

UNDERSTANDING SPUTNIK NEWS AGENCY STRATEGIC STATE NARRATIVES

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Abstract: *Our digital society becomes today the new battleground for powerful state actors, such as the Russian Federation, interested in boosting strategic narratives designed to systematically shape people's perceptions and generate "alternative realities" suitable for empowering Russia's foreign policy objectives. This research recovers the web content stored on the Russian platform ro.sputnik.md and delivers answers by interpreting large quantities of data: all news headlines, their summary, date of publication, views, positive/negative reviews, comments, tags assigned by the publisher as well as the section in which the news is framed, all for better understanding the key themes that Russia promotes in our country.*

Key words: *social media, Sputnik, fake news, ParseHub content analysis.*

1. Introduction

Nowadays, more than ever, the public interacts with the surrounding reality more and more through media than through direct human contact. Whether we speak of its traditional means (TV, radio, print media, etc.) or the new ones (internet, social networks etc.), the information presented by media today becomes, for a significant majority of the population, the only contact they have with facts all over the world.

Today, when fake news is validated as true by a generation constantly under time pressure, with less and less time for critical thinking, we must raise awareness again about the agenda-setting paradigm and its impact in everyday life.

It is the responsibility of the Academia to cultivate public attitude for multi-source information and critical thinking, and to offer clear instruments for readers to be able to detect possible misinformation or disinformation generated by media, intentionally or not.

This paradigm emphasizes a unitary theoretical perspective (Gamson, Croteau, Hoynes, & Sasson, 1992; García, 2010; Lippmann, 2017; McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Mills & Barlow, 2014; Perry, 2001) that is based on the idea that media, intentionally or not, structures the topics of public interest. In other words, a lot of people always have an agenda of interests, which will be addressed and resolved in the order of the importance given. The agenda setting paradigm shows how the media has the power to limit the public's

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attention to a set of preferred topics, choosing to ignore, intentionally or not, other topics that may present at least the same public interest. Maintaining the logic, some issues become intensely debated on the public agenda, leaving others to be lost in the sphere of ignorance.

In this complicated scenario of media-rich environment, international actors such as Russia are trying to spread strategic narratives in order to enforce their foreign policy. These strategic narratives are used by political actors to construct the public view about the past, present, and future of international politics in order to shape, in the desired direction, the behavior of other international actors. Strategic narratives are a tool for political actors to extend their influence, manage expectations, and change the discursive environment in which they operate (Miskimmon, O'loughlin, & Roselle, 2014).

Sputnik news platform is just one of the Russian tools used since 2016 launching to boost news, from a Russian perspective, in the informational space of both Romania and the Republic of Moldova.

Because international relations depend on communication, it is important to research the content that Sputnik is bringing to Romanian informational space, as a means to better understand what their interest in our region is.

This research joins the efforts of European External Action Service's East StratCom Task Force to understand the Russian Federation's disinformation campaigns that affect European Union and Romania as special case.

2. Digital Instruments & Research Questions

The present research recovered the web content stored on the platform www.ro.sputnik.md, from 2016 until 2018, using a free web-scraping ParseHub service (Parsehub, 2018) and created an original database. Using drag and drop ParseHub function was created a lightweight data-interchange format was created, presented in Figure 1, that allowed the following extractions: all news headlines, their summary, the URL to which they can be accessed, the date of publication, the number of views made, the number of positive reviews, the number of negative reviews, the number of comments, the tags assigned by the publisher as well as the news section in which they are framed.

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{"Title": [{"name":"","URL":"","summary":"","Views":"","Data":""," Positive, Negative, Commentaries, Tags, Categories, Title not shown in sample}]
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Fig. 1. *Java Script Object Notation (JSON)*

This research gives answers to the following questions: What is the total amount of news that Sputnik is delivering on www.ro.sputnik.md? In what categories is the news framed? What is the impact (number of views)? Do readers comment the news? Is the news evaluated and in what terms: positive or negative? How stable is the virtual community – do they agree with the editorial policy promoted by the SPUTNIK platform?

3. Results

On the Internet is very important to have constantly new content that people will read and share. This will keep the big search engines like Google, Yahoo, Yandex etc. constantly indexing the content making your site easier to find.

According to the data presented in Table 1 we can see that Sputnik really takes this job seriously, managing to increase the news volume every single year since the 2016 launch. In 2017 it almost doubled the news volume reaching 7.899 piece of news/year followed by 2018 when it managed to add another impressive 2.000 piece of news/year to the total number/year.

Content delivered on Sputnik

Table 1

Year	News	Average/day
2016	4487	12
2017	7899	21
2018	9860	27

In 2016, the administrators of Sputnik news platform incremented 17 categories: Analysis, Diaspora, Economy, Editorialist, International, Romanian-Moldova, Showbiz & Entertainment, Multimedia, Moldova, Politics, Radio, Religion, Russia, Society, Video, Video-club and Unassigned news items.

We have 5 categories – Video, Video club, Radio, Multimedia and Diaspora – that are almost irrelevant to the big picture, summing only 43 news articles.

As shown in Figure 2, 80% (3.620 news) the editorial team's attention referring the news volume was concentrated in only 5 out of 17 categories as following: Romania-Moldova – 1.407 news, International – 822 news, Society – 802 news, Politics – 339 news and Moldova – 250 news.

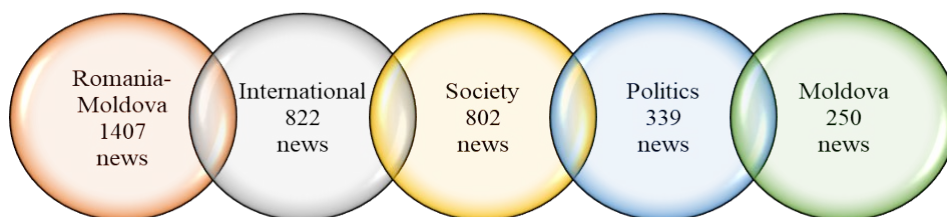


Fig. 2. *Sputnik 2016 - first 5 categories used for news delivery*

Although the editorial and news aggregation effort was submitted in the category Romania-Moldova where we have 1.407 pieces of news, this category collected only 17.453 views with an average of 12 views/article. The news generated 213 positive and 679 negative reviews. The positive/negative balance² is 365 news rated negative, 1.012

² This means that from the total number of the positive reviews that a news has we subtract the number of the negative reviews. The result can be positive, neutral if we have equal positive and negative reviews or negative

pieces of news neutral or not rated and only 30 pieces of news rated positive. The reviews highlight the disagreement of the readers' community in relation to the editorial policy implemented in this category.

The Society category is leader in terms of total number of views 369.942 with an average of 461 views/article, but the Showbiz & Entertainment category is winning in terms of number of articles/views where we have 182 articles which generated 29.5427 views, with an average of 1.623 views/article. This is typical for sites where the content quality doesn't fit readers' expectations and they are only accessing the news platform for glossy news.

The Editorialist category, which reflects the essence of Sputnik editorial policy, delivered only 79 articles, generating 29.705 views with an average of 376 views/article. The news items gathered 402 positive and 320 negative reviews. On the other hand, the positive negative balance is 36 pieces of news that are rated negative, 11 pieces of news rated neutral or not appreciated and 32 pieces of news rated positively. The category did not generate comments, the public accessing this category proved to be approximately evenly divided between agreeing to the editorial policy and disagreeing with it.

The Analysis category, which also reflects the editorial policy of the platform, delivered 114 articles, generating 31.671 views with an average of 277 views / article. The news items gathered 385 positive and 298 negative reviews. The negative positive balance is 50 pieces of news rated negative, 18 pieces of news rated neutral or not rated and 46 pieces of news rated positive. The category generated only 2 comments, the audience accessing this category proves to be approximately evenly divided between agreeing to the editorial policy and disagreeing.

Assessment: although the editorial team managed to deliver consistent news content, the Sputnik platform ends 2016 without coagulating a community that generates views in categories for which it was created (Romania-Moldova, international news, society, politics and Moldova). That means that in 2016 the news platform managed to capitalize views rather in related areas such as the showbiz and entertainment news. The comments are almost non-existent, only 33, reflecting the inability of the content team to deliver news that create debate among the readers.

The positive / negative evaluations show a split in readers' preferences, almost equal, between those who agree with the editorial policy and those who disagree with it. It is true that this is also due to the fact that the news platform was newly launched, and it needed a longer period of time for creating a community of loyal readers.

In 2017 we had 26 categories, 9 more, incremented by the page administrator, as following: Analysis, Diaspora, Economy, Editorialist, International, Moldova, Showbiz & Entertainment, Multimedia, Politics, Radio, Religion, Russia, Society, Video club, Unassigned news, Breaking News, Brexit, Press releases, English version, Photo, Info graphics, Home, News from Romania, PSD Romania, Survey and Weather.

We have 11 new categories: Breaking News, Brexit, Press releases, English version, Photo, Graphics info, Home, News from Romania, PSD Romania, Survey, Weather and 2 categories that were eliminated: Romania-Moldova and Video. The category Romania-Moldova is eliminated but the volume of content is recovered in the International, Society and Political categories.

Although the platform increased the number of categories, 12 of them are almost irrelevant (Breaking News, Brexit, Press releases, Photo, Graphics info, Home, Multimedia, News from Romania, PSD Romania, Poll, Video and Video club) scoring a total number of only 35 news.

In 2017, as shown in Figure 3, 77% (7899 pieces of news) of the editorial team's attention referring the news volume was concentrated in only 5 out of 26 categories as following: International – 1.407 pieces of news, Society – 1.554 pieces of news, Politics – 899 pieces of news, Russia – 602 pieces of news and Moldova – 533 pieces of news.

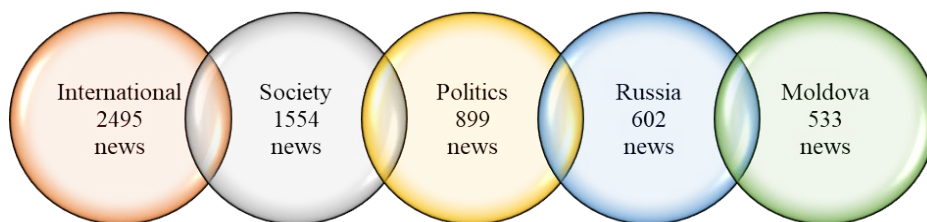


Fig. 3. *Sputnik 2017 - first 5 categories used for news delivery*

The editorial and news aggregation efforts were made in the International category, where we had 2.495 pieces of news, managing to gather 1.254.112 views with an average of 502 views/article.

The news generated 4.432 positive and 2.272 negative reviews. The positive/negative balance is 505 pieces of news rated negative, 843 pieces of news neutral or not rated news and 1.148 pieces of news rated positive. The reviews highlight the majority of readers' agreement with the editorial policy of this category. For the first time, content generated debate, scoring a total number of 341 comments for 240 pieces of news. The category is also the first in terms of total number of views 369.942 with an average of 461 views / article.

The Editorialist category, which reflects the essence of Sputnik editorial policy, has increased to 192 articles, generating 204.655 views, ten times more than 2016, with an average of 1065 views/article. The category received 1.381 positive and 521 negative reviews. The positive/negative balance is 24 pieces of news rated negative, 15 pieces of news rated neutral or not rated and 153 pieces of news rated positive. The category also generated 141 comments, the public accessing this category is unequivocally in agreement with the editorial policy.

The Analysis category, which also reflects the editorial policy, has tripled its activity reaching 491 articles that generated 983.453 views with an average of 2.002 views/article. The news received 3.981 positive and 1.064 negative reviews. The positive/negative balance is 59 pieces of news rated negative, 64 rated neutral or not rated and 368 pieces of news rated positive. The category also generated 869 comments, the public accessing this category being unequivocally in agreement with the editorial policy.

The Showbiz & Entertainment category remains an important one as winning in terms of number of article/views where we have 348 articles which generated 735.153 views, with an average of 2.112 views/article.

Assessment: the editorial team managed to deliver consistent news content, practically doubling the number of news items delivered, reaching an impressive 7.899 news articles.

It draws attention the Brexit category and the first category with the name of a political entity (PSD Romania), although no consistent content was delivered during 2017. Also, the category Russia increases from 146 pieces of news in 2016 to 602 pieces of news in 2017, clearing the way for a Russian perspective.

2017 also marks the appearance of comments, 3.370 in number, an aspect that highlights the success of the platform in creating debate among the readers' community.

The positive/negative reviews, and other metrics such as views or comments, highlight sedimentation of the readers' community beliefs in the direction of the editorial policy promoted by Sputnik.

Sputnik platform ends 2017 by coagulating a community of mature readers, which generates solid views predominantly in the categories for which it was created and where massive content is delivered. The statistical indicators were at least doubled in the priority categories Politics, Society and International.

In 2018 we had 32 categories, 6 more, incremented by the page administrator, as following: Analysis, Diaspora, Economy, Editorialist, International, Moldova, Showbiz & Entertainment, Multimedia, Politics, Radio, Religion, Russia, Society, Video-club / Video, Unassigned News, Breaking News, Romanians in London & BREXIT, English version, Photo, PSD Romania, Survey, Weather, DNA, Education, Flash, Klaus Iohannis, Monarchy, Resistance, Romania-Moldova, Romania: weather, natural disasters, Health and Sport.

We had the Brexit category that has been renamed as Romanians in London & Brexit and four categories that had been deleted: Press releases, Graphics info, Home and News from Romania.

We also have 10 new categories: DNA, Education, Flash, Klaus Iohannis, Monarchy, Resistance, Romania-Moldova, Romania: weather, natural disasters, Health and Sport.

Although the platform increased the number of categories, even this year we had 11 of them with almost irrelevant activity (Romanians in London & Brexit, English Version, Photo, Multimedia, Radio, Poll, Video club, Weather, Monarchy, Resistance and Romania-Moldova) scoring a total number of only 48 pieces of news.

In 2018, as shown in Figure 4, 69% (9.860 pieces of news) of the editorial team's attention referring the news volume was concentrated in only 5 out of 32 categories as following: International – 2.167 pieces of news, Society – 1.496 pieces of news, Politics – 1.347 pieces of news, Russia – 1.075 pieces of news and Analysis – 756 pieces of news.

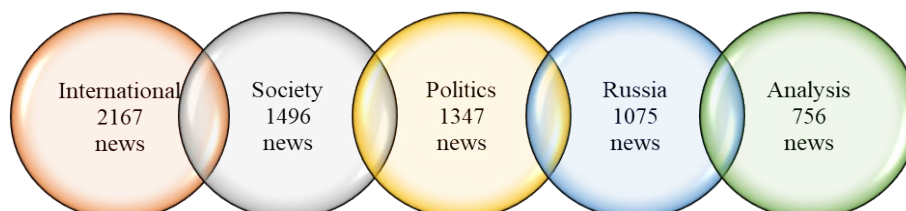


Fig. 4. *Sputnik 2018 - first 5 categories used for news delivery*

Also, this year, the editorial and news aggregation effort were made in the International category, where we had 2.167 pieces of news that generated 975.212 views with an average of 450 views/article.

The news generated 4.640 positive and 1.189 negative reviews. The positive/negative balance is 308 pieces of news rated negative, 621 pieces of news neutral or not rated news and 1.295 pieces of news rated positive. The reviews highlight the majority of readers' agreement with the editorial policy of this category. Content has generated debate, scoring a total number of 291 comments. The category is leading also in terms of the total number of views 975.212 with an average of 450 views/article.

The Editorialist category has dropped from 192 to 100 pieces of news, generating 31.5954 views with an average of 3.159 views/article. The content difference was most likely recovered in the Analysis category. The news generated 1.040 positive and 257 negative reviews. The positive/negative balance is 3 pieces of news rated negative, 12 neutral or not rated and 85 pieces of news rated positive. Content has generated 73 comments. The readers strongly resonate with the editorial policy from this category.

The Analysis category has significantly increased its volume up to 756 news articles (nearly 300 more news) generating 2.061.538 views. It is also the first category in terms of number of articles/views with an average of 2.726 views/article. The pieces of news received 6.288 positive and 24 negative reviews. The positive/negative balance is 52 pieces of news rated negative, 50 pieces of news neutral or not rated and 655 pieces of news rated positive. The category generated 714 comments.

The Russia category almost doubled the news content up to 1.075 pieces of news, reaching the 4th place in the content delivery hierarchy. The pieces of news generated 4.161 positive reviews and 254 negative reviews. The positive/negative balance is 36 pieces of news rated negative, 132 pieces of news neutral or not rated and 907 pieces of news rated positive. The content generated 111 comments. Readers in this category strongly resonate with the editorial policy.

The 2018 general assessment is that the platform managed to coagulate a community of readers, adding an impressive 2.000 news articles to the total delivered content. This effort generated real debate, scoring 2.985 comments, especially in the first five important categories.

The aspect that draws attentions is that the platform began to deliver content in categories named after institutions (DNA), civic movements (#Rezist) or political systems (Monarchy).

Future more, for the first time, Sputnik dedicated a category to a political actor, Klaus Iohannis (KWI), the President of Romania.

KWI category had 27 news articles that generated 47.909 views with an average of 1.774 views/article. The pieces of news generated 204 positive and 37 negative reviews. The positive/negative balance is 2 pieces of news rated negative, 3 pieces of news neutral or not rated and 22 pieces of news rated positive. The category generated 23 comments. The readers accessing KWI category resonate strongly with the editorial policy.

The small news volume facilitated a qualitative analysis of how the President was reflected on the news platform. In order to avoid misinterpretations and maintain

objectivity of the analysis, only the news titles and their summaries were cited below, without questioning the truthiness of facts presented by the news platform.

So, in terms of positive news we only had 2 articles “KWI approved the law for immunoglobulin supplies” (Sputnik, 2018b) and “KWI another gesture of normality towards Putin and Russia” (Sputnik, 2018h). It seems that it is always a positive thing when you take a political action that is favorable to Russian foreign policy.

On the negative side, we had news that described KWI as: ‘the weakest President’ (Sputnik, 2018m), the one that ‘violated the constitution’ (Sputnik, 2018f), ‘finished with the fear of imprisonment’ (Sputnik, 2018g), ‘rushed and superficial’ (Sputnik, 2018d), ‘hypocrite’ (Sputnik, 2018e), the one that ‘transmitted nothing at the NATO Summit’ (Sputnik, 2018n), the one that made a ‘strange blunder... ridiculous situation’ (Sputnik, 2018c) and a gesture that ‘begins to resemble a resignation’ (Sputnik, 2018a).

He is also described by some of his political opponents: “Olguţa Vasilescu knocks KWI out” (Sputnik, 2018k), “Liviu Pleşoianu transmits KWI - Be a man, are you in?” (Sputnik, 2018i), “Mihai Fifor warns KWI” (Sputnik, 2018j), “Serban Nicolae and Liviu Pleşoianu knock KWI out” (Sputnik, 2018l).

The qualitative analysis of KWI category demonstrates, without denial, the option of the platform for denigrating the President's activity. It is described in an overwhelming proportion of titles, in ways that make it incompatible with the state position that he holds.

4. Conclusions

In the evaluated period, 2016-2018, Sputnik news agency managed to coagulate a community of mature readers, which generates solid views predominantly in the categories for which it was created and where massive content is delivered every year.

In 2017 and 2018 the total number of comments was capped around 3.000 although the news volume delivered by the platform was increased every year. This aspect highlights the limit of the platform to create, maintain and entertain a real debate among the community of readers coagulated on the platform.

The positive/negative balance certifies the settling of the readers community beliefs in accordance with the editorial policy promoted by Sputnik.

In terms of general ranking, the platform has a steady growth since launching. Until now it managed to concentrate a significant reader community only in Moldova, where it holds the 4th place among news platforms, after www.point.md, www.protv.md and www.livejournal.com. The 894th position currently held in Romania doesn't place it among the news platforms that have a real impact.

For future research on the same topic I recommend the ParseHub service as a scrapping tool, especially for interactive website that delivers news. The service collects and stores data for analysis in JSON, Excel or API format. It is easy to use and doesn't require technical skills.

Also, future research should focus on a qualitative approach on every category presented in this article. This will clearly show us the strategic narrative that Russia is trying to promote in our informational space and will help the community of researchers to better

understand Russian foreign policy. Even more, we should extend our research to an internet traffic analysis because it is not enough to increase the content on a news platform in order to attract more readers.

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