Media Reflection on Religion.
Coverage on the *Iulia Ionescu* Case

Delia Cristina BALABAN

Professor, PhD
Babeș-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca
Department of Communication, Public Relations and Advertising
E-mail: balaban@fspac.ro

Meda MUCUNDORFEANU

Lecturer, PhD
Babeș-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca
Department of Communication, Public Relations and Advertising
E-mail: mucundorfeanu@fspac.ro

Abstract. *The present article focuses on a particular sensitive topic widely debated in the Romanian media at a certain point. Its aim is to identify the frames that have been used by the journalists in the large number of articles published on this matter and secondly, to conduct research on the outcome and the effects of those frames. Therefore, we conducted a content analysis of the published articles followed by a survey among young respondents. The goal was to see whether the frames have been internalized by the young audience and have managed to influence them in their opinions, or if rather their beliefs and socio-demographic characteristics played a more important role in the way they interpreted the development of such a sensitive case.*

Keywords: *framing, media coverage, religion, Romania.*

In February 2014 the Romanian public sphere was literally invaded by details of a case of a 15 year old girl who was missing from home. According to national media, the girl's decision to leave home was based on an unusual element: her

need to get closer to the church. During the days that followed starting from the time her mother went to the police station until she was found by the police and brought home, the media coverage was strong. Television stations broadcasted the investigation step by step and the issue was discussed in several talk shows. Both quality papers and tabloids published information about the ongoing investigation and a substantial number of articles revealed the opinions of journalists reporting about the case. Social media was also invaded by this topic.

Romania is one of the countries with a high rate of people who declare themselves to be religious. According to a nation-wide survey conducted by Gallup in 2014, 77% of Romanians declared themselves to be religious, in 2005 the percentange was 85%. Among young persons aged 18-24 the degree of religiosity is lower, 66%. People holding a university degree are less religious than people with no degree.

Certain questions were often raised by journalists and opinion leaders in their articles. Some of the most frequent asked questions were: *What convinced a young girl with very good results in school, enrolled in an elite highschool from Bucharest to leave for the monastery in the 21st century*?

Is it common practice for a young girl of that age to have a spiritual father, at the church she is attending, which she trusting much more than her own family? and *Was the Romanian Orthodox Church truly collaborating with the police during the investigations*?

The *Iulia Ionescu case* generated extensive discussions in the Romanian society concerning the relationship between church-school and family in children's education. It was also a discussion on the transparency of the Romanian Orthodox Church. And this discussion was continued by the media through the use of media logic. By media logic we refer to a *framework or perspective that is used to present as well as interpret phenomena* (Esser, 2013) that has a *criteria of competitiveness* or *audience-oriented commercial logic and normatively oriented public logic* (Landerer 2013: 243-245).

This article is focusing on the media coverage of the *Iulia Ionescu case* in the attempt to determine the main frames that were developed in the week after Iulia's disappearance. Our aim is also to analyze the effects of the media frames on the perception of a young audience regarding this case.

Theoretical Framework

The framing theory is one of the most present theories when it comes to the research on media effects nowadays. The theory concerning frames is the result of an interdisciplinary endeavour in social sciences, which includes aspects related to sociology, political sciences, psychology and last but not least, communication sciences.

Framing theory in the communication and media research can be summarized in an apparently simple way: the way news is presented influences the way the audience perceives the news. In order to effectively structure information, individuals use interpretative schemes, the so-called frames, which function as cognitive structures in the mind of journalists or in that of receivers, in the case of mass media, these structures having the role of contributing to the processes of information selection and presentation. The frames are selective points of view on topics and events (Balaban, 2009, 2014).

Claes De Vreese (2005, p. 51) defines framing as a communication process that includes production, content and media use perspective. A short definition underlines that *a frame is an emphasis in salience of different aspects of a topic* (de Vreese, 2005, p. 53). Entman (1993, De Vreese, 2005, p. 52) claims that the process of framing consists of three distinct stages. First, there is the *frame-building* that refers to both internal (how journalists and news organizations frame issues) and external (the continuous interaction between journalists and elites or social movements) factors that influence the structural qualities of the news frame. Second, the *frame-setting* is defined by the interaction between media frames and individuals' knowledge on the issue and predispositions. Thus, the frames used in news can influence the way an issue is leaned, interpreted and evaluated. Finally, the *consequences* of framing can be reached at both individual and social levels. While at individual level consequence refers to the possibility of altering attitudes based on the exposure to certain frames, at the societal level, frames may change social and political processes (de Vreese, 2005, p. 52, Balaban, 2009).

While at a macro level, framing refers to patterns used by journalists or other media entities to present the information (Shoemaker and Reese, 1996 in Scheufele and Tewksbury, 2007, p. 11-12), at the micro level, framing describes the way individuals perceive and use the information (Scheufele and Tewksbury, 2007, p. 11-12, Balaban, 2009).

Research design

Our research design used two elements: on the one hand we used a qualitative content analysis and on the other hand we conducted a survey on a young audience.

The content analysis comprises 80 articles which have been published in the online editions of some of the most popular newspapers and news sites in Romania such as: *Adevărul, Hotnews, Gândul* and *Jurnalul Național*. We have analyzed all the articles which have been published in theses newspapers between February the 13rd 2014 and February the 23rd 2014. The time frame is overlapping the period Iulia Ionescu disappeared from home, the police searches and the safe return home of the teenager. We chose the online editions of the newspapers because

in Romania the online content has a broader content than the printed one. Our sample consists of 41 articles from *Adevărul*, 6 articles from the blog section of *Adevărul*, 11 articles from the *Hotnews* portal and 7 articles from *Jurnalul Național*. We developed our corpus based on the titles of the articles, which included at least one of the following key-words: *Iulia Ionescu, the disapearance, Church, monastery, school.*

We used the content analysis and the codebook revolved around the four main elements of a frame according to Entman and is constructed in such a manner, that these elements can be identified in this particular case: 1. defining problems - determine what a causal agent is doing with what costs and benefits, usually measured in terms of common cultural values; 2. diagnosing causes - identifying the forces creating the problem; 3. making moral judgments - evaluate causal agents and their effects; 4. suggesting remedies - offer and justify treatments for the problems and predict their likely effects (Entman, 1993).

In order to analyze the impact on the audience by identifying the presence of the media frames we have conducted a survey among the students of the Department of Communication, PR and Advertising of the Faculty of Political, Administrative and Communication Science, Babeș-Bolyai Univeristy in Cluj Napoca. Due to the nature of their field of study, these students are interested in the media in general and in the media contents in particular. This is the reason why we considered them to be relevant respondents for our study.

Research results

Most of the articles we analyzed have been published in the news section. The perspective revealed by the authors of these articles is that most of them don't consider it to be normal at all for a young girl to have a spiritual father, they also consider religion to play a positive role in the lives of young people to a small extent. Most of the articles which discussed whether the spiritual father has acted in the young girl's interest have blamed his actions while dealing with the situation and communicating with the police.

Some articles even discussed religion in broad sense and its role in the lives of children and young adults. There are articles talking about the fact that religion can have a positive influence in the education process of children, about whether it is appropriate to teach religion in school. A small, but not insignificant number of articles suggest that religion should be replaced with other subjects in school, and one of the subjects which have been proposed most often is Ethics.

According to the framing theory, when it comes to certain complex situations or to problems, the media, as well as people, have the tendency to simplify the reality and to find a person to blame for the occurrence of the situation and a person who could be the problem solver, the hero.

Consequently, we have used the same two questions in the content analysis, as well as in the survey, in order to compare the results. The survey was conducted in March 2013 two weeks after the safe home return of Iulia Ionescu, the students were filling the questionnaires off line. A number of 125 questionnaires were filled out.

The structure of the sample was: 21,6% male and 78,4% female respondents, all of them being 18-25 years old. We considered it to be relevant to render the profile of our respondents according to their answers to the socio-demographic questions. As the chart shows below, most of them are religious to different extents. Only a small amount declared themselves as not being religious at all.
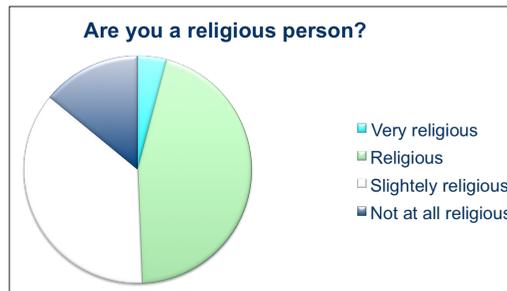

Fig. 1. Religious profile of the respondents

Regarding their religion, most of them are Orthodox (74%), while de rest are Greek-Catholic, Roman-Catholic, Protestant, Neo-Protestant and other religions; the gender distribution is the following: female (78%), male (22%). Regarding their age, more than half of them are in the age group 18-20, almost half of them are in the age group 21-25 and very few have ages between 26 and 30. Home town: Cluj-Napoca (50%), other areas mostly from Transylvania.

Our sample consist of students from small 28,5%, but also from large cities 71,5%. We are aware that our sample did not lead us to a representative research and this is one of the limits of our study, but still it served our objective to identify some tendencies in frame building among your persons related to Iulia Ionescu's case. Students studying communication science are usually interested in the media outcome, they tend to get their information from the media and this is one oft he reasons why we considered them to be appropriate for our sample. As active media users they could encounter the media frames in this particular case.

The questions included scales with the four items: not at all, slightly, much and very much.

The respondents, as well as the majority of the media blame mostly the girl for her actions, then the points of view are different. The respondens blame the parents, her spiritual father, the church, the school and the media, while the order is different in the case of the newspaper articles, who secondly blame the two most
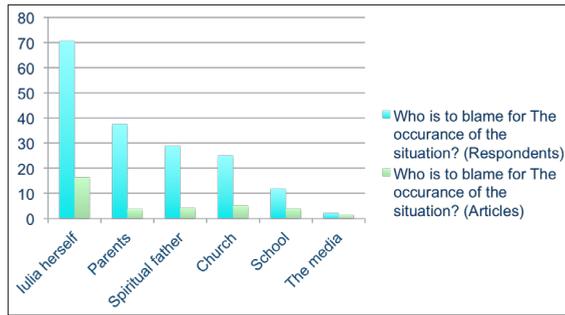
Fig. 2. The causal agents of the problem

important institutions in the girl's life, the church, the school and then the most important persons in her life, her spiritual father and her parents.
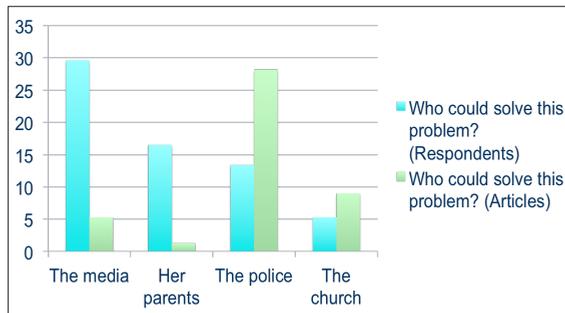

Fig. 3. The problem solvers

Regarding the problem solvers, the perspectives are very different. Highly surprising are the answers of the respondents who believe that the media could solve this problem, then her parents, the police and finally the church. On the other hand, the articles have faith that the police would solve this problem, then the church, the media and finally her parents.

The different perspectives on the case may be due to the fact that more than half of the respondents have had the impression that the newspapers haven't reported objectively about this case and therefore don't share the same opinions as those rendered though the articles.

More than 80% of our respondents have heard about the case Iulia Ionescu. More than half of them have heard about it from TV, one quarter of them have heard about it from the social network "facebook", while the rest from other online news portals, other persons or through e-mail notifications. Also, more than half of them have actively followed the coverage on this story in the media. We also wanted to find out whether the quantity of information on this topic has been perceived as being appropriate. Regarding this aspect few respondents have

answered that the coverage on this case has been insignificant, more than 25% percent of them has considered it to be appropriate, while most of them, about 35% consider it to be too large. A surprising fact is that more than half of the respondents consider that the opinions rendered in the media about this case have been appropriate.

The next set of questions focused on the particularities of this case. Because the young girl presented in the media has a spiritual father, we wanted to know if the respondents consider it to be normal for a 16 years old girl to have a spiritual father. Most of the young respondents, almost half of them, consider it to be normal to a small extent, while the amount of the respondents who consider it to be not normal at all is equal to that of those who consider it to be normal to a large extent. Surprisingly, most of the respondents believe to a large extent that religion can play a positive role in the lives of teenagers.

Regarding the part of diagnosing problems we wanted to see their opinions about who is to blame or who they consider to be more responsible for the occurrence of this problem, which is Iulia running away from home and hiding for a couple of days at a monastery. More than 70% of the respondents blamed Iulia herself. They also blamed, in this order: her parents, the priest, the church, the school and the media. But they also consider in a large amount that her spiritual father has not acted in her interest.

Because several journalists have covered this subject and consequently have written about the problem of further teaching religion as a subject in school, we have asked whether religion should continue to be taught in school. Many of them have answered this question with yes.

We have identified several negative correlations with regard to the answers of the respondents:

Most of the respondents who are religious do not consider it normal for a young girl to have a spiritual father. This interesting fact reveals that people do not correlate being religious with the necessity of having a spiritual father. Another negative correlation is about the fact that despite the fact that most of the respondents are religious, they do not consider that the church could have solved such a problem; The third negative correlation is: although the respondents consider religion to be positive for young people, they do not think that the priest has acted in the interest of the young girl.

We have also identified several positive correlations with regard to the answers of the respondents: most of the respondents who are religious do think that religion can play a positive part in the life of a young person. Regardless of the degree according to which the respondents consider themselves to be religious, they generally do not blame the church for the young girl's gesture.

Conclusions

The content analysis that we conducted revealed a large media coverage on the case Iulia Ionescu. The high number of articles we identified on this matter confirms this. The case had a large media seeding potential due tot the fact that it was about a young girl, about her interaction with the Romanian Orthodox Church and about the efficiency of state institutions to solve the case. The students that we interviewed have heard about this case and have already formed an opinion about it. We identified in those opinions, rendered by the answers given in the questionnaire, an existing influence of media frames. Nevertheless, the media buzz was criticized by some of the respondents.

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