CONTENT ANALYSIS AS A WAY OF IDENTIFYING HYBRID THREATS IN THE MEDIA CONENT

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Abstract: The intensive communication in the advanced processes of globalisation actualise content analysis when searching for immediate answers to complex social and political questions raised by extreme circumstances. This paper numerically explores the media content relating to an example incident and, at least partially, identifies the social perception, the attitude and the intentions resulting from the situation. The media content covering the instance is quantitatively tested for the presence and for the development of any hybrid threats of inflicting social negativism towards the Bulgarian authorities.

Key words: content analysis, security, media content, hybrid treats

1. INTRODUCTION

Today's person is faced ever more often with either analogously, or digitally organised information. This causes the formation of an informational continuum where the tools for mass communication play an important role in determining a multitude of variables regarding the social perception, as well as a multitude of the potential reactions to the reported important to society events. Such methodology lends itself remarkably well to detailed interpretation and utilisation of the large amounts of data generated by the media. This allows for establishing adequate reference points about whatever is happening via timely identification of potential delusions, intimations and other deviations from the objectivity of the communication. In their nature, all of them are manifestations of hybrid threats to national security [10]. They are a significant part of the so-called hybrid wars. Usually, they target a community, and above all else: its cultural-behavioural and political values. Contrary to the armed mass violence associated with traditional war, their execution is characterised by various forms of manipulation of the social communication (newspapers, magazines, websites, social online media, etc.). The presented content analysis of the media coverage of a particular incident showcases

the opportunities to "collect intelligence" not only about whatever has happened, but also about the attitude towards it, the intentions in response to it, as well as the potential behavioural plans of the sides affected by it. In the defined context, this elaboration researches the publicity around the brutal murder of a journalist in Bulgaria. The mass frame of mind in regards to the event and some political reactions are explored, courtesy of 175 media-sourced messages (via both Bulgarian and international publications). In the following content analysis, the specifics of the media informational environment are accounted for: it is dynamic, inhomogeneous and nowadays – subjected to advanced globality. All of this equates to that:

- Murders of journalists, regardless of whether they are the result of their work, or of an unfortunate coincidence, are bound to induce an intense public reaction;

- It is ever more difficult to conceal news from the citizens. The mass audience becomes much less affected by geographical borders and language barriers;

- Covering an event in today's environment is subject to influence from a larger number of interested parties, including from the stage of international politics.

The approach of the scientific exploration is deductive. Content analysis is dynamic and includes a timed overview of the coverage of the incident. The method has a significant potential to reduce ambiguity in both perceiving and anticipating social reactions in the country, as well as internationally. Elucidating at least some of this potential is the main goal for this article.

2. CIRCUMSTANCES SURROUNDING THE TRAGEDY

On October, 6th 2018 one of Bulgaria's larger cities becomes the site of a brutal murder of a young woman. The victim is recognised – she is simultaneously the director of the regional television and a journalist working for the same media. One of her last interviews is with Dimitar Stoyanov (from the website Bivol) and Attila Biro (a Romanian investigative journalist). Albeit for a short period of time, they are detained in relation to an investigation concerning a company charged with unlawful acquiring of fund from the EU. This circumstance is one of the provocations aimed at the specific assumption for secrecy which the victim knew and which someone tries to conceal. As a result of this, as well as of the inherent publicity associated with the journalist's profession, the police operate relatively quickly. Initially, a foreign citizen is detained – a Romanian with a Ukrainian passport. This fact leaks out and becomes one additional logical connections to the last interview taken by the victim. Representatives of EU institutions react strongly and with concern, appealing for an efficient and transparent investigation. Behind some of these addresses certain official representatives of the Bulgarian state see attempts for impacting the country's reputation negatively and identify hybrid in nature threats. Some adverse reactions follow. The detained foreign citizen is released. Another suspect is identified, located in Germany and subjected to

extradition back to Bulgaria. The investigation concludes the crime is committed without any connection with the victim's profession, or her work, and the murderer did not know the victim previously.

The analysis accounts for the contemporary for 2018 situation in Europe – there are two other murders of journalists – the one of Jan Kuciak and the one of Daphne Caruana Galizia in Malta. Little after the incident in Bulgaria the Iranian journalist Jamal Khashoggi is murdered in the Saudi Arabia embassy in Istanbul. All of this is accounted as a factor which further complicates the mass attitude towards the explored tragedy.

3. PARAMETERS OF THE CONTENT ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

From a sociological point of view, content analysis is a method for *"objective and systematic exploration of the content and the tools for mass communication"*[5]. Performing content analysis involves the so-called *coding categories*, each one of which could be a specific word, a phrase, or a subject. This allows for registering, evaluating and interpreting the frequency with which they appear in the analysed messages (conceptual content analysis). In some cases the correlation between the coding categories is also accounted for (relational content analysis) [5]. This interconnection between the two allows for obtaining both qualitative and quantitative data.

3.1. Choice of media messages

Choosing messages from the mass media for content analysis is subject to a very high risk of intuitive, rather inadvertent, selection of publications which best support the tested hypothesis. Human attention and perception are very focussed and purposeful which affects the orientation reflex when identifying relevant headlines to a certain degree. In the present experiment, the hypothesis – that murders of people with publically involved professions result in uncharacteristically high public activity, regardless of the geographical location – has been made at least partially devoid of this effect by:

- The period of tracking messages related to the incident: October, 7th 2019 (the day after the homicide) – October, 19th 2019 (when the media interest starts to tail off considerably)

- The issues are chosen, based on the criteria of: 1) being perceived as first spreaders of the news; 2) being associated with high popularity and wide publicity. Such selection introduces a high level of subjectivism via the parameters "high" and "wide" which despite the expert consideration, are thoroughly qualitative in character and are impossible to quantitate. Furthermore, the initial delivery of the news is evaluated, based on what is published and found in the means for mass communication, the objectivity and trustworthiness of which also do not lend

themselves to quantitative analysis. In order to evaluate the coverage of the news beyond Bulgarian borders (regardless of whether hybrid threats are present, or not), the experiment includes foreign media too. They have also been selected, based on being the first transponders of the news and being associated with high popularity and wide publicity.

- All messages from the content of the selected issues, which relate to the incident, are subjected to analysis. This way the research is set in an objective quantitatively-measurable environment.

3.2. Categories of the analysis

Accepted is the rather general understanding that the categories of the content analysis are keywords, or expressions via which the main direction of the hypothesis is presented. The fact that the analysed messages are the product of an open sample is accounted for. Hence, the coded categories, the frequency of which are measured, are defined as lexemes describing the circumstances surrounding the tragedy. The assumption is that in Bulgaria the messages covering the incident are the most, and a large spectrum of connotations is anticipated. For each issue, the frequency (c (%)) for each lexeme is defined as:

$$c = \frac{100 \cdot S}{Q} \qquad (1)$$

Where: S – number of messages in the issue which feature the lexeme; Q – total number of messages in the issue which relate to the incident.

The results obtained from the analysis feature the frequency of lexemes in the headlines of Bulgarian media. The limiting factor is that each lexeme has to feature at least twice in at least one of the sources. From the first days of the investigation to October, 16th 2018, when the crime is solved, the most often used lexemes in publically available televisions (BNT1, NOVA TV, OnAir TV) are: murder (52.89%), Ruse (32.57%), Police (17,14%), Journalist (16,57%), Detention (12%), Development (on the case) (12.9%), Quickly (4.57%), Extradition (6.29%), Germany (8%), Gypsy (5.71%), Memory (5.14%), Quick (4.57%), Neighbourhood (3.43), Brutal (3.43), Incident (3.43%), Power (social and political) (3.43), Presence (2.86%), Trust (2.29). The results show that the units which are found to repeat in all three sources amount to 17. The first four lexemes have a frequency (c) higher than 15%. They also account for approximately 20% (23.53%) of all identified lexemes and are sufficient for formulating the message:

A **MURDER** of a **JOURNALIST** has happened in **Ruse**. **The police** is investigating.

This sentence completely describes the situation which leads to the opening of the case. It is also perhaps another practical manifestation of the Pareto rule, which states that 20% of the causes can account for 80% of the effects [6].

When the threshold is lowered to 10% the units are sufficient for piecing a more comprehensive reflection of the media content regarding the incident:

A **MURDER** of a **JOURNALIST** has happened in **Ruse**. **The POLICE** is investigating. There is a **DEVELOPMENT** on the case. The murderer is **DETAINED** in **GERMANY** and is **EXTRADITED**. It was acted **QUICKLY**.

The obtained result shows that this approach for picking units in this particular content analysis is indeed successful.

3.3. Time-wise parameters

1) Initial report about the murder: An overview of the media coverage of the incident shows that initial messages were featured on October, 7th in: BNT, Nova TV, Life.ru [1], The Telegraph [8], Le Monde [3], Die Welt [9], OSCE [4] ; and on October, 8th in OnAir, BTA [2], Kommersant. Times are as per the websites of the respective media.

2) Pauses and unevenness in the coverage of the incident: Bulgarian media cover the development of the investigation every day, while foreign ones do not. The table features some of the results.

Table 1. Distribution of the messages in some media, along the timeline of the accident

Media\Day (Oct.)	07th	08th	09th	10th	11th	12th	13th	14th	15th	16th	17th	18th	19th
Kommersant		2	1	1								1	
TASS		3	2	2	1	2			1		1		
Novaya Gazeta		1	2	1									
The Guardian	1	1	1	1	1	1							
The Telegraph	1	1	1	1									1
Le Monde	1	1	1	1									1
Nova TV	1	6	13	14	8	10	5	4	3	8	7	4	4
Trud	2	8	10	10	3	3	2		2	7	6	6	5

3) Operationalization of the result: The crime is committed on Bulgarian soil, so it is to be expected for the domestic media to be the most active. The timeline shows the already noted delay in the response, visible in the peaks of the initial coverage: Le Monde and The Guardian maintain constant interest in the subject during the first few days. Kommersant covers it the most intensively on the second day, while Novaya Gazeta – on the third. The Bulgarian newspaper reaches its peak on the fourth day.

Another detail which is visible from Table 1 is that the matter is discussed the most inconsistently in Bulgarian media. Upon this fact is based the assumption that the emotions in the country escalate periodically, due to actions and comments

which "put fuel to the fire". This fluctuation in the messaging intensity, which we assume reflects directly on the mass perception, can be measured mathematically via the statistical standard deviation (**S**) which is defined as:

$$s = \sqrt{\frac{1}{n-1} \cdot \sum_{i=1}^{n} (x_i - \bar{x})^2} \qquad (2)$$

Where: n – total number of messages in the issue; x_i – number of messages on the i-th day (i = 1 – 12); x – average number of messages per day.

Table 2 unequivocally shows that the activity on the matter is relatively consistent in foreign media, compared to a substantially larger deviation in the Bulgarian coverage. This validates the assumption that someone makes connections with the incident episodically which are either unjustified, or short-lived, due to independent of the case factors. Such media coverage is no novelty in the field of crisis communication and is thus a reason for investigating for potential security threats.

Table 2. Standard deviation of the distribution of messages

Standard deviation						
Nova TV	Trud	The Guardian	The Telegraph	Kommersant	Novaya Gazeta	Le Monde
3.72	3.22	0.5	0.5	0.65	0.63	0.5

4. DISCUSSION

4.1. The transparency in the public relations in the coverage of the tragedy

In this particular instance, the reaction is mass and most adverse on the part of foreign communicators. Three-four days after the murder the prime minister, the chief prosecutor and the minister of interior give a press conference where they indirectly request the media to wait until the end result of the investigation. This behaviour is understood, both domestically and internationally, as an attempt to justify the lack of public communication about the specific actions of the investigators. Combined with the fact that in 2018 Bulgaria was declared 111th in terms of freedom of speech, the public concern is not surprising [7].

4.2. The hybridity of the threats

Nowadays, when both the interpersonal and the public communications are intensive and expanded in the Internet, concealing socially important incidents is ever more unthinkable. It is impossible for the media to resist the public pressure and hide news, as that would always have negative consequences both for the media and for society. In this context, undoubtedly, the registered lack of transparency,

comprehensiveness and organisation also leads to ambiguity in the initial coverage of the news predisposes to an environment favouring the use of hybrid tools. The results show that this opportunity is not developed, and hence: not realised.

5. CONCLUSION

The analysis is conducted, based on the three distinct relevant to the case groups of media: West-European media engaged with protecting journalists; Russian media, due to the stated concerns about hybrid threats; and some active Bulgarian media. The data show that the circumstances surrounding the creation and the distribution of the content are also an important source of information.

The developed approach to content analysis shows that picking lexemes, based on their frequency of repetition (c) in headlines diminishes the influence that subjective factors have and is the reason for successful defining of the coding categories of the experiment.

The standard deviation of the number of messages over a period of time is a clear metric of the consistency of the journalistic coverage of the social importance of the development of a particular case.

In this instance, the situation causes doubts about hybrid actions, especially with the uncharacteristically high activity of the western media. Whether this threat will turn into a hybrid one depends on a multitude of factors – presence of a foreign, or domestic enemy, etc. Simultaneously, the presence of such correlations does not reduce magnitude of the problem.

The doubts that the media have been deliberately fed incomplete information are somewhat refuted by the fact that murders of journalists usually bear a specific burden of not inconsiderable magnitude. Furthermore, this particular instance is associated with doubts about the transparency during the investigation. The coverage by the Russian media also does not give indications of hybrid actions.

The present elaboration showcases that covering a case nowadays is associated with an increased number of interests, including from the stage of international politics. This leads to ever more complicated interactions.

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