain and propagate the Communist Party’s ideology, to mobilize the population toward attaining the economic, social, political and cultural objectives set by the party, and to shield the foreign attacks on Ceaușescu’s politics (Petcu, 2000). The Romanian print media had served these functions for more than 40 years before the onset of the democratic change in 1989, and continued to serve the new political leaders’ purposes several years after 1990 (Marga, 1993).

The National Salvation Front (FSN) assumed political power during the first hours of the newborn democracy at the end of December 1989. The new leaders promised an elated Romania political pluralism, free elections, and free initiative among many other things which were characteristic of a democratic society. However, FSN soon shifted their focus away from these promises and began to orchestrate a large-scale manipulation and propaganda, mainly through television, in order to turn “the newly created opposition into a mere functional complement of the new established power” (Marga, 1993, p. 14). The elections for local offices were postponed more than two years, a period of time in which Romania resumed its decades-long tradition of single-party ruling, this time under the neo-communist FSN. When local elections finally took place in February 1992, they were shrouded in electoral fraud. But a beam of hope emerged, as Andrei Marga (1993) concluded: it was observed that “the number of votes for the parties interested in a change of regime was higher in the regions of the country where the population was better informed” (p. 15). Clearly, the democratic idea of media as a watch dog of government rather than a voice of government had significant benefit for the Romanian population.
The sharp increase of daily newspaper titles between 1990 and 1992 (i.e. from 65 to 102, see Appendix 1) coincided with the beginning of Romania’s democratization process: The democratic opposition began to have a higher degree of freedom of speech in national daily newspapers than on TV (Carey, 1996). However, as Petcu (2000) noted, the early post-communist Romanian print media landscape was dominated by a clash of rival discourses – those representing the ruling power and the opposition, respectively.

Media’s Rhetorical Discourse

Gina and André Stoiciu (as cited in Petcu, 2000) identified four major categories of Romanian print media discourse in the early 1990s: official, opposition, alternative and populist discourse, respectively. The four discourses can be summarized briefly as follows:

- the official discourse was aimed to strengthen and legitimize the ruling power (i.e. the “neo-communists”),
- the opposition discourse targeted the ruling power and fiercely criticized its politics,
- the alternative discourse functioned mainly as a “watchdog” of the official and opposition discourse, while
- the populist discourse was dominated by the tabloid and nationalist press.

The official rhetoric was preoccupied with perpetuating the communist myth of “national enemies.” In this case, the “enemies” were embodied by the opposition, students, intellectuals, or those who had pro-monarchy views.4 Libertatea, which currently is an aggressive national daily tabloid, was among the newspapers that adhered to the official discourse.

The opposition discourse was aimed at the ruling power and fiercely criticized its politics. The most important sources of this discourse were the representatives of the reborn “historical

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4 Romania was a constitutional monarchy between 1866 and 1947 when the communists took over.
parties” which were annihilated by the communist regime during the mid-1940s. These parties, which included the National Peasant Party and the Liberal Party, became active in December 1989 and revived their traditional party press, such as Romania Libera and Cotidianul, respectively. According to official circulation data from 1990, Romania Libera printed between 300,000 to 1,000,000 copies a day in its first year\(^5\) (Carey, 1996).

The third type of print media discourse, the alternative discourse, functioned mainly as a “watchdog” of the official and opposition discourse. The most important feature of the alternative discourse was its elitist and highly intellectual profile. As Petcu (2000) pointed out, this type of discourse had strong literary features rooted in the 19\(^{th}\) century “literary press” which had been the intellectuals’ weapon against the establishment. This unique type of journalism was reborn after 1989 and featured a handful of print titles (i.e. Dilema, 22) which had a low but very loyal readership. Among the characteristics of the alternative discourse were a vivid and judgmental writing style, satire, and a highly metaphoric journalistic language (Petcu, 2000).

The populist discourse included two main types of newspapers: tabloids and nationalist press. The Romanian tabloid press was initiated by Evenimentul Zilei in 1992. During its first year, Evenimentul Zilei’s highly sensationalistic style of reporting stimulated a spectacular spike in its circulation which ranged between a minimum of 600,000 to a maximum of 800,000 copies daily (Carey, 1996). The nationalist press, the second type of populist discourse, was led by Romania Mare, a weekly publication of the extremist Greater Romania party. The party’s virulent attacks against the opposition and/or the ruling power are still disseminated through Romania Mare today.

Until 1996, Romanian print media was largely dominated by journalists with overt political affiliations and significant influence over national or local elections. For example, in his

\(^5\) In 1990, Romania had a population of 23.2 million people (National Statistics Institute, 2005)
overview of the Romanian print media up to late 1990s, Petcu (2000) mentioned that journalists oftentimes contested the electoral results, even when the democratic opposition approved of the legal coordinates of the elections. Moreover, the press often lashed out at their readership (thus, the electorate) and accused them of lacking political maturity.

The conflictual relationship that the Romanian newspapers had with politics in the 1990s is illustrated by several recurrent characteristics outlined by Petcu (2000). For example, print media sought not only to become a political institution per se, but also to pervade the political process as well. Following the opposition party (the Democratic Convention) victories in 1996, 12 journalists were rewarded with important and influential jobs in various political branches of the state.

Another characteristic of the print media was opposition for the ruling power regardless of real or imaginary motives, and by doing so journalists self-glorified their role in the political process. This self-glorifying practice is still pervasive today in newspapers such as *Evenimentul Zilei* or *Jurnalul National* which emphasize their involvement in a particular crisis or situation. For example, when the first speculations were made about the connection of the Syrian businessman Omar Hayssam to the kidnapping of the three Romanian journalists in Iraq, *Evenimentul Zilei* reminded its readers of the newspaper’s earlier attempts to expose Hayssam’s illegal operations in Romania (Sercan, Badin, Onofrei & Dan, 2005; Sercan & Barbu, 2005).

Besides trying to become a political power, the print media attempted to generate political crises as well, according to Petcu (2000). By maintaining a speculative and tendentious view, the print sources often generated major political crises such as resignations of high officials (i.e. former prime minister’s Victor Ciorbea resignation in 1998 was allegedly caused by press commentaries). Petcu’s allegation that media are speculative and tendentious will be analyzed
more closely in this project through the kidnapping event. For example, *Evenimentul Zilei* along with other influential national dailies such as *Jurnalul National* began to speculate about the kidnapped journalists’ “true” intentions (i.e. Iorga, 2005) and the involvement of certain politicians in this complex incident (i.e. Sercan & Laslau, 2005).

*Media Sustainability Index*

A more recent report painted a seemingly improved and optimistic picture of the Romanian media. The 2005 Media Sustainability Index report by the International Research & Exchanges Board (IREX) concluded there was an overall improvement in the Romanian media landscape during 2005, with an overall score of 2.56 (“Near sustainability”) out of a possible 4 (“Sustainable”) (IREX, 2005). The report, which includes eight Romanian panelists’ evaluations of five different variables on a scale from 0 to 4, cited significant progress for *free speech regulations* (2.83, up 0.39 points from 2004) and *plurality of news sources* (2.67, up 0.57 points from 2004). However, less dramatic improvement compared to past reports was recorded for meeting the criteria of *professional journalism* (2.09, up 0.29 points from 2004, but less 0.12 points than 2002), *business management* (2.58, up 0.30 points from 2004) and *supporting institutions* which should function in the professional interests of independent media (2.62, up 0.03 points from 2004). The greatest concern was expressed for the lack of professional standards in print and electronic media. As one panelist stated in the report, “the main cause is the journalists’ laziness – they do not contact all the sources” (p. 90). Other concerns were related to the increasing influence that the advertisers have over the editorial content and to the rising quota of entertainment content.

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6 The International Research & Exchanges Board report evaluates the media landscape of several countries on a scale from 0 to 4.00 as follows: 0-1 = Unsustainable, anti-free press, 1-2 = Unsustainable mixed system, 2-3 = Near sustainability, and 3-4 = Sustainable.
Public Opinion Barometer

A brief look at some trends in Romanian public opinion changes over the last 10 years (1996-2005) may also be helpful in providing a more encompassing context for the present research project which revolves around the relationship between two substantial media and their audiences. Since 1994, the Open Society Foundation (OSF), financed by the American businessman and philanthropist George Soros, started a nationwide research program called the Public Opinion Barometer (BOP\textsuperscript{7}). According to foundation’s website, the bi-annual Public Opinion Barometer has been aiming to help Romanian public institutions and non-governmental organizations to better understand the dynamic relationships between the power structures and society (OSF, 2006).

For the purpose of this brief discussion about the trends in Romanian public opinion as they emerged from OSF’s surveys, three key electoral moments have been considered: 1) 1996, when the democratic opposition won the presidential and parliamentary elections for the first time, 2) 2000, when the former “neo-communist” party (Romanian Social Democrat Party) won the elections under a revised party name (Social Democrat Party) and political strategy, and 3) 2004, when the Presidential elections were unexpectedly won by the Social Democrat Party candidate’s opponent, Traian Basescu. Additional data from the latest available survey (November 2005) is included in this brief overview in order to present relevant information which was not recorded in earlier surveys (i.e. 2000 or 1996).

According to the team of researchers led by Voicu (2005) and who coordinated the survey, an improvement in the population’s optimism regarding the direction of Romania’s future was recorded. Namely, less Romanians thought Romania was headed in a \textit{wrong} direction

\textsuperscript{7} The sample is representative for the total national population and allows for up to +/-2.8\% margin of error
in 2004 (46%) when compared to 2000 (66%) and 1996 (50%). An even more significant improvement was recorded for the percentages of those who believed that the country was headed in a *good* direction in 2004 (41%) as opposed to 2000 (12%) and 1996 (28%).

In 2005, one year after Traian Basescu’s election as President and 16 years after the communist regime fell, most Romanians believed that democracy was essential to their lives, but they shared a cynical view regarding the level of democracy Romania achieved. For instance, on a scale from 1 (lowest) to 10 (highest), almost half of the Romanians believed that living in a democratic country was of maximum importance, but only 3% believed that Romania was a real democracy. Furthermore, 35% of the Romanians were (very) dissatisfied with how democracy worked in their country, while 39% shared a sentiment of indifference (neither satisfied nor unsatisfied). In terms of political affiliations (i.e. leftist or rightist), on a scale from 1 to 10, only 52% of the respondents had a clear political stance. Of this percentage, most of them considered themselves rightist (6 and up). However, the national average was only 6 on the same scale, which paints a rather moderate attitude toward Romanians’ perceptions of the political spectrum.

Finally, an insightful look into Romanian public opinion was offered of the institutions they trusted most. The Church had been the most trusted institution since the survey was initiated in 1994 totaling at least 83% in 1996, 2000, and 2004, while the Army had been the second most trusted institution with at least 67% during the same election years. Interestingly, trust in the Presidential institution shifted very frequently and dramatically between 1997 (first year this variable was included in the survey) and 2004. The lowest level of trust Romanians had in their President was between November 1999 and November 2000 when the Social Democrat Party (neo-communist) won the elections (21% and 19%, respectively), while the highest was in September 1997, almost one year after the opposition had won the elections for the first time.
Interestingly enough, since the November 2004 elections, Romanians seemed to have improved their levels of trust in the President (41% in 2004, 51% in 2005), but these levels were lower than in September 1997 (62%). Mass media as an institution was introduced in the survey in June 2002, and the data reveal an interesting and surprising picture: mass media were constantly the third most trusted institution in Romania between 2002 and 2004, varying between 55% and 63%. In November 2005, the survey segmented the “mass media” variable into “print” and “TV”, and the data showed two interesting findings: first, the overall level of trust in either of these two mass media dropped relative to the previous years, and secondly, television seemed more trustworthy than the print media (53% versus 41%).

The brief review of the Romanian print media and public opinion after 1989 revealed an insightful look at the Romanian public opinion about democracy and general cynicism. The print media have had a tumultuous and ambivalent relationship with politics: they first continued to serve as party propaganda tools in early 1990s, and then they became essential instruments in propagating the democratic opposition’s views. The tabloid press started in 1992 and has remained a strong source in the Romanian media market. Romanian print media’s propensity toward speculation and sensationalism has become an overarching characteristic which will be reflected upon in the present research project.

The Public Opinion Barometer provided an interesting outlook of Romanians’ attitudes toward politics, democracy and its institutions. As an overall conclusion, Romanians seem to be hopeful for their personal and their country’s future, but when asked about the present situation, a more pessimistic and cynical attitude was recorded. Romanians have also kept their religious beliefs strong as they trust the Church the most. The Presidency appears to have regained the nation’s trust, but at an erratic and unsteady pace, proving that Romanians are very sensitive to
the particularities (i.e. specific political scandals, crises, etc) and less willing to look at the bigger picture (i.e. the long-term gains of being led by a certain President). Finally, mass media were surprisingly viewed as trustworthy from 1997 until 2005 when the trust levels started to diminish. In 2005, Romanians trusted the television more than the newspapers, an imbalance which may indicate that the newspapers continue to promote their speculative and sensationalistic outlook on politics and society.

This brief historical overview of Romanian media in the post-communist era helps contextualize a media and political relationship characterized as erratic but increasingly stable and trustworthy. The following section will provide a theoretical foundation for examining newspapers’ and audience’s frames. It will also discuss the nature of the Internet as a new information outlet alongside the traditional media, as well as the opportunities this new medium offers to communication research in general and framing theory in particular.

IV. Literature Review

The ensuing overview of existing literature aims to provide justification for this study and to create a bridge between two rich and increasingly interrelated areas of communication research: framing theory and new media (the Internet\textsuperscript{8}). The most relevant theoretical perspectives on the concept of framing will be discussed, including de Vreese’s classification (2003) of generic and issue-specific frames. Then, an overview of the existing literature on audience frames will be presented. Next, the most relevant issues concerning new media will be examined (i.e. its logic, current trends in online journalism, and the role of the online news media

\textsuperscript{8} For the purpose of this paper, the terms “new media” and “Internet” are used interchangeably, although they are not perfect synonyms.
audience). This section will be concluded with a brief discussion of the existing opportunities and challenges facing Internet research, with a special focus on communication studies.

**IV. a. Framing Theory**

*Defining the Concept of Framing*

Framing is a complex and disputed concept that it is almost impossible to define it briefly. As Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) noticed, there is no unique and encompassing definition of the concept, but rather many perspectives that share similar characteristics. For the purpose of this study, the vast array of interpretations will be limited to a selected few, such as Entman’s (1993) definition which defines framing as a way in which “influence over human consciousness is exerted by the transfer (or communication) of information from one location – such as a speech, utterance, news report, or novel – to that consciousness” (p. 51-52). More specifically, Entman suggested that

> To frame is to *select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation* for the item described. (Entman, 1993, p. 52, italics in original).

Entman elaborated by saying that frames can have different functions, such as defining problems, diagnosing causes, making moral judgments, or suggesting remedies. In addition to these functions, Entman argued that frames have at least four locations in the communication process: *the communicators* (i.e. the journalist) who “make conscious or unconscious framing judgments” (p. 52), *the text* (i.e. the news story) which may or may not contain a certain frame,
the receiver (i.e. the online or offline audience) whose conclusions after reading or being exposed to the news story may or may not reflect the story’s frames, and finally, the culture in which both the communicator and the receiver live and exchange meaning (Entman, 1993).

Emerging from the intentional dimension of the process of framing outlined by Entman (1993), Pan and Kosicki (1992) pointed out that “frames are negotiated and framing involves interactions between texts, text producers, and audience members operating in the environment of various social influences” (p. 5). These two views about framing are particularly relevant to the idea of media effects, as they assume that there is a cause-effect relationship between journalists’ framed stories and the audience’s interpretations of those news stories.

Other views have rooted framing in cultural theory where media and public opinion interact with each other in order to socially construct meaning. For example, drawing from Todd Gitlin’s earlier work on media frames, Gamson and Modigliani (1989) conceptualized frames as the core of media’s interpretative “packages.” Gamson and Modigliani described these complex views of the world elicited by stylistic devices such as metaphors, exemplars, catchphrases, depictions, or visual images. This early attempt to identify a set of three overarching “reasoning devices” - roots, such as a causal analysis, consequences, and appeals to a principle - served as an important precursor to the generic frames scholarship (i.e. Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000).

No discussion about framing would be complete without mentioning the intense scholarly debate regarding the second level of agenda setting and its (argued) relationship to the concept of framing. Agenda-setting theory is undoubtedly one of the most influential and fertile communication theories. Its supposition that there is a connection between media’s ranking of issues and public’s ranking has been repeatedly supported by numerous studies (see Weaver, McCombs & Shaw, 2004 for a review of studies). Fairly recently, agenda-setting scholars began
distinguishing between *first level* agenda-setting and *second level* agenda-setting (McCombs, Shaw & Weaver, 1997). As Weaver, McCombs & Shaw (2004) explain, the first level of agenda-setting discusses the public issues as *objects* which have certain characteristics or *attributes*. These attributes are considered the second level of agenda-setting, and are often operationalized as the specific ways in which the journalists (or the media) present an object or an issue as well as how the public thinks about it (Ghanem, 1997).

Weaver, McCombs & Shaw (2004) acknowledge the fact that many scholars have recently tried to connect the second level of agenda-setting to the concept of framing. The similarities are, to some extent, obvious: they both attempt to delineate the way an issue or news story is packaged and delivered to the public, by attaching meaning and interpretation, as well as the journalist’s own inherent subjectivity. Takeshita (1997) notes that “agenda-setting research and framing research are exploring almost the same problem – that of the reality-definition function of the media” (p. 24). Ghanem (1997) implies the major overlapping between these two concepts by stating that

The principal difference between the research literature on frames and on the second level of agenda-setting is that the latter examines the impact of news frames on the public agenda, whereas many framing studies have focus solely on the frames themselves (p. 6).

McCombs, Escobar & Llamas (2000) round up this line of research by stating that “to frame is to ascribe defining attributes to an object; in other words, to define an agenda of attributes that characterizes the principal defining features of an object” (p. 79).

Even though the proponents of an unequivocal similarity between framing and second-level agenda setting are trying to bring empirical support to their assumption, many other
scholars would argue against such a convergence. Among the strongest voices that oppose this unifying view for framing and the second level of agenda-setting are those of Kim, Scheufele, and Shanahan (2002) who argue that such a convergence can only be justified by a rather “fuzzy” definition of the concept of framing. In other words, because of the lack of an overarching consensus among the framing definitions, it is fairly easy to “pick and choose” the commonalities with attribute agenda-setting. For this particular reason, Kim, Scheufele, and Shanahan propose a model that distinguishes between framing, on one hand, and agenda-setting and priming, on the other hand. They say that framing is an *applicability-based model* mainly because human cognition is predisposed toward correlating the incoming information with the already existing schema of interpretation. On the other hand, agenda-setting and priming are *accessibility-based models* because they rely on a memory-based pattern of information processing. In this respect, the more recently accessed an item from memory, the faster the recall/accessibility.

By making a primarily cognitive (or psychological) distinction between the mechanisms of framing and agenda-setting, Kim, Scheufele, and Shanahan (2002) hope for a definite argument against merging the two concepts. For the purpose of this study, relying on a clear distinction between the concept of framing and attribute agenda-setting is best suited. The methodology is specific to studying framing and its effects instead of agenda-setting and attribute agenda-setting. While the core of agenda-setting research methodology is the issue ranking, framing analysis deals more with how the issues are thematically delivered by the journalists. This thesis considers not only the media frames but also whether the audiences adopt these media frames or generate their own frames. The next section will briefly explain the distinctions between media and audience frames as they emerge from the existing research.

*Framing Scholarship: Focus on Media and Audience Frames*
D’Angelo (2002) meta-analyzed the vast array of framing research and concluded that there is an attempt to classify the existing research into three distinctive paradigms: the cognitive approach, the constructionist approach, and the critical approach. To begin, the research included in the cognitive perspective is mostly concerned with how – and under which circumstances – the media frames find their way to audience cognition and whether the audience accepts and negotiates, or rejects and reinterprets the frame. The constructionist approach unites the research which regards frames as one of the many factors or resources available to individuals when creating opinions and socializing audiences. The scholars adopting the critical view in their research are interested in examining how power shapes the news selection and framing, by including or excluding certain elements of the event/topic (D’Angelo, 2002).

An earlier meta-analysis by Scheufele (1999) emphasized two other directions in framing research: media and audience frames as variables in the empirical inquiry.

Media frames are defined either as “attributes of the news themselves” (Entman, 1991, p. 7) or as ways to organize the world (Gitlin, 2003). De Vreese (2003) considers that a useful distinction can be made between two types of media frames: issue-specific (pertaining to a topic or event) and generic frames (overarching and identifiable across different topics or events). The issue-specific media frames, while useful and insightful in some situations, have demonstrated to be too detailed and difficult to generalize. Generic frames, on the other hand, seem to have gained certain validity especially due to the research conducted across many areas of media coverage (de Vreese, 2003). For instance, Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) investigated five news frames that had been identified in earlier studies: “conflict frame” (depicts conflict between individuals or institutions as a way of capturing audience interest), “human interest frame” (puts a human face and inserts emotions in the presentation of the event/issue), “economic
consequences frame” (the event is reported from the perspective of the economic consequences on individuals, institutions, or a country), “morality frame” (discusses the religious and moral tenets of an event/topic, and appears to be more common in audience frames), and “responsibility frame” (presents the event so that blame or responsibility is bestowed upon an individual, institution, or government). However, these frames have been adapted widely as generic frames. This set of five prevalent media frames is not exhaustive – media framing research may eventually uncover other generic frames as more large scale, cross-national studies are conducted.

In his review of media frames research, Scheufele (1999) identified studies that treated media frames as dependent variables (i.e. factors that result from influences of the news production and selection), or independent variables (i.e. media frames exert certain effects on audiences). Media frames as independent variables have received considerable attention from communication scholars. For instance, Iyengar and Simon (1993) used their previous classification of thematic framing (i.e. background and contextual information) and episodic framing (i.e. exemplars, specific stories) in order to verify framing effects. Their methodology included opinion polls and a content analysis of a TV network news coverage of the Gulf War. The researchers concluded that there were significant effects of media frames upon public opinion, such that the viewers exposed to episodic framing favored military resolutions of the Gulf crisis, while those exposed to thematic frames were more inclined to favor a diplomatic resolution. Using a similar methodology as Iyengar and Simon (1993), Cappella & Jamieson (1996) investigated reasons why “the healthy cynicism that long characterized public attitudes toward the institution [of Congress] has degenerated into corrosive cynicism” (p. 72). Though they cautiously concluded that the reasons for this shift were unclear, Cappella and Jamieson
underscored one of their research findings stating that “political cynics are also media cynics who believe that journalists distort the political process” (p. 84). In other words, there is evidence that media frames as independent variables do have certain effects on their audience.

However, as Scheufele (1999) argued, there is a dearth of empirical data that support a direct link between the media frames as inputs, and other variables such as audience frames, as outputs. As a result, he also discussed the individual or audience frames and the need to study these frames as dependent variables (i.e. accepting or resisting media frames) in relation to media frames as independent variables. In other words, the researchers should also examine the link between how media present messages to people, and how people interpret the message from the media.

Incomplete attempts to examine the audience frames as dependent variables were made by researchers such as Price et al. (1997). They were interested in measuring the immediate effects of media frames on audience evaluations. Using an experimental setting, they exposed four groups of participants to the same news story which was framed in three different ways; one control story was also tested (i.e. it had none of the three proposed frames – conflict, human interest, or consequence). The participants were asked then to write down their thoughts about the story they had read. Price, Tewksbury, & Powers (1997) findings showed that the news frames had an influence on the topical focus of the respondents’ thoughts.

Two years after the Price et al. (1997) paper was published, a group of European researchers replicated the study and compensated for some its prior deficiencies such as the use of a hypothetical news story which was based only on one salient issue. As a consequence, Valkenburg, Semetko, & de Vreese (1999) used a similar methodology to Price et al. (1997), but they tested two real stories – one was a salient issue (i.e. increasing crime rates), and the other a
less salient issue (i.e. introduction of Euro currency). They also introduced a fourth frame (economic consequences). Their results indicated that media clearly generated similar frames within their audience’s minds. Also, in terms of issue-specificity, the crime story generated more conflict- and human interest-content in the audience frames, while the Euro story led to the formation of more economic consequence thoughts among the audience.

Other similar studies examining audience frames as dependent variables include those conducted by Neuman, Just, & Crigler (1992), Gamson (1992), Rhee (1997) and Dumlao (2003). The common threads that unite all these studies are that most of them used qualitative methods to analyze the audience frames and supported the idea that media frames may have rather limited effects over their audience. For instance, Gamson (1992) and Liebes & Katz (1986) set up focus groups in order to analyze how people used media frames in order to guide their understanding of the issues presented by the media and by a certain TV program (i.e. an episode from “Dallas”), respectively. Neuman, Just, & Crigler (1992) conducted a host of in-depth interviews which were coded for individual frames. Neuman et al (1992) concluded that people may have different priorities when they interpret media frames, thus they may or may not take these frames for granted. More recently, Dumlao (2003), using essays written by participants, conducted a frame analysis of these texts in order to identify how viewers processed a TV episode depicting a conflict. Dumlao’s findings support the previous idea according to which audiences tended to go beyond the frames “served” by the media.

A notable exception to this qualitative trend of research on audience frames is Rhee’s (1997) pre/post test field experiment conducted about the 1991 Philadelphia mayoral elections. Two of the hypotheses of the experiment predicted that after reading/watching political news material that contained a political material framed as either strategy or issue, the participants
would use ideas or thoughts that were associated with the strategy or the issue frame, respectively. The results showed some framing effects of the print news, but no effects on the audience frames for the broadcast news.

However encouraging these results may be, they present only half of the framing research. Specifically, the mentioned experiments and studies examined only the audience frames as dependent variables, ignoring the exploration of media frames as independent variables. Scheufele (1999) argued that only one study followed this particular ambivalent direction. Huang (1995) performed a content analysis of several print media sources on a specific topic, and conducted an open-ended question survey that aimed to find how people felt about that topic. By applying the same coding scheme to both data pools and media texts, Huang concluded that media frames found their way to the audience frames, but when media and audience frames overlapped, the media and the audience placed different weight on those frames (Huang, 1995). That is, media frames may leave traces in audience’s framing of the issue, but the focus of importance given to the respective frames is different for media and the audience.

The discussion so far included Scheufele’s typology of media frames and the issue of individual frames by underlying the scarcity of quantitative exploration of if and with what results the media frames influence audience thoughts. But one may ask what are the factors that may facilitate such a subtle transfer or convergence of frames. In other words, which are the frame characteristics that may transfer to the audience?

Graber (2004) provided an insightful discussion about what made a “user-friendly” political story. It could be argued that the following observations may apply to news stories in general, not just to the political ones. As a first criterion, Graber mentioned that the story frames needed to match the audience’s frames (or expectations). Neuman, Just, & Crigler (1992)
concluded their qualitative audience frames analysis of the stories related to South Africa’s social problems with the idea that “journalists preferred conflict-related frames by far for [their] stories while the audiences dwelled on human-interest frames” (Graber, 2004, p. 556). Other research revealed how much these media and audience frames varied cross-nationally according to cultural background and expectations of both journalists and citizens (i.e. Medrano, 2003).

A second criterion that makes a story “user-friendly” is carefully balancing the use of emotional appeals. Graber (2004) cited a wealth of studies on the realm of the effects of emotions on human cognition, and she underscored the lack of consensus among researchers. While some argued that “emotionally stirred people cannot weigh issues rationally” (p. 557), others showed that “stories with emotional angles capture larger audiences than stories that are bland irrespective of their intrinsic importance” (p. 557; please refer to Graber, 2004 for a more detailed discussion). The issues become even more complicated when concepts as political “trust” and “cynicism” are introduced in the analyses as variables.

Finally, Graber (2004) turned to cognitive psychology and information processing theories to explain the third criterion which required matching the news presentation to the audience’s processing skills. As opposed to the emotional appeals, there seems to be more agreement on what makes a news story “user-friendly” from a neuropsychological perspective. For instance, even though the effects of media images on people’s interest is considered “popular wisdom” (Domke, Perlmutter & Spratt, 2002, p. 133), meaning that audience reactions toward a picture are predictable, surprisingly little attention has been directed toward the question “How does that happen?” Picking up on this question, a study by Grabe, Lang, and Zhao (2001) used a sophisticated information processing model conceptualized by Lang (2000), and concluded that in order to enhance the memory for non-arousing media content, a tabloid packaging style may
be used. Conversely, journalists should be aware that formatting arousing content in a tabloid framework would damage viewers’ memory. Also, another intriguing finding showed that tabloid production features might damage the objectivity of calm, non-arousing stories. As a consequence, authors warned journalists about prejudicial news information that was designed to arouse/entertain rather than inform (p. 409).

The literature review outlined thus far provides a glimpse at the research conducted on the concepts of media and audience frames, and more specifically on how media frames find their way to their audience’s representations of the story. The next sections argue in favor of integrating new media (the Internet) in empirical testing of media effects theories such as media and audience framing, by discussing the specifics of online media and their audiences. Finally, a brief review of the opportunities and challenges for communication research in this new medium will be offered.

IV. b. The Internet

General Issues Concerning the Internet

Born as a project for scientific communication in the 1960s and later (1975) adopted by the military as a communication network, the Internet is defined today as an “electronic network of networks that links people and information through computers and other digital devices allowing person-to-person communication and information retrieval” (DiMaggio, Hargittai, Neuman, & Robinson, 2001, p. 307). Other authors view the Internet from two different perspectives: the standard model of the Internet, which allows for a fluid and simple “file transfer”-like activities that have been long performed offline (i.e. shopping, learning), and the
sociotechnical model, which is far more complex and usually entails a restricted access (i.e. a newspaper’s website where registration is required) (Kling & Courtright, 2003).

As the latest Internet surveys show large number increases of users and registered domains (websites) from year to year⁹, scholars across different disciplines have become interested in how the new media will transform and affect the life as we know it. For instance, Pappacharissi (2002) and Witschge (2002) conceptualized the Internet as a new sphere for democratic deliberation. Pappacharissi (2002) argued that “new technologies provide information and tools that may extend the role of the public in the social and political arena” (p. 10). Witschge (2002) went a step further and mentioned heterogeneity, anonymity, and equality (as a possibility of liberating from social hierarchies) as factors that may ease and improve the quality of political talk on the Internet. However, Witschge concluded her analysis with a rather pessimistic view, asserting that despite the favorable factors mentioned above, the Internet didn’t seem to create a genuine democratic deliberation. This gloomy conclusion seems to be in line with Pappacharissi (2002), who argued that greater participation in online deliberation helped to some extent, but did not promote a robust democracy.

Another research direction regarding the potential of the Internet has been aimed at the idea of national borders on the World Wide Web. Halavais (2000) analyzed the idea of a borderless cyberspace, free from national demarcations, but concluded his survey of 4000 web sites and their links with the idea that “the social structures found in the ‘real’ world are inscribed in online networks” (p. 7). According to Halavais’ findings, web sites were more likely to display links to other sites hosted in the same country, which strengthened his conclusions, and provided

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⁹ According to Netcraft.com, in just five years, the number of registered US sites surged from about 15 million to more than 62 million in 2005, while PewInternet.org reports 132 million US users in March 2005, compared to 55 million in 2000 (DiMaggio et al., 2001).
support for the idea that the Internet was not an undifferentiated space outside of the real world space, as popular accounts had oftentimes suggested (Halavais, 2000).

The above brief accounts of issues facing the Internet as a new medium of communication sustain to some degree the idea that the new media have their own logic which may contradict the predictions and expectations of communication scholars. While trying to find an overarching view of traditional and new media formats, Kluver (2002) distinguished between three different types of media logics: the logic of the narrative, the logic of the database, and the logic of the conversation. The first is mostly chronological and displays a cause ~ effect trajectory (i.e. movies or traditional newscasts); the logic of the database is most visible in the format of the Internet and relies upon hierarchical and ordered information, while the logic of conversation may be applied to the online communication as well, since it promotes a “progressive movement toward understanding as interlocutors share opinions and insights, and … learn from one another” (p. 503). Kluver furthermore argued that the logic of conversation promoted an ideal media format in which individuals listened, interpreted, and had the ability to change the meaning and the arguments.

In a similar effort to Kluver’s aim to find a unifying perspective on the broad concept of the Internet, Mitra and Watts (2002) proposed the use of “voice” as a unique theoretical lens through which the new media phenomenon could be explored. Mitra and Watts justified this attempt of creating a setting for the study of the Internet by emphasizing the discursive nature of the cyberspace, thus “focusing on the eloquence of representation as a principal means by which people and institutions voice themselves in this space” (Mitra & Watts, 2002, p. 480). The concept of “voice” is best elicited if we consider Mitra and Watts’ insightful description of cyberspace as a “discursive space produced by the creative work of people whose spatial
locations are ambiguous and provisional” (p. 486, emphasis in original). Thus, the assumption that cyberspace can be generated by institutions and users at the same time makes the online newspapers and their audience excellent illustrations of the way cyberspace is created, interpreted, and maintained.

The next two sections will provide a brief overview of some of the most significant contributions to the understanding of online journalism and the dynamics between online news creators and their audiences.

**Online Journalism**

Cooke (2005) undertook the task of analyzing 40 years of print, TV, and Internet news presentation in order to identify a potential convergence between the three media. Although her focus was on the design changes, Cooke’s conclusion pointed out how the Internet shaped the visual presentation of the information and the content structure of the “traditional” media (print and TV). This visual convergence is based upon the “information module structure” which is characterized by a portal-like presentation style with increased functionality and the illusion of a constant stream of information (Cooke, 2005). CNN Headlines and MSNBC are just two example of TV channels that exploit this new visual style, while USA Today or Chicago Tribune are two instances of print media following this new presentational logic. Although not specifically stated by Cooke, it may be possible that the Internet has an overreaching influence upon the traditional media, especially from a visual standpoint. However, apart from these medium-specific visual traits, the Internet seems to have generated a type of journalism of its own, which coexists with the online versions of the traditional media outlets. New media researchers such as Mathenson (2004), and Quinn and Trench (2002) distinguished between two main types of online journalism: weblogs (Matheson, 2004) or Net-native websites (Quinn and Trench, 2002), and
institutional journalism (Matheson, 2004) or traditional “story telling” media (Quinn and Trench, 2002). This bi-polar distinction basically sets a demarcation line between the news websites that have emerged as a new form of journalism and those websites that “shovel” the traditional content (i.e. print or TV news) into the online environment. Mathenson (2004) argued, for example, that weblogs (or blogs) created a new epistemology of the news, characterized by a key characteristic of the new media – the hyperlink, and by unrestrained and chronological entries. Blogs apparently had far more implications than just linking an entry to several other articles, Mathenson argued. For instance, the weblogs create “a space for journalistic thinking for which institutional journalism provides little room”, they “challenge the corporate journalism”, and are “a democratic, interactive space” (Matheson, 2004, p. 451). The author further argued that weblogs empowered journalists and provided them with the tools necessary for “expressing experiences which find no outlet in conventional reporting” (p. 451).

A variation of the so-called “net-native journalism” (i.e. Internet-based) or of the blogs is represented by news portals such as Google News or Yahoo! News. Although these portals take traditional news stories from thousands of online news outlets and make them available by categorizing, hierarchizing, and linking them to other stories, critics have feared that the news portals will endanger the professional journalism (Schroeder and Kralemann, 2005). “Who is going to need editors if Google News and Yahoo! News do such a good job editing and presenting the information?” is the question that is often asked by critics. However, as Schroeder and Kralemann (2005) explain, traditional journalism is not going to disappear just because the online news portals can hierarchize information, but quite the contrary, as it will be further argued.
Quinn and Trench (2002), two new media researchers working for the *Multimedia Developments in the Digital Age* (MUDIA) project sponsored by the European Commission, found that despite the emergence of Net-native news websites, “the traditional communication model of professional journalism as a form of authoritative story-telling shows considerable durability”, adding that “some Net-native services were also guided by a traditional, hierarchical journalism outlook and practice” (p. 3). In other words, traditional journalism practices are still dominant in the online news environment, despite the significant steps taken in the opposite direction by weblog journalism or by the features of interactivity. Quinn and Trench’s conclusions, which are based on a cross-national survey of websites and more than 100 interviews with journalists and news editors, add to Cooke’s (2005) findings about visual convergence: there is a reciprocal influence between the traditional, offline media, and the online media, but it seems that the Internet has not found its own identity or logic just yet (Kluver, 2002).

A slightly different approach regarding the online journalism was advanced by Deuze (1999). His study defines four types of online journalism by placing them on a four-dimension scale: moderated and un-moderated communication between online readers and journalists, on one hand, and the focus on editorial content and the public connectivity, on the other hand. Deuze’s typology of online journalism was not aimed to provide a clear demarcation between the four types, but he was concerned with exposing the possible elements that may move and exchange places with one another, across his taxonomy. Deuze (2002) distinguished between *mainstream news sites* (most widespread, offering editorial content and a minimal form of reader interaction), *index and category sites* (news portals such as Google News, Yahoo! News, or revistapresei.ro, a Romanian online daily news review), *meta- and comment sites* ("journalism
about journalism” sites that are often critical, interpretative, and non-mainstream, such as weblogs), and finally, *share and discussion sites* (which facilitate connectivity and interactivity between people, worldwide).

Deuze’s (2002) classification of online journalism has some common points with Matheson’s (2004) and Quinn and Trench’s (2002) bi-polar views of online media. For instance, while there are clear overlaps between Deuze’s *mainstream news sites*, and *institutional journalism* (Matheson, 2004) or *traditional “story telling” media* (Quinn and Trench, 2002), weblogs and Net-native sites may fit somewhere at the intersection of the last three categories (*index and category, meta- and comment, and share and discussion sites*).

Moving away from this rather typological discussion about online journalism, scholars such as Boczkowski (1999), Light and Rogers (1999), and Schultz (1999, 2000) examined how some of the inherent characteristics of the Internet (i.e. interactivity, anonymity, or hyperlinking) were assimilated and transformed by the online news media. For instance, Boczkowski (1999) discussed how anonymity impacted the development of online newspapers, and how the accessibility of the Internet shaped ex-pat communities’ ability to access news from their native countries and to participate in online forums and debates. Light and Rogers (1999), as well as Schultz (1999, 2000), took this idea of online news forums a step forward and examined the importance of journalist-reader interaction and its effects on the editorial content.

The next section will address some of the issues related to the online media audiences and the means through which they express their opinions.

*The Online Audience*

Ever since the computer mediated communication (CMC) became a part of our everyday life through the Internet, scholars have speculated about the effects of this type of communication
(i.e. Kraut et al., 1998, and Nie & Erbring, 2000 as cited in DiMaggio, Hargittai, Neuman, & Robinson, 2001). Does the Internet erode social capital and allow for isolation in an artificial world? Does it encourage the creation of a virtual public sphere that facilitates a more democratic deliberation? Has the Internet the potential to create a truly interactive relationship between online journalists and their readers? These are some of the most important questions that are currently guiding the new media research.

With respect to the first question, according to DiMaggio et al. (2001), the research on social interaction is much more complicated than it would seem at a first glance. For instance, some studies have suggested that Internet users may be even more “social” (i.e. they have larger social networks) and are more trustful than non-users. Moreover, survey analyses reveal that the Internet is rather a complement and not a replacement of the traditional media and real-life socialization. In other words, the Internet does not suddenly create a tendency toward community involvement where there is no such inclination. Rather, it seems to intensify the adherence to online sociability and communities (see DiMaggio, Hargittai, Neuman, & Robinson, 2001 for a review). Other authors, such as Kling and Courtright (2003), argue against the “aspirational” use of the concept of online “community” by saying that the Internet is not very likely to foster the building of a true community as defined by sociology.

A second question frequently asked by the new media scholars is whether the Internet has the potential to create and facilitate a more democratic deliberation among the Net-citizens (the online users). While the Internet may be a much cheaper and easier way of publicizing political ideas than the traditional media, researchers do not offer very encouraging findings regarding the virtual democratic deliberations, mostly because “historically apolitical social strata are unlikely to be mobilized overnight by the Internet political content” (DiMaggio, Hargittai, Neuman, &
Robinson, 2003, p. 321). In 1998, Hill and Hughes analyzed America Online’s chat rooms and concluded that the readers focused their discussions not on debates of issues of policies, but on events and personalities. They also found that the online participants provided few arguments and used little information in their discussions about politics, rendering these discussions rather superficial. Witschge (2002) and Pappacharissi (2002) brought further support to this political disengagement and superficiality by painting a rather gloomy image of the Internet’s potential to enhance democracy and meaningful deliberation in a virtual public sphere. However, both Witschge and Pappacharissi acknowledged the fact that it may be too early to assess such effects of the Internet, and that more time is needed to observe such a complex phenomenon.

More recent evidence comes from Hardy and Scheufele (2005) who suggested what seems to be contrary to much of the previous research: They concluded that the virtual sphere of deliberations may actually have the same moderating effects on political deliberations as face-to-face discussion, which have been found to enhance the understanding of politics. In other words, Hardy and Scheufele (2005) cautiously claimed that

“people who seek information on the internet are more likely to engage in participatory behavior, with this effect being greater for those individuals who talk about politics with other regardless of the medium in which he discussion takes place (p. 81)”

The third question that has been the focus of new media researchers inquiries about the nature of the relationship between the online journalists and their readers. According to a research report regarding the online news media and their audiences, online journalism is currently undergoing a search for its identity, mostly because traditional journalism cannot fit properly the specifics of the new media (Quinn and Trench, 2002). Apparently, a staple of online
journalism is the interaction between the news producers and the user or the consumer of the information, which may take several forms and may vary in terms of the level of interactivity. For instance, *e-mails* encourage reactive communication between two readers or between a reader and a journalist (Schultz, 2000); *live chats* are a form of reactive communication as well, and may take place between multiple readers and the journalist, but, as Schultz (1999) argues, they “are often characterized by trivial talk” (p. 4); *online polls and surveys* are a third way of interaction, but it is only one-way (from the reader to the journalist), and lacks scientific standards (Schultz, 1999); finally, the fourth type of interaction is the *online forum*, which allows for true interactive communication between readers and journalist (Schultz, 2000). Furthermore, when the postings are displayed on the newspaper’s website, readers can comment on each other’s opinions and generate more meaningful discussions, despite an apparent less frequent involvement of the journalists (Schultz, 1999).

Overall, there are indications that online forums are the most significant and relevant forms of online interaction between journalists and readers and between readers themselves. Most American news media outlets such as *The New York Times* or *The Washington Post* host forums on their websites, in which the readers can comment on the stories, but they can discuss other topics too. Another example comes from Romania, an emerging democratic country, where all the important newspapers have online editions hosting reader forums. Oftentimes, the forum participants have the chance to post their opinions as a reaction to a specific story, and the authors of the article may take part in the discussions as well.

According to Light and Rogers (1999), one of the reasons why Internet forums have become so closely related to the online newspapers has a commercial nuance: attracting readers and viewers to their websites, while encouraging them to participate in discussion is a way of
keeping the traffic high. It is also important to mention a fundamental distinction between traditional mass media and the new media, which may have contributed to this creation of virtual debate areas. As Schultz (2000) argued, traditional media lack interaction with their audiences, and thus perpetuate a centralized and powerful position in the society. It comes as no surprise then why so many scholars are eager to study the new media and ways it provides organizations to interact with their publics.

The forums hosted by the traditional media with online versions are generally characterized by a “demassified” feedback because the “participants help set the agenda for what are mainly one-way content providers” (Lievrouw, 2001, p. 21). They also increase interactivity of the mass media “by widening opportunities for reader-to-reader communication” (Schultz, 2000, p. 214), and allow for “less inhibited expressions and higher more egalitarian participation patterns” (Boczkowski, 1999, p. 104). Boczkowski (1999) also argued that anonymity in cyberspace encouraged a more genuine character of the audience-generated content which was most visible in forums hosted by online newspapers. Finally, Boczkowski highlighted the ability of online publishing to give the Diaspora the opportunity to voice their opinions side by side with their non-immigrant fellow citizens.

Mitra and Watts (2002) introduced the concept of “voice” when analyzing the online discourse like that occurring in forums, and emphasized the importance of Internet in shifting the centers of power in society:

Whereas power used to be related to location, now in the Internet space power is related to the eloquence of the voice, the way in which a voice can link itself with other voices and in combination garner power. This shift is being made possible by the fact that a new space with different densities and
interconnections is being carved out by the speakers and their voices on the Internet. (Mitra and Watts, 2002, p. 489)

However, the online forums have their shortcomings and pitfalls. As Light and Rogers (1999) suggested, because they are asynchronous, forums discussions can suffer from interrupted dialogues due to poor threading, while some submission mechanisms may increase the effort needed to post an opinion (i.e. the user may have to introduce a valid email address, and a user name each time they want to post something). Another problematic issue is related to the behavior of the online forum participants. Schultz (2000) mentioned the possibility of having people who dominated the discussions and threatened the participatory opportunities of the others. Schultz continued by signaling the political and highly energetic nature of forum discussions which involved “the danger of attracting dogmatists and extremists” (p. 215). Lamerichs and te Molder (2003) referred to these undesirable situations as “flaming,” which is a characteristic of computer mediated communication (CMC). Because electronic messages are oftentimes ephemeral (unless they are stored indefinitely on the website) and benefit of anonymity, they can very quickly rise to name callings and offensive language. Needless to say, such inflammatory and negative environment of discussions may isolate and alienate many users.

The last section will address some of the challenges and opportunities posed by the Internet research, with a special focus on the communication research.

The Internet Research

In 1999, the first issue of the journal *New Media & Society* was published, which signified the increasingly powerful presence that new media (including the Internet) were having on society. In the first issue of the journal, Livingstone (1999) wrote
Internet communication opens up considerable potential for reframing the relation between public and private, for constructing individualized lifestyles, and for reframing knowledge hierarchies through various forms of democratic participation. (Livingstone, 1999, p. 63)

Livingstone called for researching the way the new media shaped traditional theories bound to communication, psychology, sociology, and other fields, and she emphasized the changing nature of the online audiences. She further identified three major areas that may become the focus of future research on the Internet: examining the nature of online audiences with respect to media theory, production, and policy; tracing the ways in which audiences consume and use new media products; and finally, analyzing the ways in which the audiences transform themselves as a response to the social changes that host the emergence of the new media (Livingstone, 1999).

Since 1999, many researchers have answered the call for new media research, as briefly illustrated in the literature review above. Some of the mentioned authors studied the online discourse belonging to users or organizations such as online media (i.e. Bickart & Schindler, 2001; Quinn & Trench, 2002; Witschge, 2002; Deuze, 2003; Lamerichs & te Molder, 2003; Mathenson, 2004), employing methods such as unobtrusive observation of online discussions, e-mail interviews, or content analyses of electronic texts retrieved from online sources. No matter the research methods employed, be they online ethnography, content analysis, or website downloading to create a “web sphere” (Schneider and Foot, 2004), all of them are carried out in a totally different and partially unexplored environment as compared to the real-life research. Thus, in order to conduct ethical and optimal research, it is important to acknowledge and
consider the most important aspects regarding the Internet research in general, such as some of the opportunities and challenges posed by this new medium.

In a thorough attempt to provide some fundamental guidelines for conducting online psychological research, Kraut et al. (2003) listed a number of positive and negative aspects of concern to researchers. For example, Kraut et al. (2003) mention the following as opportunities for the Internet research: *easier empirical research* (i.e. large, diversified, and cost efficient participant recruitment, virtually costless and naturalistic social behavior observation, less obtrusiveness, access to archival data), and an *opportunity to study new social phenomena* such as interpersonal communication, or other instances that take a new form in the online environment (i.e. group performance without face-to-face interaction).

While the opportunities of the Internet research may seem a given, some of the challenges are much more problematic and nuanced. According to Kraut and his colleagues (2003), there are two main issues that need to be considered: *the quality of data* and *the protection of human subjects*.

With respect to the data quality, Kraut et al. (2003) warn researchers about the issues related to the sample sizes, such as lack of representativeness or no sampling frames for constructing random samples. While psychologists value internal validity more than generalizability, other scholars from fields such as sociology or communication find self-selected samples as particularly challenging because they cannot extend the conclusions to the general population. Another source of concern regarding the data quality refers to the researcher’s inability to control the environment in which the research is taking place. While for some scholars this may be an opportunity for naturalistic observation, for social scientists it becomes an important obstacle in the way of gathering valid data. For instance, the anonymity can
encourage the participants to purposefully damage the data (i.e. multiple submissions, data flooding), or it can make them less involved (as opposed, for example, to a telephone or face-to-face interview). Furthermore, Kraut et al. (2003) cite other authors who reported higher drop-out rates online than in offline settings.

A second main challenge identified by Kraut et al. (2003) is related to the protection of human subjects, which is a very sensitive issue in participant research. The authors state that when conducting online research, it is much more difficult to assess the informed consent and risks. Researchers should ask themselves questions about whether participants are anonymous or identifiable, whether their behavior is public or private, and whether participants expect their responses to be stored temporarily (Kraut et al., 2003).

Communication Research and the Internet

Five years after the first issue of *New Media & Society* was published, Wellman (2004), the self-proclaimed “tribal elder” of the Internet research community, outlined what he called “the three ages of the Internet” (p. 123). The first age, starting with the mid 1990s, would be that of a “rampant punditry,” abundant in researchers’ unrestrained optimism about the potential of the new “marvel”; the second age (end of the 1990s) was characterized by systematic studies and documentation of users and uses of the Internet, while the third and current age, should be according to Wellman, dedicated to a more “focused, theoretically-driven projects” (Wellman, 2004, p. 127). Now that the new media have evolved and have become a natural extension of our lives into a virtual world, and that “the person has become the portal” (Wellman, 2004, p. 127), shouldn’t the communication scholars try to test the traditional media effects to the Internet?
Almost a decade ago, during Wellman’s first age of the Internet, and long before most of the traditional media had moved to the Internet, Morris and Ogan (1996) published an article that called for communication scholars’ attention toward the Internet.

…if mass communications researchers continue to largely disregard the research potential of the Internet, their theories about communication will become less useful. Not only will the discipline be left behind, it will also miss an opportunity to explore and rethink answers to some of the central questions of mass communication research, questions that go to the heart of the model of source-message-receiver with what the field struggled. (Morris and Ogan, 1996, p. 39)

Following up on Morris and Ogan’s call for communication research on the new medium, Shaw, Hamm, and Knott (2000) recognized that traditional mass communication theories needed to be redefined in order to explain the way society and the individual interacted with the Internet.

Kim and Weaver (2002) have recently reviewed six years of Internet research done by communication scholars, from 1995 to 2000, totaling approximately 560 articles. They first considered Wimmer and Dominick’s (2000) four-phase evolutionary model of communication research on each new medium throughout modern history. The first phase generally consists of in asking questions about the nature of the medium and how it works. In the second phase, the communication researchers become interested in studying the users and uses of the new medium. The third phase includes research about the effects of the new medium, while the fourth phase is concerned with research about improvements and developments of new concepts and theories for the new medium (Wimmer & Dominick, 2000).
This model, Kim and Weaver (2002) argued logically applies to the study of the Internet as a new medium, although it seems that the transition from one level to the other is not necessarily linear. For instance, Kim and Weaver’s (2002) research from 1995 to 2000 shows that communication research on the Internet was focused on the first and second stages, but there was some research conducted in the third and fourth phases as well. However, it is important to note that during the studied period, most attention was turned to the Internet itself and to its uses and users, and much less to its potential effects or testing of traditional media effects theories. In this respect, Kim and Weaver underscored the fact that “generally, communication researchers lack theoretical application in their studies, regardless of the research methods (quantitative or qualitative)” (p. 525). In fact, only 17% of the studies tested a specific communication theory or relied on one for their arguments.

With respect to the study of framing theory and its related concepts such as media or audience frames on the Internet, a cumulative body of comparative research is still developing. The existent pool of such studies include a possible theoretical model for analyzing the information processing of the hypermedia news (Fredin, 2002) and possible influences of new media tools such as hypermedia, or omni-directional imaging on the framing of online news stories (Pavlik, 2002). Additionally, Mabry’s (2002) experiment explored textual framing in online groups, which is one of the scant empirical studies aiming to analyze individual frames in online communication. However, Mabry’s study is not related to media messages, but to group communication dynamics.

The final section of the literature review provides some concluding remarks regarding framing effects research (namely media and audience frames) and proposed important questions researchers should address as the Internet research develops.
IV. c. Conclusions – Framing Research and Internet Opportunities

The ultimate goal of this thesis is to extend the existing research on media and audience framing theory to international contexts. This thesis also aims to further the idea that the Internet provides fertile ground for analyzing media processes such as framing, priming, and agenda setting.

The framing literature review provided thus far underscores the necessity of exploring the framing process from a dual perspective – that of the media and of the audience, respectively. In addition, as de Vreese (2003) noticed, framing research is now cluttered around experimental studies, with a few exceptions represented by in-depth interviews, focus groups, or surveys (see de Vreese, 2003, for a brief review of the existing literature). While the experimental studies certainly have their strengths, they suffer from issues of generalizability and external validity. In-depth interviews and focus groups provide more details and can be insightful, but these methods are conducted on small samples and rely on descriptive methods of analysis. Surveys, on the other hand, are designed to reach larger samples, but they rarely accomplish linear effects through multi-stage surveys. News sites and the interactive forum discussions online could prove a valuable resource for the study of public opinion, discourse, and relationships to media content.

The answer may be provided by the Internet journalism and online debates. Thus, rich research possibilities seem possible through the online news and reader forum discussions. As Quinn and Trench (2002) found, most online journalism follows the traditional journalistic standards and practices. Most of the online media websites mirror the traditional versions in what new media researchers have called “shoveling” the offline content in online environment. Furthermore, a staple of online media is the interactivity between journalist and readers, and
among readers. This exchange may occur through online forums (or discussion threads, chat rooms, etc.), which are praised for their two-way communication (Schultz, 2000).

Romanian media

Most widely circulated Romanian newspapers, such as Jurnalul National, Evenimentul Zilei or Libertatea, have up-to-date online versions which mirror the offline content. Typically, each online journal allows the readers to give feedback on forums for each story (as opposed to online newspapers such as The New York Times, which as a separate forum, organized by major topics). This forum feature, tributary to the characteristics of the new media, allows for the creation of a potential debate space about a particular story. This further means that, at least theoretically, one can observe if and how the readers adopt the story frame when commenting upon the news, without interfering or intervening in the discussions. In other words, the online newspapers’ forums have the potential of fostering the development of naturally-occurring and unaltered opinions about a specific news story.

It is legitimate to question whether enough people are involved in such a debate in order to have a sufficient sample. Also worthy of question is whether those Romanians with access to the Internet represent views generalizable to the public at large. As it will be shown in the methodology section of this study, the forums hosted by Evenimentul Zilei and Jurnalul National, which are two of the most popular Romanian online as well as traditional newspapers, typically gather a minimum of 10 posts for a single news story and sometimes results in upwards of 500 or 600 posts for a single news story. This study begins to answer Scheufele’s call for researchers to begin filling the gap in our understanding of audience frames. This study also extends the existing research on generic media framing and audience framing (Semetko and Valkenburg, 2000) and proposes a set of three new overarching macro-frames – “cynicism,”
“speculation,” and “metacommunication.” Not lastly, this research project answers Morris and Ogan’s (1996) call for more studies that apply traditional media theories to the Internet.

IV. d. Research Questions

Given the information provided on the historical context about the Romanian media system and its evolution since 1989, several research questions consistent with current research on framing were developed. The following research questions also extend the framing theory to the Internet.

But before posing the research questions, it is necessary to specify how framing is operationalized (both media’s and audience’s) in this study. As already discussed in the literature review, Entman’s (1993) view of the framing process is favored. Thus, for this study frames are selected aspects of reality made

more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described. (Entman, 1993, p. 52, italics in original).

Entman extends this definition by adding that frames may occur in at least four locations in the communication process: the communicators (i.e. the journalist), the text (i.e. the news story), the receiver (i.e. the online or offline audience), and the culture in which both the communicator and the receiver live and exchange meaning (Entman, 1993). Obviously, this view of the framing process clearly differentiates between news stories and audience as possible locations for frames, which is a fundamental distinction for the purpose explored in this project (i.e. identifying a potential convergence of frames from the online news stories to their readers).
In the light of the literature review presented above, and considering the limited research dealing with the convergence between online media and online audience frames, the following research questions have been formulated:

**RQ 1a:** What are the dominant issues covered by the in the overall online news stories and the online reader forum posts?

**RQ1b:** Is there a relationship between the dominant issues discussed in the newspaper stories and reader forum posts?

**RQ 2a:** Which, if any, generic or macro-frames emerge from the Romanian online news stories and forum posts?

**RQ 2b:** Is there evidence to suggest that macro-frames emerge as dominant frames in either online news or reader forum posts?

**RQ 2c:** What are the dominant media and audience frames?

**RQ 3:** Is there any evidence of self-reflexive or strategy metacommunication frames in the online news stories and reader posts?

**RQ 4:** How is President Traian Basescu portrayed by the selected online news media and forum readers, respectively?

**RQ 5:** Is there a correlation or convergence between the dominant Romanian news frames and dominant forum posts frames?

**V. Research Methodology**

Semetko and Valkenburg (2000), and de Vreese (2003) mentioned that there were two possible approaches when identifying frames in the news: the *deductive* and the *inductive* approaches. The *inductive approach* starts with an open view and aims to reveal the range of possible frames that emerge from analyzing the sample. The researcher has a very loose
representation of the frames to be explored. However, as Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) argued, the inductive approach is very time consuming, often based on small samples, and suffers from replication problems. On the other hand, the deductive approach is based on a pre-defined set of frames like Semetko and Valkenburg’s (2000) five generic frames (e.g. responsibility, human interest, economic consequences, morality, and conflict frames.)

De Vreese (2003) discussed the four criteria that a frame must meet, as originally formulated by Capella and Jamieson (1997, as cited in De Vreese, 2003, p. 33). First, the frame must have a clear conceptual and linguistic set of characteristics. Second, a frame should be commonly present in journalistic practice. Third, frames should be mutually exclusive from other frames and should reach identifiable levels of reliability and validity. These four criteria support the idea of using a deductive approach over an inductive one when identifying news frames.

Given the above evidence regarding how a researcher should approach the examination of the news frames, it can be argued that either the inductive or the deductive approach can be successfully applied to studying audience frames as well (i.e. forum posts) because the opinions may also take the form of texts which are certainly framed in a particular way.

The method of analysis of this study project is predominantly deductive and consists in a content analysis of news stories as media frames and forum posts as audience frames from two leading online versions of Romanian daily newspapers.

V. a. Samples

The units of analysis are the news stories and the forum posts. This study is focused on two of the most popular daily newspapers which also have online versions – Evenimentul Zilei and Jurnalul National. These newspapers were purposively selected based on two main considerations: the availability of reader posts and access to online versions. Unlike lesser
Romanian online newspapers, both *Evenimentul Zilei* and *Jurnalul National* feature the option of posting opinions for each story individually rather than having a separate discussion forum organized by topics. Thus, it was possible to compare specific media frames (within individual news stories) and audience frames (within forum posts) directly linked through the online web features.

The second consideration pertained to the average monthly circulation and the average monthly online readership. As Figure 2 shows, the two newspapers complement each other in terms of online and print readership. Specifically, *Evenimentul Zilei* has more than double the online readers *Jurnalul National* has, but the latter newspaper has more than double the monthly circulation than *Evenimentul Zilei*.

From a historical perspective, *Evenimentul Zilei* is the first “popular” Romanian daily newspaper, which published its first issue in 1992, two years after the anti-communist revolution. The innovative design, which made it very easy to read, as well as the sensationalist content, made *Evenimentul Zilei* a nation-wide media phenomenon right from the start (Petcu, 2000). Today, the newspaper, which is similar to *USA Today*, keeps its populist content, writing style, and design but has eliminated the aggressive tabloid format.

*Jurnalul National*, also a daily national newspaper paper with a predominantly informative and opinion content, was first published in 1993. During the following several years, *Jurnalul National* did not succeed in becoming a widely popular and well circulated daily as *Evenimentul Zilei* did. As a matter of fact, in the mid-1990s, while *Evenimentul Zilei* printed up to 150.000 copies daily, *Jurnalul National* only had about half of that (Coman, 1997). However, in 2000, *Jurnalul National* underwent a massive process of redesigning and repositioning on the Romanian print media market due to a reallocation of the financial resources. As noted earlier,
this repositiong pushed the newspaper ahead of *Evenimentul Zilei* in terms of circulation. *Jurnalul National* has been financed by the same company that owns one of the largest private TV networks, *Antena 1*. It is worth mentioning that a major financial contributor to *Antena 1* and *Jurnalul National* has had political affiliations with the Romanian Humanist Party (PUR) which was part of the political coalition that ruled Romania up until November 2004. Thus, it may be speculated that *Jurnalul National* has certain political views skewed toward the former President (Ion Iliescu) and the ruling party coalition.

The selection of the sample (i.e. the online news stories and forum posts) began on March 29, 2005, when the incident was first reported in the print media, and ended on June 10, 2005, after President Basescu’s official press conference exclusively dedicated to the case. All the online news stories published online by *Evenimentul Zilei* and *Jurnalul National* during the mentioned period and which had at least one online forum post were selected, yielding a total sample of 255 news stories (113 from *Evenimentul Zilei* and 142 from *Jurnalul National*). A systematic sampling procedure selected 2,951 forum posts (1,947 from *Evenimentul Zilei* website, and 1,004 from *Jurnalul National* website). For each story that had forum posts, only the odd-numbered posts of the first 100 were selected for the analysis. For example, if a story had 154 posts, only posts number 1, 3, 5, ..., 95, 97, 99 (maximum n = 50) were analyzed. This number ensured not only randomness for statistical significance, but also allowed for keeping the most significant posts. Generally speaking, an empirical observation of the forum discussions showed that there was a tendency toward diverging from the main topic of the discussion as the number the posts increased.

As a final note, two other aspects should be mentioned. First, the sample selection method has a limitation pertaining to those discussions that had more than 100 posts per news story.
Selecting every other post instead of creating a customized sample selection for each story’s posts was necessary in order to make the project manageable. Second, the pool of online posts excluded the off-topic posts and those classified as “flaming” (i.e. personal attacks, offensive and foul language etc).

V. b. Variables

The content analysis examined the presence or absence of a set of 79 variables for online news stories and 76 for online forum posts. Variables were divided into three major categories: issues, frames and portrayal of the Romanian president. The codebook differentiated between informative and opinion online articles (see Codebook, Appendix 1).

The issues category included a pre-determined list of 28 possible issues that emerged from a pilot test. Among the 28 issues there were “corruption”, “the Iraq war”, “kidnapping facts/speculations”, “media’s role in the incident”, “Romanian mentality” or “negotiating the release of the journalists”. The issue labeled “Romanian mentality” was operationalized as any reference to Romanian national traits, features or recurrent characteristics. For example, a pilot test of such characteristics emerging from the existing sample of forum posts revealed that Romanian mentality had a mainly negative connotation: Romanians were “weak”, “coward”, “gossipy”, “irresponsible”, “indifferent”, or “gullible”. Few texts described Romanians in positive terms, such as “hospitable”, “tolerant”, “good willing” or “courteous”. After coding for the presence or absence of each of the 28 issues, the dominant issue was designated for each story or post by considering the salience or the importance of the issue in the overall text. For instance, a text that discussed the Romanian troops’ role in Iraq by referencing several international policies regarding the Iraqi war was coded as having “Romanian troops in Iraq” as a dominant issue.
The second category of variables (frames) consisted of eight generic frames, also coded for presence or absence. The first five generic frames ("responsibility," "human interest," "consequences," "morality," and "conflict") were those operationalized and tested by Semetko and Valkenburg in 2000. An additional number of three new frames, called macro-frames, were proposed by this study: "cynicism," "speculation," and "metacommunication" (see Codebook in Appendix 1 for a more detailed operationalization). The "responsibility" frame included any blaming of or blame assigning to an individual or institution, while the "human interest" frame included any emotional elements or portrayals. The "consequences" frame originally referred to economic effects, but was extended to any kind of consequences (i.e. political, social, cultural etc) in order to include a broader range of issues. The last two well established generic frames, "morality" and "conflict," included any religious issues, moral prescriptions or directions about how to act, and any depictions of antagonistic relationships between individuals, ideas, or policies, respectively. The remaining three macro-frames were defined as follows: "cynicism" was associated with powerlessness or sarcasm/irony, "speculation" referred to either predicting a course of action or providing hypothetical explanations for what happened, while the "metacommunication" frame included communication about others’ communication (i.e. other media sources or other individuals).

Esser, Reinemann and Fan (2001) as a third stage in the political election media coverage, after issue and strategy coverage. Esser and his colleagues described metacommunication as a new role that mass communication had assumed, which was that of a political institution sensitive to an emerging force in political communication: professional political public relations. "Metacommunication is defined as the news media’s self-referential reflections on the nature of the interplay between political public
relations and political journalism” (p. 16), and may have two forms: self-referential news, which “describes the tendency for reporters and media decision makers to turn the spotlight inward and to treat themselves as the subjects of their own political stories” (p. 18), and process news, which “reports about the backstage maneuvers of campaign operatives to guide or influence journalists” (p. 19). The codebook of this content analysis operationalized “metacommunication” as one of three macro-frames in addition to “cynicism” and “speculation.” While the concept is the same as those previously described by terms such as “media process” and “political process” (Kerbel, Apee & Ross, 2000) or “meta-coverage” (Esser & D’Angelo, 2003), its status in this study was treated more as an overarching theme. The previous applications of metacommunication were concerned with the American presidential elections and they addressed the televised news only. Thus, this application of metacommunication is unique and contributes to the research by extending metacommunication as a frame for newspaper coverage outside of campaign research.

If the “cynicism,” “speculation,” or “metacommunication” macro-frames were recorded as present by the coder, a further breakdown by type was created (i.e. political or media cynicism, prognostic or diagnostic speculation, and self-reflexive or strategy metacommunication). After establishing the presence or absence of the eight frames, the dominant generic (the first five) frame and the dominant overall frame (all eight) were designated. As with the dominant issue, the dominant frame was selected by considering its salience and importance in the news story or post.

Finally, if the “responsibility” frame was present, a pre-determined list of 12 possible entities was provided in order to identify which ones were assigned blame to (i.e. the President, the kidnapping suspects, terrorists etc) and to designate the main responsible entity.
The third category of variables pertained to the presence or absence of mentions of President Traian Basescu, as well as the type of portrayals (positive: leader, savior etc; negative: incompetent, cunning etc; neutral, and combination of positive and negative portrayals).

**V. c. Coding procedures**

Two coding sheets, one for online news stories and one for forum posts, were used after reading each text. The variable categories in the two code sheets were almost identical, with an exception regarding the self-reflexive metacommunication frame in the forum posts code sheet (see Codebook in Appendix 1).

Each code sheet’s reliability was established by training two Romanian-speaking individuals to code a sample of 25 random news stories and 100 forum posts according to the codebook instructions. Percentage of agreement comparisons between the two coders equaled 91% for news stories and 96% for posts.

After establishing the coding instrument, a Romanian speaking coder used a set of 1s and 0s to note the presence or absence of the variables on the coding sheets, for news stories and forum posts. Each of the two coding sheets included descriptive information about the source of the text (*Evenimentul Zilei* or *Jurnalul National*), the type of text (1 for news articles, 2 for opinion articles, and 3 for forum posts), date, and current number of the story/post. After coding for the presence or absence of all variables, all the data was merged into a unique file and then entered into the SPSS statistical software program. In order to answer the eight primary and secondary questions, frequency calculations, correlations, and chi-square tests were performed.
VI. Results

The eight questions addressed four major categories of inquiry: emerging dominant issues, dominant frames, President’s portrayal, and the potential convergence of frames between the online news stories and forum posts. The sample consisted in 255 online news stories (113 from Evenimentul Zilei and 142 from Jurnalul National websites), and 2,951 forum posts (1,947 from Evenimentul Zilei and 1,004 from Jurnalul National forums).

Issues

Research Question 1a asked which issues were dominant in the overall online news stories and forum posts. Twenty eight pre-determined issues were coded for absence and presence for both news stories and forum posts. Additional issues, if present beyond these contained on the code sheets, were written in by coders.

Correlation tests were assessed to see if there were strong relationships between the dominant issues in Evenimentul Zilei and Jurnalul National stories and forum posts, respectively. The tests revealed high correlations and marked relationships between the dominant issues covered in the two newspapers’ stories ($r = .83$, $p \leq .01$) and forum posts ($r = .85$, $p \leq .01$), respectively.

A frequency analysis was performed to identify the dominant issues in stories and forum posts. As Tables 1 and 2 show, “Kidnapping facts or speculations” had the most mentions in both the stories and posts (27.5% and 19.7%, respectively), but there were some differences for the next dominant issues. In news stories, the second and third dominant issues were “Negotiating the release or the ransom” (11.4%) and “Omar Hayssam” (8.2%), the main suspect. “Family reactions” and “The freeing of the journalists” both scored as fourth dominant issues in news stories with 7.5%, while the fifth overall dominant issue was “Media’s role in the incident”
In forum posts, the second dominant issue was “Media’s role in the incident” (10.4%), followed by “Internal politics” (9.7%), “The President’s handling of the crisis” (7.4%), and fifthly, “The author of the of the article or post” (5.9%).

Another finding resulting from Tables 1 and 2 is the distribution of frequency of the overall dominant issues in news stories and forum posts, respectively. For example, six of the 28 pre-determined issues had no mentions whatsoever as dominant issues in news stories, as opposed to forum posts which covered almost all the topics (26 of 28). More specifically, the news stories were not dominated by issues such as “Iraq war,” “Ethnic hatred/issues,” or “Terrorism” which were present in the forum discussions.

Research Question 1b asked if the dominant issues discussed in the newspaper stories and reader forum posts were related. A series of correlation tests were run to see if there were strong relationships between the dominant issues in the two sources for stories and their subsequent forum posts. The correlation tests between the dominant issues from Evenimentul Zilei’s news stories and forum posts revealed a significant positive and substantial relationship \( r = .49, p \leq .05 \), however not as marked as between Jurnalul National’s news stories and forum posts \( r = .78, p \leq .01 \).

While the correlations are predominantly strong, some differences of frequency emerged between Evenimentul Zilei and Jurnalul National stories and forum posts in terms of dominant issues. As Table 1 shows, in news stories, “Kidnapping facts and speculations” was again the dominant issue in both newspapers, but with a considerable difference: more than twice as many stories in Jurnalul National were dominated by this issue than Evenimentul Zilei stories (35.9% and 16.8%, respectively). “Negotiating the release and ransom” was the second most frequent dominant issue in both sources, but with more mentions in Evenimentul Zilei (13.3% and 9.9%, 
respectively). The following three most frequent dominant issues were somehow similar in the two sources, but differed in terms of ranking: *Evenimentul Zilei* stories were dominated by “Omar Hayssam,” “Media’s role in the incident,” and “Family reaction” (10.6%, 8.8%, and 7.1%, respectively), while *Jurnalul National* stories were dominated by “Freeing of the journalists,” “Family reactions,” and “Omar Hayssam” (8.5%, 7.7%, and 6.3%, respectively).

Other differences emerged as some dominant issues were mentioned in only one of the two newspapers. For example, issues such as “Corruption,” “Call to action,” and “Journalists’ biographies” were only present in *Evenimentul Zilei* stories, while “Romanian foreign policy” and “International policies” were only mentioned in *Jurnalul National* stories. However, there were issues which were not mentioned as dominant in any of the two newspapers: “Ethnic hatred,” “The kidnapped journalists’ reactions,” “The author of the article or post,” and “Terrorism.”

Finally, a third set of differences appeared when looking at what dominant issues received more mentions in one news source as opposed to the other. For *Evenimentul Zilei* stories, the most significant percentage differences as opposed to *Jurnalul National* were recorded for “Omar Hayssam” (10.6% versus 6.3%), “Media’s role in the incident” (8.8% versus 4.9%), and “Negotiating the release and ransom” (13.3% versus 9.9%). In *Jurnalul National*’s case, the most important percentage difference as opposed to *Evenimentul Zilei* stories was recorded for “Kidnapping facts and speculations” (35.9% versus 16.8%), followed by “International support and/or solidarity” (5.6% versus 0.9%), and “Freeing of the journalists” (8.5% versus 6.2%).

As Table 2 illustrates, a similar pattern of differences was recorded for forum posts as well. “Kidnapping facts and speculations” was the dominant issues in readers’ posts (17.4% for
Evenimentul Zilei posts and 24.1% for Jurnalul National). The ensuing four dominant issues in forum posts were more dissimilar than the dominant issues in news stories. Evenimentul Zilei posts were dominated by “Internal politics,” “Media’s role in the incident,” “The author of the article or post” (metacommunication), and “President’s handling” (11.7%, 9.3%, 8.1%, and 7.3%, respectively). Jurnalul National posts had a rather different agenda of discussions than Evenimentul Zilei in terms of dominant issues: the most frequent issue (“Kidnapping facts and speculations”) was followed by “Media’s role in the incident,” “President’s handling,” “Negotiating the release and ransom,” and “Romanian foreign policy” (12.5%, 7.6%, 7.5%, and 6.2%, respectively).

As opposed to news stories, no issue was mentioned in only one source of forum posts, but there were two issues which were not designated as dominant in either of the forums: “The kidnapped journalists’ reactions” and “Journalists' biographies”.

The final analysis of the differences between Evenimentul Zilei and Jurnalul National’s posts compares discrepancies between these two sources in terms of dominant issues in the reader texts. In the case of Evenimentul Zilei’s forum posts, the following issues had more mentions than in Jurnalul National posts: “The author of the article or post” (metacommunication) (8.1% versus 1.7%), “Internal politics” (11.7% versus 6%), and “Corruption” (4.1% versus 1.1%). For Jurnalul National posts, the following dominant issues had more mentions than in Evenimentul Zilei posts: “Kidnapping facts and speculations” (24.1% versus 17.4%), “Negotiating the release and ransom” (7.5% versus 2.8%), and “Prayer for the journalists or other religious issues” (5.6% versus 1.8%).
Frames

The next set of questions (RQ 2a, 2b, 2c and 3) were concerned with Semetko and Valkenburg’s (2000) five generic frames (responsibility, human interest, consequences, morality, and conflict), as well as with three “macro-frames” (cynicism, speculation, and metacommunication) which were defined and operationalized for the first time in this study (see Codebook in Appendix 1 for operationalization).

Research Question 2a asked which of the generic or macro-frames emerged from the online news stories and forum posts. Correlation tests were first run for news stories and forum posts in order to see what were the relationships between the two newspapers’ stories and forum posts in terms of frames. The tests revealed very strong correlations and dependable relationships between the two sources’ framing of the stories ($r = .95, p \leq .01$) and their forum posts ($r = .89, p \leq .01$). In the case of *Evenimentul Zilei*’s framing of the news stories and its subsequent forum posts, the tests showed a positive but low correlation and definite but small relationship ($r = .23, p \leq .01$), and a negative low correlation and also a small relationship between *Jurnalul National* news stories and forum posts ($r = -.23, p \leq .01$). This last set of correlations revealed that the way online readers framed their discussions about the stories was not only different than media’s framing (*Evenimentul Zilei*), but also moving in the opposite direction (*Jurnalul National*).

Table 3 shows that all five generic frames and the three macro-frames were present in both news stories and forum posts, but to varying degrees. Overall, the frequency tests show that not only the news and posts differed in terms of the weight of the overall frame mentions, but there were variations between the two sources as well.

For news stories, as Table 1 illustrates, of all the eight frames the most frequently used were “metacommunication,” “speculation,” and “human interest” (79.6%, 55.3%, and 41.7%,...
respectively), while the least employed frames were “morality” and “conflict” (8.6% and 15.7%, respectively). In terms of generic frames of the news stories, most frequently employed frame was “human interest” followed closely by “responsibility” (41.7% and 37.3%), while the most frequent macro-frames were “metacommunication” and “speculation” (79.6% and 55.3%).

When comparing the news stories frames from Evenimentul Zilei and Jurnalul National, it can be concluded that the two newspapers had a somehow similar outlook of the event in terms of generic and macro frames, a conclusion supported by the correlation tests discussed above. However, the dissimilarities between the two sources arose from the percentage weight each frame had in the stories and from the shifts in ranking of some generic frames, but no significant differences were observed for the macro-frames. Even though the sample of Evenimentul Zilei news stories was smaller than Jurnalul National’s (113 versus 142), the former source had significantly more stories including the “responsibility” (49.6% versus 37.3%), “consequences” (28.3% versus 19.7%), and “morality” (14.2% versus 4.2%) generic frames.

Also, the second set of significant differences between the two newspapers refers to the ranking of some generic frames: “responsibility” and “human interest” were the top two generic news frames in both newspapers, but they switched places (i.e. “responsibility” was ranked first in Evenimentul Zilei stories, but second in Jurnalul National). The same situation was recorded for the bottom two frames, “morality” and “conflict.”

The outlook of frequencies for readers’ forum posts is also shown in Table 3. Of all the eight frames, the most frequently employed were “speculation,” “cynicism,” and “responsibility” (43.7%, 39.5%, and 34%, respectively), while the least used frames in forum discussions were “human interest” and “conflict” (9.5% and 12%, respectively). Regarding the use of generic frames in reader discussions, most frequently employed frame was “responsibility” followed
very closely by “morality” (34% and 33.4%), while the most frequent macro-frames were “speculation” and “cynicism” (43.7% and 39.5%).

The comparison of frequency of frame mentions in Evenimentul Zilei’s and Jurnalul National’s forum posts yielded a very similar look with the news stories. More specifically, the two pools of forum discussions had a somehow similar outlook of the event in terms of generic and macro frames. The main dissimilarities between the two sources of posts arose from the percentage weight some frames had in the individual posts and from the shifts in ranking of some generic frames. For instance, the reader posts hosted on Evenimentul Zilei’s forum were more frequently framed as “metacommunication” (40.2% versus 20.1%), and they were less frequently framed than Jurnalul National’s posts as “human interest” (7.4% versus 13.3%) and “morality” (30.8% versus 38.5%).

Just as in the case of the news stories, the second set of significant differences between the pools of posts refers to the ranking of some generic frames: “responsibility” and “morality” were the top two generic reader frames in both newspapers’ forum discussions, but they switched places (i.e. “responsibility” was ranked first in Evenimentul Zilei posts, but second in Jurnalul National). The same results were recorded for the bottom two frames, “conflict” and “human interest”.

Research Question 2b asked if any of the newly defined and operationalized macro-frames (“cynicism,” “speculation” or “metacommunication”) emerged as dominant in the news stories or forum posts. A frequency test was run for the dominant frames and an order ranking was created. As Table 4 illustrates, the results show that all of the three macro-frames emerged as dominant in stories and posts. Furthermore, in all instances, the top two dominant frames were macro-frames. “Metacommunication” was the top dominant macro-frame in both newspapers’
stories, with 31% of the stories in *Evenimentul Zilei*, 49.3% of *Jurnalul National*’s stories, and 41.2% overall. The second most dominant macro-frame in stories was “speculation” which was recorded in 25.7% of *Evenimentul Zilei*’s stories, in 28.2% of *Jurnalul National*’s stories, and 27.1% overall. Finally, “cynicism” was among the least employed dominant macro-frames in stories with only 3.5% in *Evenimentul Zilei*, 1.4% in *Jurnalul National*, and 2.4% overall.

The frequency analysis for reader posts dominant frames revealed a different picture, but one which still was dominated by macro-frames. For instance, Table 4 shows that “cynicism” and “speculation” were the top two audience frames (32% and 28.4% respectively of *Evenimentul Zilei*’s forum posts, 39.6% and 25% of *Jurnalul National*’s, and 34.6% and 27.2% of the overall posts). As opposed to news stories, “metacommunication” was not among the top three dominant frames; instead, it was ranked fourth in *Evenimentul Zilei*’s forum posts (11.8%), fifth in *Jurnalul National*’s readers’ posts (4.7%), and fourth overall (9.4%). The 7.1% discrepancy between *Evenimentul Zilei* and *Jurnalul National* posts in terms of “metacommunication” may be partly explained by *Evenimentul Zilei*’s more interactive forum, which allowed for easier communication among readers.

Research Question 2c asked which were the dominant media and audience frames. As already mentioned, the top two dominant frames in the online news stories were macro-frames (“metacommunication” and “speculation”), but some differences were noted for the ranking of the generic frames. Table 4 shows that for stories, “human interest” and “consequences” were ranked the same by *Evenimentul Zilei* and *Jurnalul National* online stories (third and fifth, respectively, with 15.9% and 13.7%, respectively), but important dissimilarities emerged for “responsibility,” “morality,” and “conflict” frames. Specifically, *Evenimentul Zilei*’s stories about the kidnapping event were dominated more frequently by the “responsibility” frame than
“Responsibility” was ranked fourth by the former newspaper (12.4%), but sixth by the latter (2.1%). “Morality” also seemed more frequently employed as a dominant frame by *Evenimentul Zilei*’s journalists (ranked sixth, with 4.4%), as opposed to *Jurnalul National* stories which were never dominated by this frame. However, the “conflict” frame was more frequently ranked dominant in *Jurnalul National*’s stories (fourth, with 4.2%) than *Evenimentul Zilei* (ranked last, with 1.8%).

In the case of online forum posts, as already discussed, the top two dominant frames were macro-frames (“cynicism” and “speculation”), but some differences emerged for the generic frames, even though they were not as significant as it was the case for the stories. With the exception of the “morality” and “conflict” frames which were ranked constantly third (14.4% for *Evenimentul Zilei* and 17.3% for *Jurnalul National*) and seventh (2.3% and 2.6%, respectively), all the other four generic frames were ranked differently by the readers of the two newspapers. For example, “responsibility” was ranked higher but weighted less as a dominant frame in *Jurnalul National* forum discussions (fourth, with 6.5%) than in *Evenimentul Zilei* posts (fifth with, 7.6%). Among the least frequently employed as dominant frames in *Evenimentul Zilei* and *Jurnalul National* posts, there were the “consequences” (ranked fifth and last, respectively) and “human interest” frames (ranked last and sixth, respectively).

Research Question 3 was focused on metacommunication frames. Specifically, it asked if there was any evidence of self-reflexive (i.e. media talking about media, or readers talking about other readers’ posts) or strategy metacommunication (i.e. media or readers commenting about a third party’s communication) frames in the online news stories and forum posts.

A series of chi-square tests were additionally run in order to see if there were any differences between the way the two source of news stories and forum posts employed the two
types of metacommunication frames. There were no significant differences between the *Evenimentul Zilei* and *Jurnalul National* news stories in terms of self-reflexive and strategy metacommunication frames \( \chi^2 (1, N = 255) = 6.31, p = .12 \) and \( \chi^2 (1, N = 255) = .28, p = .60 \), respectively. However, significant statistical differences were recorded for forum posts, for both types of metacommunication \( \chi^2 (1, N = 2,951) = 227.45, p \leq .001 \) and \( \chi^2 (1, N = 2,951) = 17.11, p \leq .001 \), respectively.

Table 5 offers a descriptive look at the way the self-reflexive and process metacommunication were used by the online news stories and readers. There is ample evidence of self-reflexive and strategy metacommunication in both news stories and reader posts, but to varying degrees and with some differences. The frequency tests show that, overall, news stories had more self-reflexive and strategy metacommunication frames than forum posts (34.1% versus 26.9% and 65.5% versus 7.7%, respectively). For news stories, both *Evenimentul Zilei* and *Jurnalul National* employed the strategy metacommunication frame with similar frequency (67.3% and 64.1%, respectively), but there was a 15% gap between the two news sources in terms of self-reflexive metacommunication (42.5% and 27.5%, respectively). Table 5 illustrates a different situation for the forum posts: in the *Evenimentul Zilei* forum, which allowed for an easier interaction between readers than *Jurnalul National*, there were nearly four times as many self-reflexive metacommunication frames (35.7% versus 9.8%). However, *Jurnalul National*’s online readers used more strategy metacommunication to frame their discussions about the event than *Evenimentul Zilei*’s online readers (10.6% versus 6.3%).

*President’s Portrayal*

Research Question 4 was concerned with President’s Traian Basescu’s portrayal (positive, negative, neutral or a combination) in news stories and readers’ posts. Table 7 shows
that 42% of the news stories and 21% of the reader posts mentioned Traian Basescu. The President was more frequently talked about in Evenimentul Zilei stories (51.3%) than Jurnalul National’s (34.5%), but an equal frequency of mentions was recorded for forum posts for both sources (21%).

As series of chi-square tests were run in order to see if there were statistically significant differences between the two online newspapers’ stories and forum posts in terms of positive and negative valence. The results reveal several statistically significant differences between the Evenimentul Zilei and Jurnalul National portrayals of President Basescu in news stories and subsequent forum posts. For instance, Evenimentul Zilei’s news stories were significantly more positive than Jurnalul National’s \( \chi^2 (1, N = 255) = 14.56, p \leq .001 \). Other statistically significant differences were recorded between the two newspapers’ forum posts, as Jurnalul National’s readers portrayed Basescu in negative terms more frequently than Evenimentul Zilei online readers \( \chi^2 (1, N = 2,951) = 3.86, p = .05 \). However, Evenimentul Zilei’s online readers portrayed the President in both positive and negative terms more frequently than its news stories \( \chi^2 (1, N = 2,060) = 12.15, p \leq .001 \) and \( \chi^2 (1, N = 2,060) = 5.01, p = .025 \), respectively. In Jurnalul National’s case, statistically significant differences were recorded only for the negative portrayals: readers tended to portray Basescu negatively more frequently than news stories \( \chi^2 (1, N = 1,146) = 6.82, p = .009 \).

A more detailed look at President Basescu’s portrayal valence in news stories and forum posts in terms of frequency of mentions is offered by Table 7. In news stories, the President benefited from an overall neutral to positive portrayal (71% neutral and 18.7% positive), but differences between the two newspapers were revealed. Specifically, Evenimentul Zilei stories had almost five times as more positive portrayals than Jurnalul National (29.3% versus 6.1%).
but no combined portrayals as opposed to the latter newspaper which had 10.2%. On the other hand, *Jurnalul National* stories had more negative and neutral portrayals (8.2% versus 3.4%, and 75.5% versus 67.2%, respectively).

According to the frequency data in Table 7 for forum posts, there were less dramatic differences in President’s portrayal valence. Overall, Basescu still benefited from a majority of neutral to positive mentions but to a lesser extent than stories (25.2% neutral and 28.2% positive). Also, the readers portrayed him more frequently in unfavorable terms than the newspapers (38.1% versus 5.6%). The differences between the two newspapers’ forums show that *Evenimentul Zilei*’s online readers predominantly portrayed the President in negative terms but less than *Jurnalul National*’s readers (34.7% versus 44.5%). However, there were still more positive mentions of Basescu among *Evenimentul Zilei* online readers than among *Jurnalul National* readers (30.8% versus 23.2%). Neutral and combination portrayals had similar weight in both online forums.

*Correlation of Frames*

The last Research Question asked if there was a correlation between the dominant Romanian news frames and forum posts frames. In order to answer this question, a series of correlations were run for the dominant media and audience frames by source. Table 9 shows very high correlations and dependable relationships between *Evenimentul Zilei* and *Jurnalul National* news (\(r = .91, p \leq .01\)) and forum posts (\(r = .95, p \leq .01\)). However, weak correlations and negligible relationships were recorded between each newspaper’s stories and subsequent reader posts: \(r = .16, p \leq .05\) for *Evenimentul Zilei*’s news and posts, and \(r = -.13, p = .71\) for *Jurnalul National*’s news and posts.
VII. Discussion

The kidnapping of three Romanian journalists in Iraq spurred many newspaper reports and online reader posts. This study employed a content analysis of 255 news stories and 2,951 reader forum posts from two influential Romanian newspapers with online versions. The goals of the study were to identify (1) the main issues in news stories and posts, (2) the distribution of Semetko and Valkenburg’s (2000) five generic frames and the emergence of three new macro-frames across the media and audience texts, (3) the portrayal of President Basescu by the two sources of news and their online readers, and finally, (4) to observe if a convergence of media and audience frames took place.

Generally speaking, the results show some differences among the two newspapers and among their forum posts, and significant discrepancies between the media and the audience texts.

Issues

Research Question 1a asked which issues were dominant in online news and reader forum posts. The correlation tests revealed strong similarities between the issues discussed in Evenimentul Zilei and Jurnalul National stories. Similarly, the dominant issue rankings of the reader posts from Evenimentul Zilei and Jurnalul National were highly correlated. This means that type of dominant issues were very similar among source (e.g. both newspapers covered the same dominant frames and both reader forum posts sources covered similar dominant issues).

The frequency results showed that “Kidnapping facts or speculations” was the most dominant issue in news stories and reader posts, regardless of the source. The fact that this issue was the top concern is not surprising, since the event was shrouded in mystery and speculation, and little information was made public by the authorities. However, ranking differences emerged between the stories and forum posts for the other dominant issues. The two newspapers were
similar in that their predominant coverage was concerned with reporting about the negotiations with the kidnappers, journalists’ families reactions or the suspects (i.e. Omar Hayssam). In contrast, readers were more preoccupied with discussing media’s role in the incident or the political aspects of the kidnapping, including the President’s handling of the crisis. These discrepancies between newspaper and public issue agendas reveal a picture in which the journalists reported about the event and its consequences, while the online readers commented about personal performance of media and political figures throughout the event. In other words, as opposed to the media, it would seem that the online readers adopted a rather critical stance in their discussions by evaluating how the major players performed during the unfolding of the event. This finding is in line with Hill and Hughes’s (1998) conclusions about America Online’s chat room political discussions: The online users did not focus on debating about specific issues or policies, but rather they focused on personalities.

A few examples may clarify this significant distinction. When the news about the kidnappers’ request for retreating the Romanian troops from Iraq in exchange for journalists’ lives was made public, Evenimentul Zilei published a montage of stories (“Mesaj dramatic din Iraq,” 2005). The report was filled with emotional language (i.e. “terrifying” and “shocking” images of the journalists, repeated use of the word “kill”), with speculations regarding the identity of the kidnappers (i.e. “a group which is close to Al Qaeda”) and with human interest information related to the journalists’ family reactions. Jurnalul National published a few articles about Omar Hayssam’s arrest and court appearances due to allegations regarding his involvement in the kidnapping as well as several fraud charges. Extensive accounts of Hayssam’s behavior were provided, while the stories had a general tendentious tone throughout the reporting (“sinister circus”) (Popa & Pasa, 2005).
A reader from *Evenimentul Zilei’s* forum cynically commented about President Basescu’s foreign policy, on March 30:

“We can only thank mister Basescu for the policy he has adopted and thrown in our face … Can’t we realize that Romania’s future is by Europe’s side and not USA’s?”

Another reader, from *Jurnalul National’s* forum, also commented cynically about media’s role in the incident, more precisely about a private TV channel’s decision to report the release of the journalists on April 1 which proved to be false information:

“Yes, Diaconescu [the reporter who released the false information] is really paranoid. I’m not a journalist, but I’ve heard about the concept of credibility, not to mention the information double-checking. Or maybe these concepts have become outdated today?”

The results also showed that six of the 28 pre-determined issues were not classified as dominant issues in stories, despite the possibility that they were mentioned. However, reader comments addressed 26 of the 28 issues. More specifically, issues such as “Iraq war,” “Ethnic hatred/issues,” or “Terrorism” were dominant in forum posts, but they were never the dominating issues in newspaper stories. Perhaps an explanation may be the fact that stories often took the form of “information packages” comprised of several distinct topics, such as new developments in the crisis, the Iraq war, family reactions and experts’ opinions. In a situation like this, the designated dominant issue was most probably “Kidnapping facts or speculations.”

Referring to both issues of “Terrorism” and “Ethnic hatred,” an *Evenimentul Zilei’s* reader commented on March 29, shortly after the event was first reported in the media:
“What did the journalists do wrong? They wanted to let the world know that there is no rebellion in Iraq but a group of gunmen and criminals who have access to Saddam’s weapons and money, and who generate terror so that they can be prosperous, just like the loathsome Hamas [Islamic Resistance Movement] and Islam followers.”

Research Question 1b asked if there were any differences between the two newspapers’ stories and posts in terms of the dominant issues covered. The correlation tests revealed that, for both sources, the dominant issue rankings in stories and their respective forum posts were not as highly related. As discussed for the previous research question, it appeared that the two newspapers and the online readers, respectively, had very similar dominant issues on their agendas; however, the correlation results for the present research question revealed slight differences between the ranking of the dominant issues in the stories and their subsequent reader discussions. This may be an indication that online readers tended to diverge from the news stories in their use of the issue that dominated each post and story, respectively.

The frequency analysis of the two newspapers and the two forums in terms of dominant issues showed some differences. For example, *Evenimentul Zilei* stories seemed more preoccupied with issues related to the “mechanics” of the incident, such as the negotiation process or the role of the suspects and the media in the unfolding of the event. As it will be illustrated, the main targets of such reports were some members of the Social Democratic Party (PSD) which ruled Romania until November 2004. *Jurnalul National* stories, on the other hand, seemed less polarized and more balanced in terms of the distribution of frequencies with one exception represented by the weight given to “Kidnapping facts and speculations:” there were almost twice as many stories in *Jurnalul National* than in *Evenimentul Zilei* that were dominated
by this issue. Although the causes for such a difference are not clear, it may be speculated that the two newspapers had a different perspective on the incident according to their political views. For instance, as mentioned in the literature review, *Evenimentul Zilei* has long been a tabloid newspaper concerned with high profile corruption cases of the former ruling party (PSD) and its members, which currently is considered the political opposition to the ruling coalition of parties. *Jurnalul National*, although a tabloid itself, seems to conceal such radical political views. The press and politics have a complex relationship in that *Jurnalul National* receives funding from a high profile politician whose political party, the Romanian Humanist Party (PUR), used to form an alliance with PSD, the former ruling party.

Another interesting difference resides in which issues were not mentioned as dominant in either of the two newspapers’ stories. Interestingly, issues such as “Corruption” or “Call to action” were not frequently present in *Jurnalul National*, while “Romanian foreign policy” and “International policies” were not frequently present in *Evenimentul Zilei*. These differences seem to lend additional support to the distinct editorial views that the two newspapers have: as opposed to *Jurnalul National*, *Evenimentul Zilei* apparently has a more activist position by publishing stories which demasked high profile corruption cases and by asking people to actively protest against the kidnapping. The following examples illustrate these differences.

In an editorial from *Evenimentul Zilei* April 1 titled “PSD and the Arab Heap”, a journalist decried the numerous corruption cases among the Arab businessmen that were members of the PSD. The author begins his chastising:

“Serial illegalities by Zaher Iskandarani, the cigarette smuggler… Suspect relationships between the Romanian secret services and the smugglers Youssef and Ellie Nassar... Behind the newspaper *Adevarul* there is Fathi Taher’s
money... The key to the kidnapping of the three Romanian journalists is held by Omar Hayssam... Don’t you think that we are seeing the same movie, but with different characters? In the lead roles there are Arab citizens schooled in Ceausescu’s Romania (Cartianu, 2005).”

The “Call to action” issue is illustrated in a news story published on April 26 titled “Marie Jeanne, Sorin and Ovidiu – Let Us Pray for Them!” the authors wrote about the thousands of Romanians who were protesting against the kidnapping in a marching of solidarity in several Romanian cities (Olteanu, Iorga & Pra, 2005).

On the other hand, two Jurnalul National stories were dominated by “Romanian foreign policy” and “International policies” which were absent in Evenimentul Zilei stories. On April 27 and 28, the two stories reported a press release by the US embassy in Romania and a study done by the US Department of State which praised Romania’s diplomatic and public support for the American fight against terrorism (“Campioni impotriva terorismului,” 2005; Constantinoiu, 2005).

In the case of forum posts, as already mentioned, correlations show strong relationships between the two forums, but the frequencies reveal a more dissimilar picture. This discrepancy between the correlation values and the frequencies is possible because of the significantly larger number of posts on Evenimentul Zilei’s forum (about 50% more than Jurnalul National).

Even though “Kidnapping facts and speculations” was the top dominant issue in both forums, Evenimentul Zilei and Jurnalul National reader posts differed to a larger extent than the news stories in terms of the frequency distribution. It may be argued that Evenimentul Zilei readers were somewhat more interested in the performance of politicians than Jurnalul National readers and, more importantly, they also provided more feedback to each other (“The author of
the article or post”), which was barely present in Jurnalul National posts. This was possible because, as mentioned in the “Method” section of the thesis, Evenimentul Zilei forum allowed for facile interactions between the readers, while Jurnalul National did not.

Jurnalul National readers, on the other hand, were more preoccupied with the fate of the journalists. They brought up more often religious issues than their counterparts from Evenimentul Zilei forum, and were more concerned with the negotiation process. It may be that the interactivity function available on Evenimentul Zilei forum encouraged an active exchange of opinions about the issues and thus generated a more critical and cynical view about the incident instead of just posting a comment. If this observation is accurate, then it may confirm Hill and Hughes’s (1998), Witschge’s (2002) and Pappacharissi’s (2002) concerns with the Internet’s limited ability to promote meaningful deliberations in a virtual public sphere.

Frames

Research Question 2a asked which of the five generic (responsibility, human interest, consequences, morality, and conflict) or three macro-frames (cynicism, speculation, and metacommunication) emerged from the online news stories and reader posts.

Before analyzing the frequencies, a series of correlation tests were done in order to assess the comparability of the newspaper and reader frames. The frame correlation tests revealed that the media and the audience followed a somewhat similar trend as noted for dominant issues. More specifically, the two newspapers’ news stories and the two newspapers’ forum posts, respectively, were very highly correlated, meaning that they were similar in their use of the eight frames.

However, like the findings for the dominant issues, weaker relationships were observed when the stories were compared to their reader posts. In fact, in Jurnalul National’s case, the
relationship was not only small but also negative, denoting that the stories and posts were moving in opposite directions. In other words, the more *Jurnalul National* news stories used certain frames, the less the readers used the same frames. Even though the correlation test for *Evenimentul Zilei* stories and posts showed a positive (thus non-diverging correlation), the absolute value of the correlation was identical to *Jurnalul National*’s, which means that the relationship is small as well.

What these correlation tests reveal is that the media and their readers framed the event differently and even divergently, despite the similarities among issue frequencies for stories and posts. This important finding supports previous research that shows audiences’ different perspectives and priorities in their framing than media (Neuman, Just & Crigler, 1992; Huang, 1995; Dumlao, 2003).

The frequency distribution results confirmed the significant *similarities* among stories and among posts revealed by the correlation tests. This means that among stories and forum discussions, respectively, the eight frames had similar frequency distribution. The frequencies also verified the important *discrepancies* between the way the two newspapers and their readers framed their views of the event. Overall, the newspapers framed their reporting mostly in terms of “metacommunication,” “speculation,” and “human interest.” On the other hand, the readers were mostly speculative, cynical, and ready to assign responsibility in their discussions.

It is interesting to notice that the second most used media frame was “speculation,” which was employed in more than half of the 255 news stories analyzed in this study. This propensity toward making assumptions rather than reporting rigorously verified facts seems to be a characteristic of the Romanian print media, as Petcu (2000) concluded in his survey of seven years of post-communist print media. Thus, this project brings further support to Petcu’s
conclusion – two of the most influential and largely circulated Romanian newspapers still rely on subjective and biased reporting after 16 years of democracy and freedom of the press.

An example of how speculation pervades the Romanian print media reporting is provided by a story published by *Evenimentul Zilei* a few days after the abduction took place. The story relied exclusively on the opinions and speculations of Valica Gorea, the president of the Romanian Nuclear Agency. Despite the fact that Gorea was a hostage in Nigeria during 1994, he had no authority or government access to information related to this case. The story begins:

“[Gorea] says that the kidnapping of the Romanian journalists seems to have been managed from Romania. Gorea, who was the director of Bucovina Mineral Water, said in a press conference that he had known Omar Hayssam [the prime suspect] personally. ‘I had dealt with him for a certain period of time,’ said Gorea, who also stated that ‘what the media have been saying seems very close to reality to me, namely that this kidnapping has been managed from Romania.’ He said that he phoned the Romanian authorities in Bucharest Saturday morning but ‘the Romanian Government hadn’t received any official claim about the kidnapping yet, and also, nobody hasn’t mentioned any ransom as of now.’ Gorea said that, after seeing how the kidnapping situation was unfolding, the situation was ‘intriguing,’ mostly because Omar Hayssam was the first one who talked about the abduction and ransom. ‘I have the feeling that the first time anybody ever heard about this kidnapping was from Omar Hayssam, who also mentioned the ransom’ said Gorea” (“O ipoteza tot mai des formulata”, 2005).
The report continues along the same speculative and subjective lines, without mentioning any official and verified evidence about the case.

In can be argued that the unhealthy speculative reporting style of the Romanian print media may alienate the readers and make them adopt a cynical attitude toward media’s role in a democratic society. The results of this study reflect this cynical attitude of the readers – two out of five reader posts included cynicism as a frame (39.5%). The following comment from *Jurnalul National* forum posted on April 23 is a cynical response of a reader to a story that discussed the possibility that media reports may have endangered the three journalists’ lives:

“Yes, gentlemen, you have endangered their lives! The best proof is represented by the new broadcast images [of the hostage journalists]. Do you remember when you used to trivialize the first images and you were making imbecile assumptions about terrorists’ clothes and shoes? You said they were some crazy kids, with no serious intentions, who could barely hold their guns straight… Well, the “kids” took their shoes off and shot the images in black and white so that Romanians couldn’t mock their appearances anymore … Now, gents, you are finding out with horror that the situation is dead serious and all that your pens have produced is just garbage … The terrorists have been mocked and laughed at by YOU, cheap journalists chasing sensationalism and power over people’s consciousness.”

Finally, the results signaled which of the five *generic* and three *macro* frames were most frequently used in news stories and online forum posts. In the case of *generic* frames, “responsibility” was the top frame in *Evenimentul Zilei*’s stories and posts, while “human interest” and “morality” were the top frames in *Jurnalul National*’s stories and posts,
respectively. Interestingly, the “responsibility” frame had almost twice as many mentions in Evenimentul Zilei than in Jurnalul National stories, which reflects the former newspaper’s aggressive tabloid format, as mentioned earlier. The focus of Jurnalul National stories on the “human interest” frame is also characteristic of tabloids, but the difference between the two newspapers resides in the fact that Evenimentul Zilei was preoccupied with unmasking the culprits, thus assuming an active role in the incident. Jurnalul National, on the other hand, favored a more neutral approach by emphasizing the human element, and it thus avoided taking any political side overtly.

Even though no ranking differences were recorded for the three macro frames in either newspaper’s stories or forum posts, it is worth mentioning that “cynicism” was the most used frame by the readers. As discussed in the section regarding the most important trends in the Romanian public opinion, the propensity toward cynicism of the Romanian readers may be a direct result of the widespread dissatisfaction with the state of democracy in the country (Voicu, 2005). The speculative view of the Romanian print media may also be the second culprit in this wide-spread cynical attitude among citizens. As the excerpt from a reader’s comment illustrated earlier, there is a tendency among Romanian readers toward chastising Romanian journalists for their lack of professional and moral standards.

Research Question 2b sought to find out if any of the three macro-frames (“cynicism,” “speculation,” and “metacommunication”) emerged as dominant in news stories or forum posts. The results showed not only these macro-frames were designated as dominant, but they were also the top dominant frames in stories and posts.

In the case of stories, for instance, “metacommunication” was the top dominant frame in both newspapers’ stories, while “speculation” was the second most employed media frame. The
The prevalence of “metacommunication” as a dominant macro-frame in news stories is not necessarily surprising; after all, media texts are, to a large extent, reports about others’ communication. Also, the nature of the event itself accommodated media reports about official or unofficial sources’ statements regarding the latest developments. In other words, since the media could not investigate the incident themselves due to its highly classified nature, they had to rely on the communication generated by a variety sources, some more credible or official than others. Also, the prevalence of the “human interest” frame overall, as mentioned earlier, may have contributed to the emergence of “metacommunication” as a top macro-frame since most of these stories depicted what the hostages’ families and friends had said about the crisis.

However, it is surprising to observe that, once again, “speculation” was such a widely used frame by the media. As already discussed, the results confirmed other scholars’ statements about Romanian media’s highly speculative nature (i.e. Petcu, 2000), which may stem from the lack of professional standards in both print and electronic media. In fact, as briefly discussed in the literature review, the 2005 Romanian Media Sustainability Report written by the International Research & Exchanges (IREX) concluded that the least improvement was noticed for Romanian journalists’ adherence to professional standards. This situation is concerning especially because it seems that the number of Romanian journalists who contact all the possible sources to double-check the information is under decline (IREX, 2005).

In the case of online reader posts, “cynicism” was the most frequently employed as a dominant macro-frame, and it also was the most prevalent audience frame overall, as already discussed for RQ 2a. The fact that people exhibit high levels of cynicism in a former communist country is not unexpected for a promising, but struggling and evolving democracy. Perhaps the
overall dissatisfaction with the state of democracy in Romania since its emergence from communism in 1989 is partly the fault of a poorly performing and highly speculative media.

Research Question 2c asked which were the dominant media and audience frames. For news stories, the top two dominant frames were “metacommunication” and “speculation.” Since this result has already been discussed under the previous research question (2b), further attention will be given to some differences that emerged between the two newspapers’ dominant frames. The results showed that “human interest” was the next dominant frame in both sources, but important incongruities surfaced for the remaining frames. For instance, Evenimentul Zilei stories were more frequently dominated by the “responsibility” and “morality” frames than Jurnalul National stories. This situation brings further support to a tendency that has already been noted and discussed: Evenimentul Zilei stories advanced more overtly the newspaper’s political stance than Jurnalul National. Results indicated that Jurnalul National was more preoccupied with reporting about the facts surrounding the event. Evenimentul Zilei’s reporting angle had a mainly aggressive and accusatory tone, especially when presenting information about corruption and internal politics. For example, one story discussed the evidence that several highly ranked politicians (of whom some were PSD members) might have intentionally covered up the main suspect’s (Omar Hayssam) illegal businesses in Romania for several years (Dan, Feraru, Onofrei, & Sercan, 2005).

The online reader discussions, as already noted and discussed, were dominated by “cynicism” and “speculation” macro-frames. However, some differences emerged between the two forums. Namely, “metacommunication” was more frequently a dominant frame in Evenimentul Zilei forum discussions because, as already mentioned, the website allowed for easier interaction between the readers (i.e. the structure of the forum allowed for replies to a
specific posting). Also, two of the most frequently used dominant media frames, “human interest” and “consequences”, were very seldom used by the readers. However, these two frames were ranked differently in the two forums. “Human interest” was ranked higher as a dominant frame on *Jurnalul National* readers’ agendas of discussion, while ranked very low by *Evenimentul Zilei* readers. This situation generates two possible conclusions. First, the readers did not necessarily follow the leading frames of the news stories in their forum discussions. Second, it is possible that the higher interaction between *Evenimentul Zilei*’s readers may have resulted in a more cynical attitude which decreased the chances of framing the discussions as “human interest.” In other words, as Pappacharissi (2002) and Witschge (2002) observed, a high level of interaction between the online readers may produce a cynical outlook which may be incompatible with the emotional elements of the “human interest” frame.

The discussion so far about the emergent overall and dominant frames in news stories and online forum posts revealed two important aspects. First, even though all of the eight frames were present in both the stories and posts, the online readers seemed to have placed dissimilar weight and importance than the journalists writing about the kidnapping incident. This important conclusion is supported by previous research such as that conducted by Neuman, Just & Crigler (1992), Huang (1995) or Dumlao (2003) who found that the audience may use the same frames as the media but to differing extents.

The second aspect pertains to the prevalence of the three macro-frames, defined and tested by this study for the first time. The macro-frames were not only present throughout the stories and reader posts, but they were also the top *dominant* frames in both media and audience texts. This may suggest the possibility that these macro-frames may function as overarching media and audience representations of events, upon which other types of frames such as the
generic or issue-specific are constructed. In other words, it is possible that they created the foundation upon which generic frames, such as those defined by Semetko and Valkenburg (2000), define the framing particularities of media and audience discourse. This important finding advances framing research by delineating the basis of media and audience frame exploration, since they have the potential of providing a cross-media and cross-cultural point of reference for framing scholars. Macro-frames’ broad spectrum of applicability and significance may allow for their testing in various contexts, ranging from a particular event to a cross-national and cross-media topic.

Research Question 3 asked if any of the two types of metacommunication, *self-reflexive* (i.e. media talking about media or readers talking about other readers’ posts) and *strategy/process* (i.e. the media or the readers commenting about a third party’s communication), was present in the online stories or posts. The chi-square and the frequency tests showed that *Evenimentul Zilei* and *Jurnalul National* news stories used the two types of metacommunication very similarly, but there were differences in reader posts between the two sources. More specifically, it seemed that *Evenimentul Zilei* online readers used self-reflexive metacommunication more frequently than *Jurnalul National* readers (35.7% versus 9.8%). The explanation for this discrepancy may be that the online version of *Evenimentul Zilei* had a more interactive forum which let the readers to post replies to each other’s posts. However, the results also showed that *Jurnalul National* readers used more strategy metacommunication than those from *Evenimentul Zilei*’s forum, that is they commented more about the communication of those involved in the event (i.e. the families, the President, political leaders, etc). Perhaps the readers reacted to *Jurnalul National*’s propensity toward more neutral reporting about the event and sought to compensate for the lack of overt partisanship by commenting the cited sources’ communication.
President’s Portrayal

President Traian Basescu had an important role throughout the kidnapping event. His controversial political background and straightforward personality, as discussed earlier in this thesis, prompted media and public scrutiny of his actions and decisions. The results revealed that two in five news stories and one in five reader posts mentioned the President, but he was mentioned more frequently in Evenimentul Zilei news stories than Jurnalul National; equal mentions of the President were recorded in both online forums. This imbalance in mentions between the two newspapers’ stories can be explained by Evenimentul Zilei’s concern with the “mechanics” and the political aspects of the event, as discussed earlier. Additionally, as a series of chi-square tests revealed, this newspaper also portrayed President Basescu in more positive terms than Jurnalul National, which had more negative mentions, but not at statistically significant levels.

The distinction in portrayal valance reveals that Evenimentul Zilei had a more overt political agenda, in the sense that its news stories seemed to tackle the political aspects of the incident more frequently than the other newspaper, as already discussed. Also, the dominant positive tone in Evenimentul Zilei’s report about the President, which was found in almost five times as many stories than in Jurnalul National, denotes the newspaper’s historical support for President Basescu’s ruling coalition of parties.

The following examples illustrate how overtly different Evenimentul Zilei portrayed President Basescu and the former President, Ion Iliescu. On May 29, a week after the news that the journalists had been freed was publicized, Evenimentul Zilei published an editorial titled “The Therapy of Truth” which portrayed President Basescu in a flattering light:
“Traian Basescu is a different kind of president. He is the type that assumes responsibilities and risks like neither Iliescu [President between 2000 and 2004] nor Constantinescu [President between 1996 and 2000] did because they had been invoking Constitutional limitations in order to justify their lack of involvement. He assumed the main role along with the risks involved throughout the hostage crisis, so it is only natural that he was the first to congratulate. During the last weeks, the President gave the feeling of unrestrained sincerity. He went back and forth between exaggerated optimism and genuinely concerned statements. Basescu has proven to be an atypical politician: He has had the courage to act like an ordinary person, lacking demagogy or cheap precaution – he has been a President who puts public’s interest above image and communication strategies” (Ulmanu, 2005).”

On the other hand, an editorial published a few days after the kidnapping took place overtly accused former President, Ion Iliescu, of corruption. Ilieascu, founder of the Social Democratic Party (PSD), is accused not only of corruption, but also of nurturing the illegal operations of the Arab businessmen living in Romania:

“What a strange marriage it is between the party conceived by Ion Iliescu [PSD] and the group of the Arab sharks! ... All seem to have a common denominator: the secret structures that have raised them, protected them, and let them get rich in a country that they have ripped off – Romania (Cartianu, 2005).”

Interestingly, despite Jurnalul National’s rather neutral portrayal of the President, the online readers had a differing opinion of President Basescu: they tended to portray him more
negatively. Evenimentul Zilei online readers had a differing opinion about the President as well, despite the newspaper’s predominantly positive portrayals: they tended to talk about the President in both negative and positive terms equally. What these results say is that the readers may already have their own views about the President, thus the valence of news portrayal did not seem to change their opinions. The results also suggest that the readers have a tendency toward portraying the President in rather negative terms regardless of what the reality is, which may be related to the public’s dominant cynical view noted earlier in this study. Again, this is a finding that is consistent with previous research (Hill and Hughes, 1998; Pappacharissi, 2002; Witschge, 2002).

Correlation of Frames

Research Question 5 asked if there was a correlation between the dominant news frames and reader forum frames. The correlation tests revealed that, taken separately, the news frames and the reader posts frames were very similar. In other words, the two newspapers and the two online forums respectively used the eight frames to comparable extents. However, significant discrepancies were noticed when newspaper stories were compared to their subsequent reader posts: The correlations were minor and the relationships almost negligible. Moreover, in Jurnalul National’s case, the relationship between its stories and forum posts was negative, meaning that when the stories used certain frames, the readers used the others.

These results paint a picture in which there is significant frame “agreement” among the newspapers and among the readers, but strong frame “disagreement” between the newspapers and their subsequent reader posts. This finding brings further support to the scant research that looked at both media and audience frames. For example, Neuman, Just, and Crigler (1992) conducted a series of in-depth interviews which were coded for individual frames, and concluded
that people may have different priorities when they interpret media frames, thus they may or may
not take these frames for granted. Huang (1995) concluded her analysis of media and audience
frames with the observation that even though the media and audience frames overlapped, each of
them placed different weight on those frames.

VIII. Limitations

Results of this study need to be considered in light of a few limitations such as the
specific nature of the event and the profile of the online readers.

The kidnapping of the three Romanian journalists in Iraq was, indeed, one of the most
significant media event in the post-communist Romania. Despite the considerable amount of
published media reports, a question may be raised regarding the specificity of the incident: Is this
event more prone to higher levels of media speculation than other large-scale events? The answer
may be “yes” since little factual and official information was released to the media while the
event was unfolding. Furthermore, as President Basescu officially declared, the entire file would
be de-classified no sooner than 50 years. This situation may have led the media to publish more
speculative material than usually in order to compensate the lack of information.

The second problematic aspect was related to the profile of the online readers of the two
newspapers. More specifically, in the month of March 2005 when the incident took place, 47% of
Evenimentul Zilei’s online readers were located in Romania, while the rest were Romanians
accessing the website from other countries. In Jurnalul National’s case, 66.7% of the online
readers accessed the newspaper’s website from Romania. However, it is still not clear how many
of the readers were posting their online posts from Romania. This uncertainty may raise the

10 According to the available data provided by a Romanian web traffic monitoring service (http://www.traffic.ro).
question of how representative of the Romanian population these opinions are if they belonged to people who did not live in Romania at the time the incident.

**IX. Suggestions for Further Research**

The emergence of the macro frames ("cynicism," "speculation," and "metacommunication") as dominant is an encouraging next step of research for both media and audience framing. Future inquiries may study the three macro frames in the context of a different media event and of a different culture. This way it can be revealed if the "cynicism" and "speculation" frames, for example, pervade the traditional democratic societies as well, such the United States or other European countries.

Additionally, another promising line of research could extend the present project to study the issue and frame cycles throughout the Romanian journalists’ kidnapping event. Such an approach would fit well under the umbrella of the agenda setting theory since it allows the comparison of the ranking of issues and frames in news stories and audience opinions during specific time segments.

Finally, further research could explore in more detail the generational differences between the Romanians born in late 1980s and those who lived under the communist regime for several decades. More specifically, such a line of research would examine the levels of cynicism for each of these generations. If results show that cynicism transfers from one generation to another, than a further question worthy of attention would be what aspects of the Romanian society and culture fuel such a gloomy view and why?
X. Conclusions

Four major conclusions emerge from this study. First, analyzing online forum posts as audience texts proved not only to be possible, but also beneficial in audience frame research. The benefits of considering online reader posts as valid audience texts include unaltered and unlimited expression of opinions and the opportunity of studying a statistically significant sample, as opposed to the traditional experiments, opinion polls, or focus groups.

A second conclusion pertains to the prevalence and dominance of the macro-frames (“cynicism,” “speculation,” and “metacommunication”) in newspaper stories and online reader posts. What the results are suggesting may be that the macro-frames function as an overarching umbrella of media and audience representations of events which encompasses the other types of frames such as the generic or issue-specific. This important finding advances framing research by delineating the basis of media and audience frame exploration since they have the potential of providing a cross-media and cross-cultural point of reference for framing scholars. Also, the macro frames have a great potential of applicability in various contexts, ranging from a particular event to a cross-national and cross-media topic.

The third conclusion is related to the speculative nature of the Romanian newspapers and to online readers’ cynicism. Post-communist Romanian media, particularly the newspapers, have been pervaded by a propensity toward reporting rumors and hypotheses, and not by verified facts and official information (Petcu, 2000). This study confirms that, after 16 years of democracy, Romanian print media still rely on speculation as main reporting style. Also, the high levels of Romanian citizens’ lack of trust in the democratic process and in a speculative media may have prompted the high levels of cynicism revealed in this study.
Finally, the fourth major conclusion emerging from this study is that while the media and the audience, respectively, share similar views, there are important divergences when media’s views are compared to the views of their readers. This study showed that the journalists and the readers may use similar frames, but to differing extents and with differing weight. Moreover, in an emerging democracy such as Romania where media are struggling to adhere to the professional standards and norms, speculation is still pervasive especially in newspapers, while cynicism seems to be a predominant characteristic of the public’s discourse.
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Figure 1

The Evolution of the Total Number of Daily Newspaper Titles between 1990 and 2003

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<td>106</td>
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<td>108</td>
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<td>1,180</td>
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<td>1,986</td>
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<td>1,923</td>
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*Source: National Statistical Institute, 2006*
Fig. 2

Breakdown of average monthly circulation and online readership

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Evenimentul Zilei</em></td>
<td>103,814 copies</td>
<td>1,307,268 visitors 13,724,317 hits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Jurnalul National</em></td>
<td>275,074 copies</td>
<td>595,513 visitors 3,390,365 hits</td>
</tr>
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</table>

*Source: BRAT (The Romanian Bureau for Circulation Auditing)
**Source: www.trafic.ro
### Table 1

Frequencies of Dominant Issues for Online News Stories by Newspaper and Overall (N = 255)

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Issue</th>
<th><strong>Evenimentul Zilei</strong></th>
<th><strong>Jurnalul National</strong></th>
<th><strong>Overall</strong></th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n=113</td>
<td>n=142</td>
<td>N=255</td>
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<td></td>
<td>f</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>%</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corruption</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Iraq war</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
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<td>Romanian troops in Iraq</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kidnapping history</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International support/solidarity</td>
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<td>8</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family reactions</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnic hatred or ethnic issues</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The kidnapped journalists’ reactions</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The author/content of the article/post</td>
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<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The President’s handling of the crisis</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>13</td>
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<td>Romanian foreign policy</td>
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<td>International policies</td>
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<td>The crisis squad</td>
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<td>7</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kidnapping-related facts/speculations</td>
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<td>51</td>
<td>70</td>
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<td>The kidnapped journalists’ whereabouts in Iraq</td>
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<td>Secret services</td>
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<td>Terrorism</td>
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<td>Media's role in the incident</td>
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<td>7</td>
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<td>Internal politics</td>
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<td>Call to action</td>
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<td>Journalists' biographies</td>
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<td>Omar Hayssam</td>
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<td>Prayer for journalists/Religious issues</td>
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<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negotiating the release/ransom</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mohamad Munaf</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freeing of the journalists</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Journalists' debriefing/Press conference</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2

Frequencies of Dominant Issues for Online Forum Posts by Newspaper and Overall
(N = 2,951)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issue</th>
<th>Evenimentul Zilei</th>
<th>Jurnalul National</th>
<th>Overall</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>f</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>f</td>
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<tr>
<td>Corruption</td>
<td>80</td>
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<td>11</td>
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<tr>
<td>Iraq war</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Romanian troops in Iraq</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kidnapping history</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International support/solidarity</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family reactions</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>9</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ethnic hatred or ethnic issues</td>
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<tr>
<td>The kidnapped journalists’ reactions</td>
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<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The author/content of the article/post</td>
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<td>8.1</td>
<td>17</td>
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<tr>
<td>The President’s handling of the crisis</td>
<td>143</td>
<td>7.3</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Romanian foreign policy</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>62</td>
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<tr>
<td>International policies</td>
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<td>2.5</td>
<td>11</td>
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<tr>
<td>The crisis squad</td>
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<td>0.2</td>
<td>12</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kidnapping-related facts/speculations</td>
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<td>17.4</td>
<td>242</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Secret services</td>
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<td>2.2</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Romanian mentality</td>
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<td>5.1</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Terrorism</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>11</td>
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<tr>
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<td>9.3</td>
<td>125</td>
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<td>Call to action</td>
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<td>1.5</td>
<td>18</td>
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<tr>
<td>Journalists' biographies</td>
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<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Omar Hayssam</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>9</td>
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<tr>
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<td>1.8</td>
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<tr>
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<td>2.8</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mohamad Munaf</td>
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<td>0.7</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freeing of the journalists</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Journalists' debriefing/Press conference</td>
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<td>0.6</td>
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</table>
Table 3
Frequencies of Generic & Macro Frames for Online News Stories and Forum Posts by Newspaper and Overall

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frames</th>
<th>Evenimentul Zilei (n=113)</th>
<th>Jurnalul National (n=142)</th>
<th>Overall (N=255)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>f %</td>
<td>f %</td>
<td>f %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Generic frames*</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Responsibility</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Human Interest</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>Consequences</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>28</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Morality</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>6</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Conflict</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Macro-frames</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cynicism</td>
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<td>17</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Speculation</td>
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<td>75</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Metacommunication</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>112</td>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frames</th>
<th>Evenimentul Zilei (n=1,947)</th>
<th>Jurnalul National (n=1,004)</th>
<th>Overall (N=2,951)</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>f %</td>
<td>f %</td>
<td>f %</td>
</tr>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Generic frames*</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Human Interest</td>
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<td>Consequences</td>
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<td>136</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Morality</td>
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<td>387</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Conflict</td>
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<td>122</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Macro-frames</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Cynicism</td>
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<td>597</td>
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<td>Speculation</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Metacommunication</td>
<td>782</td>
<td>202</td>
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</table>

*The generic frames were adopted from Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000
Table 4

Dominant Frame Rankings of Online News Stories and Forum Posts by Newspaper and Overall

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Evenimentul Zilei</th>
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<th>%</th>
<th>Jurnalul National</th>
<th>f</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Overall</th>
<th>N=255</th>
<th>f</th>
<th>%</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Evenimentul Zilei</td>
<td>n=113</td>
<td></td>
<td>Jurnalul National</td>
<td>n=142</td>
<td></td>
<td>Overall</td>
<td>N=255</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
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<td>Speculation</td>
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<td>69</td>
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<tr>
<td>3</td>
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<td>18</td>
<td>15.9</td>
<td>Human Interest</td>
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<td>12.0</td>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Responsibility</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>12.4</td>
<td>Conflict</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>Responsibility</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Consequences</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>Consequences</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>Consequences</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Morality</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>Responsibility</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>Conflict</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Cynicism</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>Cynicism</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>Cynicism</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Conflict</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>Morality</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Morality</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

|      | Evenimentul Zilei | n=1,947 | | Jurnalul National | n=1,004 | | Overall | N=2,941 | |   |
|------|-------------------|---------| |                   |         | |         |         |   |   |
| 1    | Cynicism          | 623     | 32.0 | Cynicism          | 398    | 39.6 | Cynicism | 1021 | 34.6 |
| 2    | Speculation       | 552     | 28.4 | Speculation       | 251    | 25.0 | Speculation | 803 | 27.2 |
| 3    | Morality          | 280     | 14.4 | Morality          | 174    | 17.3 | Morality | 454  | 15.4 |
| 4    | Metacomm.         | 229     | 11.8 | Responsibility    | 65     | 6.5  | Metacomm. | 276  | 9.4  |
| 5    | Responsibility    | 147     | 7.6  | Metacomm.         | 47     | 4.7  | Responsibility | 212 | 7.2  |
| 6    | Consequences      | 50      | 2.6  | Human Interest    | 28     | 2.8  | Conflict | 70   | 2.4  |
| 7    | Conflict          | 44      | 2.3  | Conflict          | 26     | 2.6  | Consequences | 65  | 2.2  |
| 8    | Human interest    | 22      | 1.1  | Consequences      | 15     | 1.5  | Human Interest | 50  | 1.1  |
Table 5
Overall Frequencies of Self-reflexive and Strategy Metacommunication Frames for Online News Stories and Online Forum Posts by Newspaper and Overall

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frames</th>
<th>Evenimentul Zilei n=91</th>
<th>Jurnalul National n=112</th>
<th>Overall N=203*</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>f</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>f</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-reflexive metacommunication</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>42.5</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategy/Process metacommunication</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>67.3</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frames</th>
<th>Evenimentul Zilei n=782</th>
<th>Jurnalul National n=202</th>
<th>Overall N=984*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>f</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>f</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-reflexive metacommunication</td>
<td>696</td>
<td>35.7</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategy/Process metacommunication</td>
<td>122</td>
<td>6.3</td>
<td>106</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

*The overall sample refers to the total number of stories or posts that were coded for metacommunication frame presence. If both self-reflexive and strategy metacommunication types were present, they were both coded for presence.
Table 6

Frequencies of Mentions and Portrayal Valence of the President in Online News Stories and Forum Posts by Newspaper and Overall

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Evenimentul Zilei</th>
<th>Jurnalul National</th>
<th>Overall</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>f</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>f</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mentions</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>51.3</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>29.3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>67.2</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Combination</td>
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<td>-</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td>58</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

|                    | f     | %   | f     | %   | f     | %   |
| Mentions           | 409   | 21.0| 211   | 21.0| 620   | 21  |
| Positive           | 126   | 30.8| 49    | 23.2| 175   | 28.2|
| Negative           | 142   | 34.7| 94    | 44.5| 236   | 38.1|
| Neutral            | 106   | 25.9| 50    | 23.7| 156   | 25.2|
| Combination        | 35    | 8.6 | 18    | 8.5 | 53    | 8.5 |
| **TOTAL**          | 409   | 100 | 211   | 100 | 620   | 100 |
Table 7

Correlations of Dominant Frames for Online News Stories and Forum Posts by Newspaper and Overall

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Evenimentul Zilei News</th>
<th>Jurnalul National News</th>
<th>All News</th>
<th>Evenimentul Zilei Posts</th>
<th>Jurnalul National Posts</th>
<th>All Posts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<td><strong>Evenimentul Zilei News</strong> (N=133)</td>
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<td>.913**</td>
<td>.967**</td>
<td>.162</td>
<td>-.104</td>
<td>.064</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Jurnalul National News</strong> (N=142)</td>
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<td>1.0</td>
<td>.986**</td>
<td>.133</td>
<td>-.131</td>
<td>.034</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>All News</strong> (N=255)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>.157</td>
<td>-.114</td>
<td>.056</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Evenimentul Zilei Posts</strong> (N=1,947)</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>.952**</td>
<td>.993**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Jurnalul National Posts</strong> (N=1,004)</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>.981**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>All Posts</strong> (N=2,951)</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

** Correlation tests reveal significance at the p ≤ .01 level
Appendix 1

Codebook for Content Analysis

Unit: The coders will assign the current order number, starting with 1 (including forum posts).

Story/Post Source: The coders will assign the following codes for the story/post source:

   (1) for any news story from “Evenimentul Zilei”
   (2) for any news story from “Jurnalul National”

Text Type: The coders will assign the following code for each of the texts:

   (1) for news story
   (2) for opinion article
   (3) for forum post

Story/Post Date: The coders will write the date of the article (i.e. mmdd).

Story/Post Number: There are days when the same online newspaper published several stories or it posted several forum posts about the event. The coders will assign an order number, starting with 1, for each sequence of stories/posts from the same day.

Issues: The coders are asked to identify the presence or absence of a number of issues from a predetermined list based on prior research:

   (1) Corruption
   (2) Iraqi war
   (3) Romanian troops in Iraq
   (4) Kidnapping history/facts
   (5) International support/solidarity
   (6) Family reactions
   (7) Ethnic hatred/issues (i.e. Muslims)
   (8) The kidnapped journalists’ reactions
   (9) The author/content of the/other article(s) (referring strictly to the quality of the journalistic writing, including possible errors or mistakes)
   (10) The President’s handling of the crisis
   (11) Romanian foreign policy
   (12) Int’l policies (including European Union, USA, other countries)
   (13) The crisis squad
   (14) Kidnapping-related facts (i.e. reporting strictly what happened)
   (15) The kidnapped Romanian journalists’ whereabouts in Iraq (i.e. why were they there? Was it really necessary for them to be there? etc)
   (16) Secret services
   (17) Romanian mentality
(18) Terrorism
(19) Media's role in the incident
(20) Internal politics
(21) Call to action, protests, signing, unity, websites etc
(22) Journalists' biographies
(23) Omar Hayssam
(24) Prayer for journalists/Religious issues
(25) Negotiating the release/ransom
(26) Munaf
(27) Freeing of the journalists
(28) Journalists' debriefing/Press conference

**Dominant Issue:** After reading each story/post and listing all the issues present, the coders will determine which is the most dominant issue by considering the salience or the importance of the issue in the story/post. For instance, a story/post that discusses the Romanian troops’ role in Iraq by referencing several international policies regarding the Iraqi war will have issue #3 as a dominant issue.

The dominant issue will be coded by writing the corresponding issue number from the above list.

**Generic Frames:** The coders are asked to determine the presence or absence of the following frames, as listed and described below:

1. **Responsibility**
   - Does the story suggest that some level of gov’t has the ability to alleviate the problem?
   - Does the story suggest that some level of gov’t is responsible for the issue/problem?
   - Does the story suggest that an individual/group of people in society is responsible for the issue/problem?
   - Does the story suggest solution(s) to the issue/problem?
   - Does the story suggest the problem requires urgent action?

2. **Human Interest**
   - Does the story provide a human example or “human face” on the issue?
   - Does the story employ adjectives or personal vignettes that generate feelings of outrage, empathy-caring, sympathy, or compassion?
   - Does the story emphasize how individuals and groups are affected by the issue/problem?
   - Does the story go into the private or personal lives of the actors?
   - Does the story contain visual information that might generate feelings of outrage, empathy-caring, sympathy, or compassion?

3. **Consequences (economic, social, political, military etc)**
   - Is there a mention of any type of loses or gains (economic, social, political, military etc) now or in the future?
   - Is there a mention of the costs/degree of expense involved?
Is there a reference to any kind of consequences of pursuing or not pursuing a course of action?

(4) Morality
Does the story contain any moral message?
Does the story make reference to morality, God, and other religious tenets?
Does the story offer specific (social) prescriptions or solutions about how to behave/act?

(5) Conflict
Does the story reflect disagreement between parties/individuals/groups/countries?
Does one party/individual/group/country reproach another?
Does the story refer to two sides or to more than two sides of the problem/issue?
Does the story refer to winners and losers?

(6) Cynicism
Does the story reflect any attitudes of disdainful or jaded negativity, especially as a general distrust of others’ integrity or motives?
Are there any feelings that ordinary people cannot influence what the powerful do?
Are there any statements implying that politicians and other powerful individuals in a society do not care about the others?
Is there any indication of (bitter) irony or sarcasm toward certain individuals or issues?
Is there any perceived sense of surrender to “greater forces” or alienation (i.e. refusal to participate in any social or political actions like voting, protesting etc)?

(7) Speculation
Does the story make any speculation about what has happened or will happen?
Does the story mention any hypothetical assumptions about the event?
Does the story ask or imply any rhetorical questions or inferences?

(8) Metacommunication
Does the story include the reporter’s own opinions?
Does the author of the story cite other journalists?
Does the story mention how the news media has handled the crisis?
Does the story mention/discuss the communication strategy of a particular individual or group of individuals?

Dominant Generic Frame: After reading each story/post and listing all the frames present, the coders will determine which is the most dominant of the first five frames by considering the salience or the importance of the frame in the story. For instance, a story/post that revolves around assigning responsibility to the Romanian government by making several speculations about the kidnapping will have frame #1 as a dominant frame.

The dominant frame will be coded by writing the corresponding frame number (1 through 5) from the predetermined generic frame list.
Dominant Overall Frame: After reading each story/post and listing all the frames present, the coders will determine which is the most dominant of the eight frames by considering the salience or the importance of the frame in the story/post. For instance, a story/post that revolves around assigning responsibility to the Romanian government by making several speculations about the kidnapping, will have frame #1 as a dominant frame.

The dominant frame will be coded by writing the corresponding frame number (1 through 8) from the predetermined generic frame list.

Responsibility Frame: If the responsibility frame is present, the coders are asked to identify which of the following entities are considered to be responsible for the crisis (check all that apply):

(1) The President Basescu  
(2) The government/the political system  
(3) The former President (Ion Iliescu)/government  
(4) The Romanian mentality  
(5) Omar Hayssam  
(6) The Muslim/Arab businessmen  
(7) (Any of) the three journalists  
(8) The media  
(9) USA’s foreign policy  
(10) George W. Bush  
(11) Terrorists  
(12) Romanian Secret Services

Dominant Responsibility: After reading each story/post pertaining to the responsibility frame, the coders will determine which is the most dominant of the nine instances of responsibility by considering the salience or the importance of one of the ten possible instances. If the coder decides that the story/post does not assign any dominant responsibility, than the coder will leave the cell blank.

The dominant responsibility will be coded by writing the corresponding frame number (1 through 10) from the predetermined responsibility frame list.

Cynicism Frame: If the cynicism frame is present, the coders are asked to identify who is the subject of cynicism (check one):

(1) The media (including the author of the article, other Romanian or foreign journalists or media channels)  
(2) The politics (including the Romanian or any foreign political system, democracy, government, President, political parties, other political actors, European Union etc)  
(3) Other (i.e. the kidnapped journalists themselves etc)
**Speculation Frame:** If the speculation frame is present, the coders are asked to establish if the speculation is about something that will happen (prognostic) or something that must have happened (diagnostic):

(a) prognostic  
(b) diagnostic

**Metacommunication Frame Presence:** Metacommunication is defined slightly different for stories and post. For stories, metacommunication can be news media’s coverage of themselves (self-reflexive metacommunication), and the reporting of the way the actors involved in the event have spoken out (strategy/process metacommunication). For posts, metacommunication can be online readers’ references or comments to preceding forum posts, and/or citations or references to other information sources such as websites or other news stories (self-reflexive metacommunication). Metacommunication in posts also includes any discussions about or references to the way various actors involved in the event have spoken out (strategy/process metacommunication).

If the metacommunication frame is present, coders will be asked to indicate which type of metacommunication emerges from the news story:

(1) self-reflexive, or  
(2) strategy/process

**Stories:** For the self-reflexive metacommunication, the coders will be instructed to further identify which of the following characteristics are present (check all that apply):

(1) Journalists discussing their opinions about the event  
(2) Journalists interviewing/citing/reporting about other journalists  
(3) The news media/journalists emphasizing their role as mediators in the event

For the strategy/process metacommunication, the coders will be instructed to further identify which of the following characteristics are present (check all that apply):

(1) The "crisis squad's" information strategy (including any references to how the crisis squad has planned to disseminate the information to the public, and/or whether or not their planned communication has been successfully implemented)  
(2) The Presidency's/government's/secret services’ information strategy  
(3) The journalists' families' information strategy  
(4) The suspects' information strategy  
(5) (Any of) The 3 kidnapped journalists' information strategy

**Posts:** For the self-reflexive metacommunication, the coders will be instructed to further identify which of the following characteristics are present (check all that apply):

(1) Readers referencing, discussing or commenting upon preceding forum posts  
(2) Readers citing or mentioning any other information sources (i.e. websites, news stories from print or visual media etc)

For the strategy/process metacommunication, the coders will be instructed to further identify which of the following characteristics are present (check all that apply):
(1) The "crisis squad's" information strategy (including any references to how the crisis squad has planned to disseminate the information to the public, and/or whether or not their planned communication has been successfully implemented)
(2) The Presidency's/government’s/secret services’ information strategy
(3) The journalists' families' information strategy
(4) The suspects' information strategy
(5) (Any of) The 3 kidnapped journalists' information strategy

**Mentioning of the President:** The coders will be instructed to code for the presence or absence of any reference made to Traian Basescu, the President of Romania. The coders should keep in mind that the President is sometimes nicknamed as “The Captain” because of his background as commercial maritime ship captain.

**President’s Portrayal:** If there is at least one mentioning of the President, the coders are asked to identify which one of the following portrayals is attributed to him:

(1) Savior  
(2) Vigilante  
(3) Leader/"The Captain"  
(4) Helpless  
(5) Puppet  
(6) Incompetent/Irresponsible  
(7) Cunning/has hidden agenda  
(8) Neutral  
(9) A combination of positive and negative portrayals

If a story contains contrasting portrayals of the President (i.e. savior but also incompetent), the coders will choose option #8 “A combination of positive and negative portrayals”. A “neutral” portrayal may be described as balanced as well as objective (i.e. presents several perspectives about the President in an objective, un-slanted manner).
Vita

Ana R. Constantinescu

Ana R. Constantinescu was born October 26, 1977 in Bucharest, Romania. In 2001, she received her Bachelor of Arts from the College of Journalism and Sciences of Communication (FJSC) at University of Bucharest, Romania.

While in her junior year at University of Bucharest, she started work at Graffiti/BBDO advertising agency, the Romanian branch of the New York based BBDO Worldwide, one of the top three advertising agency networks in the world. After holding positions such as public relations executive and junior strategic planner, she arrived in the US in 2003 and began the graduate program in Communication at Virginia Tech in 2004. As a graduate teaching assistant, she assisted Dr. Beth Waggenspack in “Introduction to Communication” and Dr. Stephen Prince in “Introduction to Film.” On April 11, 2006 the author successfully defended her thesis.