

CONTENT PARTICULARITIES IN THE LOCAL ONLINE PRESS: THE TITLE - BETWEEN INFORMATION AND *CLICKBAIT*

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Abstract: *In this paper, I propose to study the specifics of the headlines in the local online press in Constanța, to find out to what extent informative headlines are used, which refer to the journalistic text, and to what extent clickbait headlines, whose reference is the internet user, are employed. The title is of immense importance in the economy of a journalistic text because it is the first element that attracts the attention of a potential reader and the first to provide the audience with information. The research focuses on two local publications, both of which have a daily publication regime, a generalist character from the point of view of the fields and topics covered, the difference between the two is that, while one publication has a tradition in the local media landscape, having been established in the print era, the other one is new, being a digitally native publication. The research questions are: Is the choice of the journalistic title content-driven, or audience-driven? How does the choice of the journalistic title shape the informational gap?*

Keywords: *clickbait, informative title, local press, online*

The current research aims to study the specifics of the headlines in the local press in Constanța at present. More precisely, the study aims to monitor, the titles used by two online news and analysis publications from Constanța over a set period. What we propose to assess is whether the titles used by the two online publications follow the writing techniques and deontological standards of the profession, or whether they mainly favor the “hooking” function, becoming clickbait, at the expense of information relevance, which is valuable for a reader in his role as a citizen. If the informative headline is denotative and brings relevant information, the clickbait headline does not necessarily reflect the journalistic content but challenges the reader to determine him/her to access the content. Consequently, clickbait also has its role, that of taking the reader to the text. The informative headline has as its reference the journalistic text, while the clickbait headline caters to the time-pressed internet user.

Are Internet users looking for or ignoring informative headlines? Does clickbait create a bridge between the internet user and the text? Which contents go viral? Those with an informative title or those with a clickbait title? Field studies carried out in Veles, Macedonia (the place from where fake news that influenced the presidential elections in the United States of America was posted or shared), show that clickbait headlines and illustrations are the most

important elements in the content economy in the digital environment (Vanghelescu, Petre, Trajchevska, 2020; Petre, Trajchevska 2021). Does the reader need to be tricked by clickbait to access the text, or is the sober, informative headline the long-term solution?

To be able to understand if these headlines in the local online press contain information of public interest or if, on the contrary, they do not respect the drafting techniques regarding the conception of a good informative journalistic headline, sometimes going as far as resorting to methods such as clickbait, the criteria of newsworthiness that Raluca Petre describes in the work *Management of information in the media* (in original *Managementul informației în media*, 2019) will be considered. In turn, the mentioned author refers to the values of news proposed by John Hartley (1998), corroborated with those proposed by David Randall (1998) and Ken Metzler (1985).

Another aspect that needs to be mentioned at the beginning of this paper is that the two local publications chosen for the case study are *Cuget liber* and *Focus Press*: the former was established as a publication outside the tutelage of the state in 1989, therefore with a tradition on the media market in Constanța and which appeared, for decades, also in the traditional, printed format, while the latter is a relatively new publication, founded about two years ago, which is published exclusively online.

On its website, in the section “About us”, the publication *Cuget liber* does not define itself in any way. The only description is present on the first page of the printed edition, also available in PDF format on the site, but in a separate section, entitled “Digital Edition”, namely “Cuget liber, opinion and information daily. Founded in 1944”¹. It should be mentioned that, over time, the publication appeared under several different names: “Dobrogea jună [Young Dobrogea]”/ “Dobrogea nouă [New Dobrogea]”/ “Cuget liber [Free Thought]”. The local publication from Constanta passes as one with tradition in the collective mind, enjoying local notoriety. In the work “History of a Constanta newspaper. Cuget liber, 1944-1990”, the authors - Aurelia Lăpușan, Ștefan Lăpușan, and Vartan Arachelian - recall some of the events organized by the *Cuget liber* press trust, events that, in the early 2000s, animated the Constanta public space. “At the beginning of the summer, we created, in partnership with the Union of Professional Journalists from Romania and the Ovidius University, the first professional training center in journalism in our country, and in September we certified the first batch of graduates” (Lăpușan 160). In the same volume, it is mentioned: “Also during that period (2003 – ed.) we were co-organizers (the *Cuget liber* press trust” – ed.) of the first Congress of the European Society of Culture ever held in Romania, whose prestigious general secretary is Professor Manuela Cernat. First-rate cultural

¹ cugetliber.ro

personalities from all over Europe traveled to Constanța and learned about us, about the history and charm of these places” (Lăpușan 160).

On the other hand, *Focus Press* describes itself, according to the information present on its website, on the homepage, and in the footer, as “a media product created from the desire for correct information of citizens. We believe in quality journalism, in debates, and in bringing real topics of public interest to the fore”².

The present research aims to analyze the press titles in the online media from Constanța not only for mapping the local media landscape but also to have a didactic relevance for undergraduates and master's students in the field of Communication Sciences. It is useful and relevant to understand the developments that the print and online media have registered in the recent past in post-December Romania to be able to contribute to a better professionalization of the media industry in general and to a better application of the techniques of writing in particular.

Press titling - between information demands and digital limitations

The paper starts with a review of the most important aspects related to the press title, recorded in the specialized literature. One of the typologies of press headlines is that proposed by Michel Voirol (1992), who supports the existence of two great integrative types: the informative headline and the stimulating headline (Voirol 1992 qtd by Preda 121). The informative title “gives the reader the essence of the information” (Preda 2006: 121), while the stimulating title is “very short, direct and shocking: ‘Shock and horror’, ‘Swallowed by the flood’, etc. With this title, we are in the not-so-honorable universe of sensational media” (Preda121).

Yves Agnès also refers to this typology, describing the informative title as “the king title of the daily press, but also of all articles in the periodical press, intending to teach the reader something and to deliver useful information for his/her culture, his/her daily life” (Agnès 133). About the stimulating title, Yves Agnes claims that “its aim is not to summarize the main information of the article, rather it conveys its general meaning, being sufficiently sharp to encourage reading” (Agnès 135).

Noting that there is no specific technology for designing a good headline, Sorin Preda nevertheless formulates a series of rules that a practitioner can or even should take into account when drafting a press headline: it should not be too long, not be too short, not be trivial, not be excessively metaphorical, not be general, not be notional and abstract, not be vague, not be dishonest or immoral, and it should not contain neologisms or pompous phrases (Preda 118-120). Sure, this set of best practices may seem outdated today, but constant

² focuspress.ro

monitoring of the media shows us that journalists, even the most experienced and talented ones, can sometimes choose a headline that is either uninspired or immoral concerning readers, in the sense of misleading them. In addition, such monitoring of the titles of the journalistic text can become a constant concern for both theorists, researchers, and practitioners, in the idea that journalistic practices can become better, to a greater extent addressed to the loyal press reader and less to the internet user.

In principle, there is an inexhaustible diversity of titling procedures. Along with this, the specifics of a publication can also contribute to the conception of titles in the current press. But regardless of the specifics of a publication, the title is of immense importance in the economy of a journalistic text, because it is the first element that attracts the attention of a possible reader and the first to provide him with information. In this sense, we must remember the six functions that Yves Agnès believes a good title must fulfill, namely: “[It] Hooks the eye; provides the essentials at a glance; favors choice; arouses the desire for reading; structures the page; and it ranks information” (Agnès 130). The decision to read or not to read a press text, regardless of the journalistic genre, largely depends on the headline.

Regarding the newsworthiness criteria or criteria for selecting information in the media, Raluca Petre mentions spatial proximity, temporal proximity, rarity and uniqueness, notabilities, scope and consequences, reference to elite nations, capacity for meaning, clarity, and human interest (Hartley in Petre 2019). In the present research, we will observe to what degree the titles of the two publications chosen for analysis meet these criteria, namely to what extent they provide information to readers and to what extent they contain clickbait elements.

Regardless of their typology, press headlines aim to draw the reader's attention and facilitate reading. Being an anchoring element, the journalistic title plays a fundamental role in the economy of a text, because the reading of the text largely depends on it. Without the anchor, which is the title, an online publication could not exist, and could not be conceived. Hence the attention that theorists in the field of Communication Sciences, but also practitioners, give or should give to titling, especially in the context of online development, which produced some changes not only at the level of editorial content but also at the level of media consumption behavior.

Simona Bader and Corina Sîrb claim, in the work “Peculiarities of the online press in Romania: dynamics and concepts”, that there are two elements that characterize information consumption behavior in the digital environment, namely: 1) users scan the pages before reading them, context where the title is an indicator of relevance and a factor that determines whether an article is read or abandoned; 2) most users come into contact with journalistic content through third parties (aggregators, press magazine applications, social media)

where the news feed is rather a listing of headlines, possibly accompanied by a caption or a short description” (Bader, Sîrb 59). However, the two authors mention that, even in the situation where the articles are accessed directly on the page of a publication, most sites have a list-type homepage, which presents the most imported, respectively the most recent titles of the moment, which are filtered and are ranked selectively, in any case (Bader, Sîrb 59). Therefore, the title is the element that can “trigger” the reading of a press text, but also can rank the order in which a media consumer will choose to go through the texts that present potential interest.

In this vein, in the same work, Simona Bader and Corina Sîrb draw attention to the importance of the title of a press text. “It (the title – ed.) represents, after all, the first contact of the readers with the content, which must not only attract attention but also reveal the subject. From a journalistic point of view, the title should fulfill a whole series of exigencies. A good title must have a very clear message, based on the main information in the article, so there must be a close connection between the text and its title” (Bader, Sîrb 59). At the same time, the two authors emphasize that “the lack of ambiguity in the titles is equally important, as they are, from a pragmatic point of view, indicators of relevance for the audience. Journalistic headlines can either summarize the content of the article or highlight it” (Bader, Sîrb 59). The rush for clicks, i.e. for as many accesses/views as possible, can lead to a rise in the tendency of online publications to use less informative titles and more clickbait-type titles, out of the desire to attract advertising and, thus, to endure in the media market. But in order not to fall into the trap of prejudices and not to make abusive generalizations, we will formulate the conclusions only after analyzing the titles of the two selected publications, precisely because the purpose of the research is to outline a real picture of the local journalistic practices at present.

It is worth mentioning that, in this study, we refer to the concept of clickbait as defined by the authors of the volume “Peculiarities of online media from Romania: dynamics and concepts”, according to which “by clickbait, we understand any element of content by which it tries to attract clicks on a link that leads to a certain web page. The term would translate into Romanian as clickbait” (Bader, Sîrb 58). However, in this paper we do not apply a value judgment to the clickbait titling technique, in the sense of demonizing it.

Also referring to the issue of titration in the online press in Romania, Simona Bader and Corina Sîrb claim that having to survive a very competitive environment, “the online press had to find solutions to succeed in attracting visitors to their sites so that the numbers shown by web analytics to be attractive enough for advertising agencies” (Bader, Sîrb 58). The same authors admit that these solutions do not always have positive effects on the published editorial content, but mention: “Beyond this aspect, it is easy to understand

why, in the context of the digitalization of the mass media and therefore the increase in competitiveness in the “information industry”, journalistic content is heavily influenced by marketing tactics” Bader, Sîrb 58). In addition, in digital formats the title is separated from the text, unlike classic press texts where the title and text are found together, there being a necessary connection between the two. In the digital environment, the connection between the title and the text has to be reconstructed, as there is no longer a co-substantial link between them.

Next, Bader and Sîrb explain that one of the most powerful typically human cognitive elements, curiosity, underlies strategies that use click-fishing mechanisms. “Curiosity arises, according to Loewenstein, following the awareness of the existence of an informational or epistemic gap. Understood in this way, Loewenstein continues, curiosity works on the model of physiological needs, such as hunger or thirst. Thus, offering information in small doses, in incomplete or ambiguous syntaxes, causes the appearance of curiosity which, once manifested, will be satisfied by attempts to complete the data puzzle previously provided. This is the *information gap theory*, which seems to underlie the construction mechanism of many clickbait headlines” (Bader, Sîrb 63).

Before moving on to the actual analysis of the headlines from the two local online publications selected for this paper, it is necessary to mention the strategies by which, according to the two authors mentioned above, the clickbait headlines are designed and which, they claim, are the most frequently used in the Romanian online media: “1. Vague expressions by avoiding proper nouns: a common noun is mentioned, possibly accompanied by an adjective that arouses interest, incomplete expressions are left, which do not fully reproduce the subject, to cause readers to access the article to elucidate the mystery” (Bader, Sîrb 63). The second strategy consists of questions: “headlines take the form of questions aimed at the topic covered in the article, leaving the impression of a positive answer to the question. [...] The logic behind this principle is simple: from a journalistic point of view, verified information is presented in the form of a statement; if the journalist had evidence for what he stated, he would no longer have to resort to interrogations” (Bader, Sîrb 64).

The third strategy is, according to Simona Bader and Corina Sîrb, the following: “Headlines that reproduce quotes intended to attract attention. They give the illusion of reality, of credibility, but they represent only a fragment of reality, which causes the user to want to complete it, to put it in context” (Bader, Sîrb 65). The fourth strategy consists, in the authors' analysis, in the use of cataphora and deictics, where examples from two national publications, “Libertatea” and “Adevărul”, are given: “All drivers must be wary of this. If you find this ticket in the car, you risk being left without it” (headline taken

from “Libertatea”, 29.01.2021) and “What the international press writes about the fire at Matei Balș” (headline taken from “Adevărul”, 29.01.2022) (Bader, Sîrb 66).

Last but not least, the authors claim that mentioning a strong emotion is also a strategy for designing a clickbait title, which, in turn, includes three distinct strategies: “a. Direct or indirect mention of emotions that the user will experience as soon as he reads the article (...); b. Mentioning some emotions or dramatic situations experienced by the protagonists of the press materials; c. Inducing fear by announcing or, rather, suggesting an imminent or probable danger, or merely an unpleasant event that might take place” (Bader, Sîrb 66-67).

Methodological aspects

As a research method, I will use content analysis, defined by Mircea Agabrian as a research technique with a non-reactive character, which excludes the influence of the researcher who carries out the study: “Content analysis is nonreactive because the process of placing words, messages, or symbols in the text to be communicated to a reader or receiver occurs without the influence of the researcher analyzing the content” (Agabrian 18).

The corpus analyzed in the present research consists of 157 press texts selected from the mentioned local online platforms, *Cuget liber*, and *Focus Press*. As regards the journalistic genre, the 157 texts are news items and they appeared on September 2, 3, and 4, 2022, in the permanent news feeds of the two local publications. More precisely, they were published in the section titled “Breaking news” in *Cuget liber*, respectively the section “Last hour” in *Focus Press*. Out of the total of 157 texts, 109 appeared on the *Cuget liber* website, and 48 on *Focus Press*. A part of the 157 press texts was initially accessed on September 8, but subsequently, all were either accessed or re-accessed on October 1, 2022. The number of views/news mentioned in the present research is the one recorded on October 1.

Operationalization - informative title. The informative title contains concrete data about: time, space, scale, consequences, novelty, conflict, personalities, and elite nations; and partially answers the questions *who?* and *what?*.

Operationalization – clickbait title. The clickbait title contains vague phrasing and interrogatives, refers to only a part of reality, uses cataphora and deictics, and avoids nominalizations and proper names, as common nouns are used instead.

Both local platforms have a daily regime, and both have a generalist character. They address, mainly in information texts but also in some opinion texts, subjects from all fields, from politics, administration, culture, and education, to health, justice, and sports. What differentiates the two platforms

is the fact that the publication *Cuget liber* appeared, developed, and established itself in the post-communist period of print press, namely in the 1990s and early 2000s. Instead, *Focus Press* is what will be called a native digital publication, whose publishing takes place exclusively online.

The **research hypothesis** of the present study is that the *Cuget liber* platform uses fewer clickbait titles because it is an already established publication, one with tradition in the media landscape of Constanța county. Therefore, it does not need to resort to techniques to “hook readers” like in the case of clickbait headlines. Contrarily, *Focus Press*, founded about two years ago, is a publication that, to appeal to a great number of readers and views – and thus to strengthen its position in the local media context –, uses clickbait titles more often.

There was, in the formulation of the research hypothesis in the paper, an aspect of an autoethnographic nature, namely the fact that I worked as a journalist at the *Cuget liber* daily between 2007 and 2010, a time when the publication was just consolidating its position on the online market of local newspapers in Constanța, but without making compromises regarding the editorial content delivered to its readers and without resorting to clickbait titling. In fact, at the time, clickbait was little known in the local media, online competition between local publications having just begun. All in all, we consider this mention appropriate because it had, as previously stated, an influence on the formulation of the research hypothesis.

Research results

After analyzing the titles of press texts published on the two online platforms on September 2, 3, and 4, 2022, we reached the following results: on the *Cuget liber* platform, 14 titles had clickbait headlines out of a total of 109 texts in the mentioned period. These are:

- “Constanța authorities, important announcement! This is how a PARKING PLACE should be signaled, correctly”, Friday, September 2, 2022 (464 views)
- “Be careful what SCHOOL SUPPLIES you buy for your children! Here are the dangerous substances detected in pencil boxes or erasers”, Friday, September 2, 2022 (287 views)
- “Be careful where you park your car! Traffic is completely restricted, in a busy area of Constanta”, Friday, September 2, 2022 (206 views)
- “Warning to over a million Android users: You must delete this app now!”, Friday, September 2, 2022 (4791 views)
- “SCANDAL slip of a high-ranking cleric: A woman is not raped unless she wants to”, Friday, September 2, 2022 (748 views)

- “How much did a tourist pay for the Predeal cable car”, Friday, September 2, 2022 (254 views)
- “Mistakes you make when measuring your blood pressure at home”, Friday, September 2, 2022 (432 views)
- “CJRAE Constanța, mourning the loss of a valuable colleague”, Friday, September 2, 2022 (5590 views)
- “Breaking news about actress Jane Fonda. The announcement that saddened fans”, Saturday, September 3, 2022 (177 views)
- “Romanian Police, warning of a new type of online fraud: 'We do not send such emails’”, Sunday, September 4, 2022 (595 views)
- “'Surprise key' found by tourist on the beach”, Sunday, September 4, 2022 (323 views)
- “How many cases of COVID-19 were recorded in the last 24 hours”, Sunday, September 4, 2022 (197 views)
- “Money for students in the form of educational vouchers. What documents must parents submit”, Sunday, September 4, 2022 (167 views)
- “How much is the rent for a London studio apartment where the bathroom is in the closet”, Sunday, September 4, 2022 (293 views).

By far the vaguest, most unclear, and most alarmist clickbait headline of the above is: “Warning to over a million Android users: You must delete this app now!”, published on September 2, 2022, on the *Cuget Liber* online platform. The imperative “must” and the time adverb “now” can have the effect of inducing panic among readers, but also elicits curiosity, making the readers want to satisfy their desire to know what application it is about.

Clickbait titles are also those that use indirect queries: “How much did a tourist pay for the Predeal cable car”, “How many cases of COVID-19 were registered in the last 24 hours”, “Money for students in the form of educational vouchers. What documents do parents have to submit”, and “How much is the rent for the London studio apartment where the bathroom is in the closet”. In these cases, triggering curiosity works, creating the impression that once the reader accesses the article, the reader will almost instantly find out the answer to the question “how much/how many?”.

Clickbait titles that use vague statements, where proper names are avoided, are: “CJRAE Constanța mourned the loss of a valuable colleague” and “SCANDALOUS slippage of a high-ranking cleric: A woman is not raped unless she wants to”.

A clickbait headline that exploits emotion is “Breaking news about actress Jane Fonda. The announcement that saddened the fans”, published on the *Cuget liber* platform Saturday, September 3.

Regarding the titles “Constanța authorities, important announcement! This is how a PARKING PLACE should be signaled, correctly”, “Be careful what SCHOOL SUPPLIES you buy for your children! Here are the dangerous substances detected in pencil boxes or erasers” and “Be careful where you park your car! Completely restricted traffic, in a traffic area of Constanța”, they are also clickbait in that they not only exploit curiosity by warning readers to pay attention, but they also elicit the readers’ emotions either by referring to imminent events (traffic to be completely restricted) or by inducing fear (dangerous substances detected in supplies).

It is important to mention that, among the news items published on September 2, 2022, in the “Breaking news” section, on the *Cuget Liber* platform, the texts with clickbait titles “CJRAE Constanța mourned the loss of a valuable colleague” and “Warning to over a million Android users: You must delete this app now!” are the ones that get up to ten times more views than the news without such headlines, i.e. 5590 views and 4791 views respectively. In contrast, we exemplify the text with the fewest views on that day: “A two-month-old baby died of COVID! He was born prematurely”. This text has only 106 views, although it meets several criteria of newsworthiness (a rarity - relative to the period in which it occurred, namely the end of the coronavirus pandemic, consequences, human interest, and negativism).

In the same period monitored in the present study - September 2, 3, and 4, 2022 - only two out of 48 texts published in the "Latest Hour" column on the *Focus Press* platform had clickbait titles:

- “Former mayor found shot. He had been missing for several days” - Friday, September 2, 2022 (576 views)
- “Actions of Constanta policemen: It ‘rained’ with fines in the southern area of the Romanian coast!” - Saturday, September 3, 2022 (407 views)

The first clickbait headline avoids naming as it does not provide the deceased person's name. As for the second title, it is formulated very vaguely, in the sense that it does not specify whether it is about actions regarding the detection of the consumption of prohibited substances, about actions by the traffic police on the south coast to detect drivers who either drive under the influence of alcoholic beverages or simply do not respect traffic rules or about police interventions in those premises that do not allow the access of commissioners from the National Authority for Consumer Protection. So, from this point of view, the title allows for a wide range of assumptions on the part of the readers.

We consider it relevant that significantly fewer items of breaking news were published on the *Focus Press* platform than on the *Cuget liber* website in the same section (“Breaking News” / “Last hour”) and in the same time frame.

Conclusion

While the *Cuget liber* publication had to adapt its editorial content to the trends and demands imposed by the online environment (being an especially successful publication – but not exclusively so – during the heyday of print press), the *Focus Press* platform did not have to make this effort, being a native digital media product. *Focus Press* was born online and therefore operates in a context that is “natural” to it nowadays. The research hypothesis – that the online platform *Cuget Liber* uses fewer clickbait titles because it is an already established, well-known publication and therefore does not have to resort to such techniques to attract readers – is invalidated by the present analysis. This may also be because the publication *Cuget liber* (which is not currently audited by any specialized entity) no longer occupies a top position in the readers' preferences, regardless of its age and its tradition in the local media market in the Constanța county.

In the work *Return to the Romanian laboratory. Mass media after 1989* [original title *Întoarcere în laboratorul românesc. Mass-media după 1989*], Peter Gross claims, referring to what he calls the “lessons” learned by Romanian journalism after the fall of the communist regime, that “the change in journalism took place in a self-taught spirit, through trial and error” (Gross 2015: 269). We believe it is a conclusion that can be applied in the present study as well, even after more than 30 years have passed since the Revolution of 1989 and the Romanian mass media has been trying to consolidate its identity for more than three decades, always challenged by the times and by financial, technological, and professional requirements. Specifically, amid efforts to remain attractive to readers in the online environment, the local publication *Cuget liber* turns to clickbait headlines to “hook” readers. The compromise it makes implies providing fewer data relating to the time, location, extent, and consequences of the events, highlighting novelty, conflict, celebrities, and elite nations. It uses titles that only partially answer the questions *who?* and *what?*.

Can we, in the present digital context, develop a new type of headline, a sort of “informative clickbait”? What would be its features, and how could we arrive at a formula that is both exciting and informative? Or do the two exclude each other? These are some of the questions that arise from the present research.

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