



ORIGINAL PAPER

Representing Public Health in Romanian Communist Media (1945-1989)

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Abstract

In present days, as the existing literature shows (McCombs, 2004), the news production is influenced by organizational and professional variables (professional norms, individual and professional values). The media content no longer appears as an “isolated”, but as a product deeply rooted into the social world, being organizationally determined. The media is a body of work relevant for understanding the nature and the importance of content effects on people and society (knowing the media, content, its effects on the audience can be predicted). The aim of the present paper was to present media coverage of public health in Romanian printed press during the communist period (1945-1989). A quantitative content analysis was made on a sample of Romanian printed press titles published in that period of time. The articles were published in “Sănătatea” (“The Health”) - 1967-1981; “Femeia” (“The Women”) - 1987-1989; “Almanahul Revistei Sănătatea” (“The Yearbook of the Health Review”) - 1982-1983. All articles had directly targeted the prevention, treatment and remedies of the most widespread diseases, such as cardiovascular disease, respiratory system, and advice on food and quality of life. At the first sight, the results showed a strong interest of the communist state in communicating about the improvements of the population’s health status. However, at a more in-depth analysis the results had revealed the fact that the prophylactic methods transmitted to the population were based on the main political goal of demographic growth postponed by the Romanian communist regime (Neculau, 2004). The communist proganda put an important emphasis in the helath-related information on the importance of strictly observing the rationalization of food, the importance of breeding children and on maintaining women’s health as a means to secure the demographic increase.

Keywords: *Mass media; Romania; health-related information; audience; communist period.*

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Introduction

Many researches has been focused on the ways in which media represents reality (McCombs, 2004), pointing out the fact that news production is influenced by organizational and professional variables (e.g. professional norms, individual and professional values) (McCombs, 2004). As a result of those external and internal factors media content no longer appears as an “isolated”, but as a product deeply rooted into the social world, being organizationally determined. McCombs (2004) widely considered the problematic role of the media in creating public interest topics. According to his analysis, the most important aspect of the role of public agenda for the media is to influence public opinion (McCombs, 2004).

The research question of this paper is: How was presented the reality in Romanian mass media in the past? In other words, our research question was:

RQ: What were the journalistic procedures to cover and present reality in a different society?

In order to offer an answer at this general question we have choose the period 1945-1989 in Romania and we have been interested to trace the media’s perspectives from which the issue of public health had been then covered in media – the reviews and magazines.

Key-elements of the public health in Romania during the communist period (1945-1989)

After 1945 the Romanian health system was completely under the state’s control and, as in the rest of Easter European countries, it was organised according to the Semashko pattern (Vlădescu, Rădulescu, Cace, 2005). This model (e.g. Semashko model) granted to all citizens free access to medical services and equality for treatments, regardless of medical needs. However, after several decades in which the health situation of the population had improved, the health sector started to be assessed as “non-productive”, as requiring more funds necessary to function than it returned (Maxim, Diaconu, Maxim, 2015). The system has reached its competitiveness peak in the 1970s when it provided the general medical care that was needed to treat common diseases.

Although East-European health systems were similar betewen 1945 and 1989 there has been some traits which could be considered as “national marks” from a medical perspective. In Romania’s case those have been the program of scientific nutrition for populatio, the anti-abortion legislation and the prevalence of specific diseases at the level of population (Neculau, 2004).

The program of scientific nutrition for population

The economic crisis Romania had faced at the beginning of the 1980s had led to the emergence of the so-called “Law for the organization, distribution and use of food supplies at the level of counties” (Neculau, 2004). As a result of this law’s passing ratios of flour, oil, sugar and bread were introduced in the etnire country (mainly in the towns and big cities). The situation was synthethised by Anton (2015: 350) in the following way: “The topics of rationalization, saving and stopping waste have turned in an obsession for the General Secretary of the Communist Party, who had taken measures that sometimes were absurd. If in 1981 a real war was lead against the curtains which covered the public offices’ windows, one year later he had forbid the serving of coffee at official meetings in order to reduce protocol expenses. The coffee also disappeared from shops, its place being taken by a mixture of chicory, chickpea and barley”.

Some major changes took place in the next years (1980-1989) and a clear-cut difference between the rural and urban areas was set up. The food ratios in cities were larger than those distributed in the villages. The consumption of food was based on the premise that the population had weight problems due to supplementary consumption of food (Mihai, 2016). Nicolae Ceausescu was worried about the “high” consumption of some food such as oil and bread, and he initiated a plan of decreasing it (Mihai, 2016), the main official reason being “maintaining the health of Romanian population”.

The anti-abortion legislation

During the communist period the population of Romania increased from 15,872,624 in 1945 to 23,211,395 in 1989 (Bolovan, 2004) (see Table 1):

Table 1. Evolution of the population – Romania: 1945-1990

1948	1956	1966	1977	1990
15,872,624	17,489,450	19,103,163	21,559,910	23,211,395

Source: Bolovan, 2004: 286

The major demographic growth registered after 1966 was a direct result of implementing pronatalist measures in a totalitarian way (Bolovan, 2004). Nicolae Ceausescu’s efforts to increase the population size were connected to a nationalist rhetoric which claimed that “a great nation needed a larger population” (Bolovan, 2004). A set of anti-abortion laws was settled after 1967, and the Romanian Higher Health Council has been tasked with acting as a primary tool of demographic control. Referring to this situation, Barbulescu (2011: 81) has resumed it in a very concise way: “In the general context of the thesis about ‘a healthy nation’, the abortion was seen as a problem which has to be solved at the national level. Major newspapers began to publish articles that discussed, on the one hand, the issue of abortion from using the eugenic framework, and, on the other, they approached the issue on the basis of the thesis that many women in the urban area used abortion to control their fertility”.

In women’s magazines and in other periodicals, articles in which the benefits of a pregnancy were exposed had been published. Those articles contain thesis according to which pregnancy helped to fight against depression, it could heal the skin diseases and allergies, or it could help to fight against melancholy (Tomescu, Todiras, Bîgiu, Rogozea, 2013).

Other health issues of the population during the communist period

Among other diseases recorded at the level of Romanian population between 1945 and 1989 tuberculosis was one of the most severe, as Mureşean (2002: 63) has stressed in an analysis of this disease in Romania: “In the second half of the 20th century, there was a clear decrease in the number of new cases of tuberculosis - 80,361 in 1950 to 12,039 in 1980. After that there was a new increase at 23,611 in 2000”.

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Table 2. The dynamic of tuberculosis' incidence (1970-2000)

Years				
	1970	1980	1990	2000
Incidence ratio at 100,000 inhabitants	137.7	54.5	64.6	105.3
Prevalence ratio at 100 inhabitants	0.63	0.20	0.2	0.18
Mortality ratio at 100,000 inhabitants	18.5	3.7	6.9	9.5

Source: Mureşan, 2002: 63

Syphilis was another disease which affected many Romanians, the main causes being the low level of hygiene and the state of primary care for population in some regions. Mureşan (2002: 63) had indicated that syphilis' incidence had increased in urban areas, as a result of internat migration from villages to cities.

Table 3. The dynamic of syphilis' incidence in Romania (1974-2000)

Years	Total	Urban areas	Rural areas
1974	29.5	48.9	17.3
2000	45.2	52.8	36.0

Source: Mureşan, 2002: 63

Elements of methodology

The present paper analysed the media's reconstruction of health problems during the communist period.

As the main method for research we have used qualitative content analysis (Chelcea, 2001). The sample was made of articles published in various reviews and magazines before 1989: "Science and Life" ("Ştiinţa şi Viaţa") (1970), "The Health" ("Sănătatea") (1967-1981), "The Woman" ("Femeia") (1987-1989), "The Yearbook of the Health Review" ("Almanahul Revistei Sănătatea") (1982-1983), "The Guide of the Housewives" ("Ghidul Gospodinei") (1970), "The Flame" ("Flacăra") (1960-1989).

The qualitative analysis allowed us to present in a descriptive the media coverage of health problems during that period of time. We aimed to highlight the importance of the explanatory language, its complexity, the ease with which it could be understood and applied by lay people.

The period of time in which all data were collected was November 2018-March 2019 and the data were analysed using SPSS 11.5.

The analysis of the result

The management, prevention and treatment of cardiovascular and respiratory diseases

The twelfth issue of the magazine "The Health", which was published in 1967, contained a two-page article describing the medical elements related to sleep and rest hours (Eskenhazy, 1967: 6). Using an accessible language, the author (who was a doctor) discussed the importance of rest and identifies several types of sleep (e.g. "passive and active sleep") and presented the polemic among Western medical scholars about rest and sleep. The article reported also the results of Romanian researches and discussed the existence of two types of sleep: "by pulling out" or "by plugging in" (Eskenhazy, 1967: 6). Also, the author highlighted the beneficial impact of "observing

sleeping rituals”, pointing out the fact that stress and lack of rest could lead to the development of diseases of the heart and the nervous system (Eskenhazy, 1967: 6).

The magazine “The Health” from 1967 (issue 12) also contained a number of articles presenting case-studies from Western countries. One of them introduced the reader to an isolated situation in France where a large number of people with cancer have been detected in a small community (Sănătatea, 1967b: 50). Using the power of contrast, the author had highlighted the positive elements of the Romanian health system in fighting against cancer in the communist period (Sănătatea, 1967b: 50).

Other articles from the same issue of “The Health” magazine had presented statistics according to which women tend to smoke more, pointing out the possible connection between smoking and death (Sănătatea, 1967a, 20). At the same time, the magazine also had published articles which had discussed other diseases of the respiratory system, not necessarily caused by smoking, such as pulmonary congestion. All articles were structured in a similar manner: factors which allow the apparition of a disease, the early signs of disease and its progression, its treatment and the measures of prevention.

Twelve years later (that is, in 1978) the first issue of “The Health” had published an article with the title: “The Great National Assembly of the Social Republic of Romania had passed the Law on population general health insurance” (Turturescu, 1978: 4). The article presents the law which stated the states’s protection on the public health for all citizens, regardless of their nationality, race, sex or religion. The author also informs the readers about their rights to receive medical care under any circumstances (Turturescu, 1978: 4). Another important article published in this issue is related to the hygiene at the work-place and it deals with the rules that should be implemented in the context of industrial production (Sănătatea, 1978a: 24). It is structured also in a simple and synthetic way: hygiene is presented as a requirement of the production; health education and control; significant control test for the pollution (Sănătatea, 1978a: 24). The section on “Medical News” of this issue of “The Health” covered the topic of nutrition which is presented through the “lens” of new scientific researches (Mihăilescu, 1978: 7). The content of the article is the presentation of a round-table discussion on the topic: “The Methodology of Population Nutrition and Nutrition Survey” and here the opinions of various doctors from Romania were cited (Mihăilescu, 1978: 7). The entire discussion was focused on understanding and explaining the population’s eating habits in Romania.

The second issue of “The Health” published in 1978 contained articles devoted to the topic of rational nutrition in the context of a general campaign for preventing the acute digestive diseases. One article presents the meeting of the representatives of the Red Cross with doctors from different districts on the topic of “improving the health status of working people, preventing diseases and spreading hygiene and sanitary knowledge among population” (Sănătatea, 1978b: 8-10). The article covers the topic of the existing link between food ratios and health issues, the conditions in which food becomes a factor which leads to certain diseases, the food’s preservation, preparation and hygiene (Sănătatea, 1978b: 8-10).

The articles on food ratios became more and more frequent at the beginning of the 1980s in Romanian printed press, but they could be found in almost every issue of “The Health” magazine between 1968 and 1989, as well as in “The Woman” magazine between 1978 and 1989.

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Three years later (in 1981), the article covering the National Program for Prevention and Control of Cardiovascular Diseases was published in “The Health” magazine (Vlaicu, 1981: 4). From this material, the readers could learn that in the period 1974-1982 the ratio of mortality due to cardiovascular disease in Romania was 478.2 per 100,000 inhabitants (Vlaicu, 1981: 4). The article discusses the strategies of the national program in order to inform people about the causes of cardiovascular disease. The author also made a list of causes of cardiovascular diseases: the abuse of food, alcohol drinking, smoking and stress (Vlaicu, 1981: 4). Once again, using the thesis of decreasing the high levels of cholesterol (one of the main causes of hearth-related diseases) the article discussed at length the necessity of food ratios in modern societies. Another article on the food-related topic published in the same issue presents the necessary amount of kilocalories that has to be consumed in 24 hours by each type of person: children or adult, young or mature, woman or man (Moronescu, 1981: 7). The author (who, once again, was a doctor) presents a list of different issues caused by bad habits related to nutrition, such as: obesity, excess of salt in food and other issues (Moronescu, 1981: 7). The readers were encouraged to make regular checks of their weights and to consult doctors if they discover that they gained extra-weight in a short period of time (Moronescu, 1981: 7). In the same issue of “The Health” it was also published a test about the readers’ diet and the announced prize was a brochure of the Red Cross with the title “When, How, How Do We Eat?” Readers were encouraged to send to the editorial team their recipes used in fighting obesity and weight-gain (Sănătatea, 1981a: 34).

The third issue of “The Health” magazine published in 1981 covered various topics, but the main focus was on combating and preventing seasonal diseases (the flu, the cold or the allergies). A separate section from this issue was devoted to nutrition, and the rationale behind this editorial decision was the fact that food and nutrition were assessed to be problems of general interest. One article used examples of good practices in order to prevent obesity and presented ways of improving daily nutrition and also pointed out the case of nutrition for a specific group of people (Sănătatea, 1981b: 12).

The same topic (e.g. nutrition) linked to cardiovascular disease was covered in an entire issue of “The Health” magazine published in 1982. One article (Hozan, 1982: 10) presents an interview with the Head of the Department of Nutrition and Metabolic Diseases of Sibiu County Hospital. In the article which presented a discussion between the doctor and the journalist and the topic approached were the underlying conditions related to Romania’s food habits which could lead to cardiovascular diseases: the type and quantity of food, the overweight of many people and the sedentary way of life (Hozan, 1982: 10). Another article from the same issue of this magazine contains advices for the population in order to introduce vegetables in their daily diet (Dumitrache, 1983: 13).

The protection of the environment and the fight against pollution

The eighth issue of “The Women” magazine (published in 1987) covered the topic of pollution and protection of the environment. In the article with the title “Holiday at the seaside” the tourists were advised to pay special attention at the cleanliness of the seaside (Iacob, 1987: 4). The article also presents a set of rules for tourism’s behavior: avoiding to let waste in no-signaled areas, paying attention to packs, bottles, plastic boxes or cigarettes’ butts which could be found in sand, avoid damaging installations from the common sanitary facilities and so on (Iacob, 1987: 4).

In the same magazine, two years later (in 1989) an article on the topic of pollution in Romania was published. The author warns about the possible dangers related to pollution and environment and the title was extremely appealing: "Let's give an unpolluted nature to our children" (Georgescu, 1989: 9).

Linking pollution to economic development an article published in 1989 in "The Woman" magazine describes the increase of chemical emissions caused by cars and stress the need to reduce the risks of accidental pollution by complying at some basic rules of hygiene rules (Femeia, 1989a: 10). The set of solutions proposed by the authors in this case also made reference to recycling. In a second article on this topic from the same issue of "The Woman" magazine a list of ways to collect and recycle waste adapted to the new capacity needs of the growing population of Bucharest was published for the first time in the communist printed press (Femeia, 1989b: 12).

"The Yearbook of the Health Review" published in 1982 includes a series of articles on prevention and fighting against the diseases, the quality of life, the protection of environment, the family's importance as a factor in the children's development, the role of women in the family. In the article with the title "SOS Terra" the topics of pollution and environment's protection were discussed (Ianovici, 1982: 46). The author states the environment's protection as a major problem which affect people's health economic development world-wide (Ianovici, 1982: 46). He also refers to the issue of water's quality and warns about the need to minimize as much as possible the infiltration of toxic substances into soil, where they can affect the ground-water and, from here, people's health. In the end, the author presents a list of the top ten pollutants and explains their use in economic activities (Ianovici, 1982: 46).

Short informative articles on general health

The sample of magazines and reviews enclosed in our sample covered also some general aspects related to health. Thus, "The Yearbook of the Health Review" (the issue which was published in 1982) contains a special section devoted to self-medication. The article with the title "Pills at any price?" presents the risks of chemical imbalance caused by abuse or incorrect administration of medicines (Almanahul Revistei Sănătatea, 1982a: 66-67). The authors offered as example the case of "Thalidomina", a drug prescribed to pregnant women as a sedative but which had consequences on the children born after the mother undergone this treatment (Almanahul Revistei Sănătatea, 1982a: 66-67). The yearbook also published old suggestions on hygiene, health and nutrition under the title "Advices old for 140 years which are still valid today", stressing, once again, the benefits for health of certain foods (Almanahul Revistei Sănătatea, 1982b: 140).

The next year's issue of "The Yearbook of the Health Review" had published an article covering the activity of World Health Organization in order to develop prophylaxis for a better public health (Barnea, 1983: 3). The article cites the slogan used at the 34th World Health Assembly hold in 1981 in Geneva – "Health for All in the year 2000" – and presents the objectives of this organisation related to prophylaxis (Barnea, 1983: 3). Even in this case, the author stressed the importance of nutrition norms for the general well-being of the population (Barnea, 1983: 3). Another article published in the same issue of the yearbook stated the fact that nutrition should be balanced and "in accordance with the economic, social, moral and humanitarian rules of the socialist society" (Almanahul Revistei Sănătatea, 1983: 30). Other articles published in the same

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issue of the yearbook covered the topics of rational nutrition for pregnant women, nutrition for children and adolescents, children's obesity and its consequences.

The issues related to mental illness were among the topics which were only accidentally covered in the reviews and magazines during the communist-period. An article published in "The Yearbook of the Health Review" (the issue which was published in 1983) under the headline "Depression between sadness and suicide" pointed out the most common symptoms of depression and lists several stages and types of depression: reactive depression, mental seizures, melancholy (Pascu, 1983: 184). A short history was published for each type and stage of depression (Pascu, 1983: 184) but one could notice that there was no medical advice related to depression's treatment and / or prevention.

Other publications which had published articles on topics related to health and medicine themes were "Science and Life" (1970-1989), "The Guide of the Housewives" (1970) and "The Flame" (1960-1989). As compared with the previous magazines and reviews ("The Health", "The Woman" and "The Yearbook of the Health Review") one could notice that the last category of Romanian publications did not cover in detail the issues related to health and illness. The majority of articles published on those topics were small informative notes about certain diseases (such as flu or cold) and special sections devoted to answer questions received from the readers.

Conclusions

Referring to the paradigm of journalism in modern societies, Reese (1997: 423-424) pointed out that this can be seen as being shaped following a model that governs the collection of information, manifested in practical journalism. At the same time, modern journalism is focused on objectivity as the highest value of journalistic's ethics (Reese, 1997: 424). On the other hand, as Rieffel (1994: 190) noticed, when news was published by the media the journalists had to make appeal at certain source in order to cover an existing topic (Rieffel, 1994). Referring to the work of journalism, Jeffres (1986) have differentiated between objective and subjective (personal) standards of professional culture.

Even if in the case of the communist press one could not invoke and use the Western standards of media's activity the present article had presented some journalistic procedures to cover the health-related topic in Romania between 1945 and 1989.

Using only official sources the public health's image transmitted by the communist state was that of direct and deep concern on the health and well-being of the population. However, a more in-depth analysis allows us to point out the main themes with a clear ideological bias – this being the case with the program of scientific nutrition for population from the 1980s.

One favoured technique used by the Romanian journalists to cover health-related issues in the case of nutrition was to connect the scientific results related to common diseases (such as circulatory and respiratory ones). The aim of all articles was only to deliver a clear message about the necessity of food ratios and scientific nutrition. Another procedure was the use of non-connected health issues (such as the topic of pollution and environment's protection) and to link them to food and nutrition in order to point out, once again, the necessity of food ratios for the population.

At the same time we could notice the fact that the communist printed press had published articles which had stressed the role of media as formal educators about the medical system through the use of citations from laws and official documents, extended

coverage of medical discoveries, making recommendation about the future of the system and adopting an impersonal attitude towards the topics presented.

The present study has some limitations, the most important being the qualitative character of the analysis, which did not allow the generalisation of the results. Despite those drawbacks we assess that it could be taken as a starting point for a future analysis about the ways in which public health issues were covered in Romania in the last decades. Obviously, future research is needed in order to understand the evolution of Romanian collective mentality regarding the medical system and health.

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