

THE SPECIALIZATION OF THE ROMANIAN BLOGS' SPHERE: FUNCTIONAL TENDENCIES IN SOCIAL MEDIA DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract: *The work presents a global perspective on the Romanian social media development. In the last two years, the Romanian blogs have changed their social functions, becoming more and more specialized. To design and to write on a blog is not any more a personal occupation but a “profession”, with multiple benefits for bloggers and readers. Blogs are now integrated with the other social media (social networks), communicating and promoting each other on several channels. Thus, through their independent and fast development, Romanian social media have now one of the leading roles in the orientation of people’s opinions and attitudes. This paper’s perspective and conclusions are based on a panel research that was conducted in January 2008/January 2010, using the same frame of content analysis, the same methods of selection and a comparable sample of blogs.*

Key words: blog, online tendencies, social functions

1. INTRODUCTION

The last three years have witnessed clear and accelerated changes as a result of the impact of new media on the public space. The explosive development of the online space and of the online services determined complementary effects in the role and in the traditional media functions. An unequal “war” started between ‘real’ media and online media; in this “war”, mainstream media fight for survival, but find themselves at a loss. First effects were found in the level of the audiences, which become more and more fragmented and divided between the two spaces: the audiences with a high level of education transferred in the online space, while the

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audiences with a low level of instruction still prefer the television². Among mainstream media, the most unaffected by the Internet expansion is the radio, whose use is different (it is not visual, as television, which is the main media involved in the “war” with the Internet). In what concerns the competition between the printed press and the online press, the result is already visible: the printed press has lately decreased gradually. The decline is motivated by economic reasons: printed press does not offer enough profit in comparison with the online press (the costs are lower for the online press, and the speed of news circulation is higher).

In Romania’s case, the Internet developed at a slower pace than in other European countries. The audiences build slowly enough a habit of consumption of the Internet products, usually in parallel with the use of mainstream media. In this period, new media (and especially blogs) have passed through a slow process of selection and of specialization³. The functions of blogs and of the blogs’ sphere as a whole have changed during the last three years.

2. INFORMATION

A short look at the functional perspective shows important changes of media functions in the last decade. Thus, Lasswell’s model⁴, later completed by Wright⁵, considers four functions of media: the supervision of environment (through information), the social binding (the reinforcement of social ties through interpretation, selection and critique), the socialization (education, transmission of the cultural heritage) and the evasion (the entertainment function).

Against the background of the constitution of the information society and of the consumption society, the weight of these functions has changed. By comparison, we may notice that the information function has a greater importance for some audiences, because of the lack of security in the environment, which places its demands over this function. As a consequence, the receptors become either too specialized, either indifferent to the instance that produces the information function. Thus, the information function became more and more specialized (structured on specific channels and adequate with the audience’s needs), and the selection or the synthesis are now essential. Last but not least, because of the “bombardment” of the receptors with information, the interpretation has had a leading role in the last years: the processed information is preferred instead of the nude information (the information is “served” as a “cooked dish” to the audiences). This tendency determined the increasing importance of the role of the opinion leaders, and in the mean time this was one of the key factors that influenced the blog’s explosion phenomenon.

² Cismaru, D.-M., “Televised News and New Media: The Crossing Point of the Real and of the Virtual Space”, in *Education, Research and Innovation. Policies and Strategies in the Age of Globalization*, Comunicare.ro, Bucharest, 2008, pp. 259-262.

³ Guțu, D., *New Media*, Tritonic, Bucharest, 2007, p.142.

⁴ McQuail, D., Vindahl, S., *Modele ale comunicării pentru studiul societății de masă*, Comunicare.ro, Bucharest, 2004, p.19.

⁵ Tankard J.; Severin W.; *Perspective asupra comunicării de masă*, Polirom, Iași, 2004, p. 333.

In what concerns the second function of the above model, the social binding, it is differently defined now depending on audience categories: for some of them the interpretation is more important, and for others the selection is more important (the virtual communities have the criteria of information selection as aggregation tool). Meanwhile, in the context of the availability of the online information (availability that changed the learning models), the education function of media decreased as importance and frequency. Further, at the level of the consumption society's effects on the media functions, there are two tendencies: the transfer of the socialization function in narrower environments than the whole society, and the surge of the entertainment function, caused by the collective stress and by the "compression" of time.

The parallel analysis of the functions of mainstream media and new media manages to clarify differences. The online space brought the quickness of the transmission and the possibility of the permanent actualization; thus, mainstream media did not keep their traditional information function. Mainstream media tries to keep this function as supervision of environment, by exaggerating the prevention of disasters and negative social behaviors. But from this attitude emerges a perverse effect: an unreal image of the reality is built, as being a violent and dangerous one (as the theory of cultural dependency shows, the long term effect on audiences is lasting and negative).

As regards the interpretation function, this is differently performed in online media and mainstream media: the online media assume they are subjective, while mainstream media hide it under the first function (they declare themselves as objective). Further, the socialization function is split in two segments, depending on level of instruction, as already observed in the introduction section. But, concerning the cultural transmission of values, new media lead more and more by accessibility and by possibilities of selection. Finally, the function that is developed nowadays by mainstream media, to the point of becoming a "drug for masses", is the entertainment.

The methods of research

The main aim of the exploratory research has been the detection and the analysis of the changes in the Romanian blogs' sphere over a two year period. The changes have been perceived in a functional sense, considering the main function of the blogs' sphere as a whole, and the functions of every category of blogs separately. The two year period has been considered relevant for obtaining significant research results. There has been a fast evolution of the online communication instruments, and also an increase in the number of users. Other aims of research were to determine the success factors for promoting and maintaining a new media product in the blogs' sphere, as well as to identify some tendencies of future evolution.

The design of research has been a panel one, by the method of content analysis. The panel supposed two phases in the research, January 2008 and January 2010, and the comparison between the successive data obtained. The comparison allowed the identification of some tendencies in the Romanian blogs' sphere in what concerns the structure and the specialization.

A. The first phase of analysis was conducted between 1-3 January 2008. The sample constituted around the third part of the blogs in Romanian identified on

the Wordpress platform (930 blogs were displayed, the first 270 of which were selected). The framing in the categories was made by the analysis of the materials on the first page of the blog. The criteria for framing were: the identity of the author, the type of selection and of treatment of information, individual/collective author, the lifetime of the blog. The unit of analysis was the theme and the unit of numbering, the sentence.

There resulted the following categories:

1. Personal blogs: with an obvious subjective fingerprint: blogs that present the author, his/her personality and his interests. This frequent category has a number of divisions:

a. narrative blogs: a story about the day-to-day experience (online diary): the entries are short, there is no or little interpretation;

b. “life philosophy” blogs: the daily experiences are not at all presented, there is no story or life characters, instead there are literature fragments, moral or philosophical interpretations.

c. “personal comment” blogs: past or present experiences are in the background but only as a pretext for interpretation, the subjective fingerprint is strong.

d. “comment on public life” blogs: elements from the public life (news, lectures, events) presented and commented through the personal perspective.

e. “take over” blogs: the authors take over elements from the public life without any change (a personal “press review”).

2. Professional blogs: the author uses the professional identity. Only issues from a particular field are presented: a blog in public relations comments ongoing campaigns, public space communication, press releases, web pages of companies.

3. “Hobby” blogs: the author does not use the personal identity or the professional identity, but a less known one (a partial identity, which values a side passion or another domain of interest): for instance, blogs about sport or music.

4. Collective “niche” blogs: blogs built round an idea (for instance, the Romanian culture, environment policies, religion). There are ideas with weak representation in mainstream media and the online space is a way to represent them.

5. Collective professional blogs: there are some organizations that use the blog as a way of promotion in the online space; there is a blog with several usernames placed under the identity of the organization.

6. “Online reviews” blogs: collective blogs that are not the blogs of an organization or an online version of a printed publication, but are organized and presented as a blog.

7. Temporary blogs: built only for the preparation and the presentation of some events (blogs maintained only until the event takes place).

There was another category considered in the first phase (religious blogs: a category strongly represented in the blog’s sphere, probably because *mainstream media* had no space for this important problem on the social agenda) but this category was removed into a subcategory of (3) in 2010. In the material that was analysed, a great number of blogs (18%) were not active: either they couldn’t be accessed, either the author transferred to another web address.

B. In the second phase (3-8 January 2010) of the research the same criteria of analysis and selection were used: the selection was done randomly, on Wordpress platform. The only difference was that the sample included 300 blogs instead of 270.

The preliminary research for this phase revealed a minimum necessity to restructure the categories' inventory. The changes were: the inclusion of the 6th category (religious blogs) from the 2008 classification into a subcategory in the third category, and the change of the third category's name ("niche" blogs instead of "hobby" blogs). Because this third category diversified and became important, five subcategories were identified and measured, depending on the aim of the blog: art, *loisir*, ideas, humanitarian and religious blogs.

C. In 2010 the analysis was completed by the investigation of the first 100 blogs listed in Zelist, an online platform that ranks the blogs following several criteria (number of visitors, the frequency of posts and of quotations on other blogs, the number of links that send to the blog, the influence of the blogrolls that list the blog, and some others). The aim was to identify the specialization and the percentage of the categories in the case of "success blogs", those blogs that were built as "media products" and as results of "business strategies".

In what concerns method, for the "Top 100 blogs" the framing in categories was difficult, because of the diversity and of the strong profiles that products had. There was a need for formulating supplementary criteria and for designing the categories more clearly (the criteria of the assumed identity of the author and the way in which the identity influences the entries were still the most important). Another difficulty in analysis was the possible confusion between the informal style and the personal expression (while the professional expression became friendly and informal, the border between personal and professional sphere must still be visible). A final problem was determined by the blogs with a double profile (for instance, personal blog plus an area or more of interest). For these cases, a detailed analysis was made, expanding the material to 2-3 pages of the blog (in total, 28 entries were analyzed for each blog in this situation).

The interpretation of data

A. The comparison of categories and results between the two moments of the panel shows the specialization of the Romanian blogs' sphere.

Table 1. Comparison of blogs' categories in 2008 and 2010

Cate- gories	Sub- cate- gories	2008	2010
1.		41,3%	45%
	1a	7%	2,6%
	1b	4%	5,3%
	1c	20,7%	21,3%
	1d	6,6%	11,2%
	1e	3%	4,6%
2.		4,4%	13,6%
3.		8,5%	27,3%
	3a	-	4%
	3b	-	7,6%
	3c	-	7,3%

	3d	-	2%
	3e	-	6,3%
4.		13,5%	6%
5.		1,4%	3%
6.		4%	2%
7.		3%	3%
religious		3,7%	-
inactive		20%	-

1. For the first category, personal blogs, the percentage did not decrease, but increased with a few percentages. What is different, is the distribution of the subcategories: narrative blogs, classic journal type, became very rare; “philosophy of life” blogs (life events are not presented at all) are still present, although not in a significant degree. The most consistent segment, “personal comment”, is maintained at the same percentage (a positive fact is that they began to have clearer profiles). Further, the subcategory (d), “comment of public life” is almost double in 2010 (a proof that bloggers tend more and more to support a public attitude). The last subcategory, “take over blogs” has been renamed in 2010 “useful blogs” because it is specialized: entries are still overtaken, but they are compact collections of information that are considered useful.

2. Professional blogs are three times more numerous in 2010 than in 2008 (a positive aspect, considering that they could be used for multiple objectives by an organization). We could notice the limited professional area represented (media, advertising, marketing, public relations, web design).

3. Individual “niche” blogs are an important category in 2010 not only because they are three times more numerous, but because they are changed from “hobby” blogs to media products with a clear target and identity. In what concerns the subcategories, these deserve a detailed look. (a) Like in 2008, the blog is a useful method to promote traditional art subjects that survive with difficulty in the contemporary world (poetry, painting). (b) The second subcategory, entertainment blogs, includes a great variety of products, from sports, modern music, fashion, cartoons, jokes, to tourism, museums, local culture.

(c) The third subcategory, idea blogs, is in development and encapsulates the potential of the blog as a strategic communication instrument. (d) Humanitarian blogs manage to inform about desperate cases and to raise funds. (e) Religious blogs lost their new fingerprint from 2008 (in these two years the religious current became visible in the public life) and also became specialized like the others.

4. The collective “niche” blogs now have a clearer identity. Thus, the low quality “products” with no public disappeared, and there remained the ones that justify their existence either by their audience, either by the useful idea and concept. This is the area of associations/NGOs that wish to promote some ideas and prefer to do this by employing several authors.

5. Corporate blogs had a very small percentage and a modest development in the two-year period. The observation is not necessarily relevant for corporate blogs in general: companies might have blogs on their site and not a blog on a public platform. But a look at the virtual space, like in this research, shows that there still are many organizations that didn’t reach the concept of 2.0 and limit themselves to

presentation sites, in spite of the fact that presentation sites offer less possibilities than 2.0 interactive sites. Thus, blog as an instrument is still not used at its full potential by organizations.

6. Online reviews changed but not as a category but as placement: they were transferred in locations of their own and probably in the future will not be in the public domain of the online space.

7. Temporary blogs remained at the same percentage, but they diversified as well, covering a variety of categories: blogs for summer schools, literary contests and electoral campaign were identified.

Further, we may draw an optimistic conclusion about the behavior of bloggers: they assumed two elements that are important in the online space, the consequence and the responsibility. Thus, the number of “deserted” blogs and of those with rare entries decreased. Blogs are not abandoned anymore, they are erased or “officially” closed.

Table 2. Comparison of general sample with “top 100 blogs” in 2010

Cate- gories	Sub- cate- gories	General sample	Top 100 blogs
1.		45%	42%
	1a	2,6%	1 %
	1b	5,3%	1%
	1c	21,3%	28%
	1d	11%	10%
	1e	4,6%	2%
2.		13,6%	20%
3.		27,3%	18%
	3a	4%	0%
	3b	7,6%	13%
	3c	7,3%	3%
	3d	2%	1%
	3e	6,3%	0%
4.		6%	10%
5.		3%	0%
6.		2%	9%
7.		3%	0%

B. In what concerns the first 100 blogs analyzed, all the “products” are positioned clearly enough on segments of users, either by age, either by level of instruction, either by values. Thus, in this sample, the blogs from the third category could be named “thematic” because they are placed in clear areas.

The comparison of the two categories analyzed in 2010 (blogs from “top 100” and “usual” blogs, from the first sample) allows the identification of some factors which determine the enhancement of a blog’s status.

(1) The notoriety in the real space is a very important criterion, which differentiates the strategy of blog promotion. The notoriety in the real space also has an impact on the online notoriety, as well as on the number of visitors (greater than in case of the compared sample) and on the fidelity of the consumers (return rate significantly higher).

(2) The factors that over passed refer to specialization, actualization of content and virtual age. All the blogs with a higher status (better position in “top 100”) had a high specialization and a prominent profile. The content’s actualization may be defined as equal and constant (average rate: one entry a day). All senior blogs in the blogs’ sphere entered easily on a “fresh” market.

In what concerns the differences between the two categories (“success” blogs and “useful” blogs) there was noticed the diversification for the blogs in the second category. In the case of the first category (top 100 blogs) there is a great effort made for: organization of content, comment moderation, interaction with other blogs, expansion of the network.

C. Another element, which was a result of the percentage analysis and of the blogs material too, was the integration of the blogs’ sphere in the virtual space and the strengthening of ties with social networks. Thus, most of the bloggers use their social network profile, but also the connections they have in social networks, to promote the entries on blogs (social networks have greater audiences and also they have the possibility to send messages at a higher speed, through larger channels). As a secondary result of the analysis, the gain is for the bloggers that use these media channels in a combined and alternative way (those that managed to be opinion leaders in the social networks as well). To this integration of two online media which at the beginning developed in parallel (blogs’ sphere and social networks) contributed also the development of some specific instruments which allow the connection (there are some shortcuts that allow the connection, that are accessible now to every author).

3. CONCLUSIONS

The analysis of the first 100 blogs allows the identification of the factors that facilitate the success of a new media product of this type. The factors weigh differently in every case: (a) *The frequency of entries*: in most cases there are daily or more frequent posts. (b) *The seniority*: the blogs that came first won adherents and audience, by entrance in a free space. (c) *The notoriety in offline sphere*: if the author is a public figure, the online identity is like a complement to the real identity. (d) *The clear and consistent profile*: blog’s authors rely either on the diversity of the information (more areas, surprising the readers with new subjects), or on specialization (only one area, but emphasized in a creative way). (e) *The organization and the presentation of information*: personal sites which deliver complex and attractive information escape from the seal of the individual; the authors redefine themselves as a “multiple formula”. (f) *The community built round the blog*. This process of building a community is quite slow for a blogger that is not a public figure. There are already some habits about the building of a small virtual community (the trust and the familiarity with the issues and the perspective of the author have a leading role).

Returning to the evolution tendencies of the blogs' sphere, identified by comparing the percentage of categories in 2008 and 2010, the first observation concerns the specialization and the individualization of the blogs' profiles. The authors became more responsible and more aware of their value as instruments of communication. The promotion of the "new media products" and the way to construct the relationship with the community changed, becoming more structured and following positioning objectives. The status of bloggers changed to "professionals". A symmetric phenomenon is that the audiences became more selective and increasingly use blogs as an information and interpretation source, and not as an entertainment source, as at the beginning of online space expansion.

Thus, the functions of blogs in the public space are clearer in 2010 than in previous years. They could be considered important adversaries for the mainstream media, by their competing for the information function, officially performed by the latter. The connection made in the last period between the blogs' sphere and the social networks (especially Facebook and Twitter) has as a result the impossibility to control the speed of news and the appearance of micro networks. The aggregation of the audiences in the online space following the criteria of interest has as an effect the decrease of the dominance of mainstream media, especially of the television. The supervision function begins to be taken over by blogs, which establish other variables as criteria of environment control.

The evolution of the blogs' sphere in the next few years cannot be appreciated from the actual position. Certainly, the explosion of blogs belonged to a specific phase in the development of new media. But a particular feature of the young age segments (teenagers and young people under 25) is that they prefer more and more the synthetic and plural messages, adapted to a simultaneous information context. The elimination of redundancy is made not by rearranging statuses or establishing the key interpreting actors (as in the case of blogs' sphere) but by concentration and coding of messages, by extreme shaping of the form of communication. This encourages the conclusion that blogs' sphere will not expand in the future. The volume of the blogs' sphere is at this moment stationary and develops through refining and raising the quality of the media products. Thus, the idea of quality communication on blogs may be sustained in the future, against the background of the expansion of social networks and eventually, of the development of some new online communication channels.

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