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REPORTING ROMANIA: A CONTENT ANALYSIS OF *THE NEW YORK TIMES* COVERAGE, 1985-1997

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INTRODUCTION

The dramatic events that signaled the collapse of communist regimes across Central and Eastern Europe and the equally significant political transitions in the former Soviet Union sundered what had been a standard "conflict" news frame, the familiar "Cold War" narrative, for American journalists (Grunwald 1993:14). News frames, narratives or schemas are dominant stories or interpretive themes used to explain events (Kerbel 1995:62-63; Patterson 1993:56-57). Political events in Central and Eastern Europe could no longer be satisfactorily described and explained as scenes in the larger Cold War drama. American foreign policy makers, on whom American journalists had depended for information and explanation, were faced with a comparable loss of reference and could offer little assistance. Anti-Communism had served as the primary policy organizing principle for foreign policy makers (Rieff 1996:3; Whitehead 1994:53; Maynes 1990:9). Deprived of the Cold War narrative, and thus an established decision rule for determining which events to cover and how to cover them, American journalists were nonetheless confronted with responsibility for explaining rapid democratization, the resurgence of virulent ethno-linguistic and ethno-religious nationalisms, unexpected popular resistance to market reforms, florescent organized crime, and high levels of industrial pollution. Clearly this field of potential political news was unlikely to yield chirpy and triumphal "end of communism" copy. Although conflict was still evident, it took new forms, and the task of differentiating the parties to the various conflicts was more difficult. At the same time, news coverage decisions may have assumed greater political influence in policy agenda setting.

Did news coverage of political events in Central and Eastern Europe lose its coherence during the transition from communist regimes? In other words, did news coverage cease to present events as part of a consistent narrative? Did news coverage regain its

coherence in the post-communist aftermath? Which narrative or narratives, if any, were dominant in the post- communist aftermath? The answers matter because any loss of narrative coherence would have increased the information costs of news consumers. Interpretation of political events by the attentive public for international news would have become more difficult. One likely consequence is that the attentive public would have assigned events in Central and Eastern Europe less significance and turned its attention to other international news.

News coverage not only imposes a narrative on international events but also locates them in cultural and geographic space. This designation of location may be crucial because it signals the proximity, and significance, of events to the news consumer. More proximate events are likely to be deemed more significant. Todorova (1997:141) identified a possible "relocation" of the former communist countries of the former Eastern Europe, with the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland joining "Central Europe," Albania, Bulgaria, Romania and the post-Yugoslav successor states becoming "Southeastern Europe" and the post-Soviet successor states becoming the new "Eastern Europe." Is such a "relocation," change in regional geographic assignment, evident in news coverage?

To answer these research questions, we employed a content analysis design to examine *The New York Times'* coverage of political events in Romania from 1985 to 1995. *The New York Times* is one of a handful of elite national newspapers; others include the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Christian Science Monitor*, the *Wall Street Journal* and the *Washington Post*, which are important because they are read by the attentive public for international news in the United States and because their news coverage decisions affect subsequent news coverage decisions by the editors of other national newspapers, regional newspapers, news magazines and electronic broadcasters (Hess 1996:4; McCombs, Einsiedel and Weaver 1991:47; Reese and Danielian 1991:247; Winter and Eyal 1991:103; Dunwoody 1981:354). Subsequent news coverage content is likely to echo not only the specific content, but also the general tone of the initial coverage. Thus, *The New York Times* and its sister elite national newspapers play a central role in determining whether any particular international political event will be deemed newsworthy for American news consumers. Arguably, the decisions about news coverage made by these newspapers matter because they affect American

public opinion. Although clearly not the only factor affecting public attention, interest and interpretation of international political events, news coverage decisions are nonetheless vitally important.

REPORTING ROMANIA

According to data reported in Hess (1996:129), Romania was one of twenty countries covered in more than one percent of the total number of international stories in *The New York Times*, *Chicago Tribune* and *Los Angeles Times* between 1989 and 1992. The other four Central and Eastern European countries in this list of twenty, Russia (Soviet Union), Poland, Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia, each received more coverage than Romania. Not surprisingly, Russia received the majority of this coverage. If this suggests that Romania received a roughly proportional share of this news coverage, there are good reasons to suspect that Romanian coverage might differ from that of the other four countries in important respects.

Covering the Romanian revolution would have been especially frustrating for any journalist intent on describing the collapse of an individual communist regime as part of a larger regional drama. Although the Romanian revolution was ignited by spectacular and spontaneous acts of nonviolent civil disobedience, events that resembled the protests that led to the destruction of the Berlin Wall and the Velvet Revolution in Prague, first in Timoşoara and later in Bucharest, it clearly departed from any possible larger pattern in several respects. First, although the numbers of deaths were initially exaggerated, it is clear that the overthrow of the Ceaucescu regime involved greater violence than did the overthrow of communist governments elsewhere in Central and Eastern Europe (Gallagher 1995:73; Carothers 1992:77-78; Fischer 1992:45; Ratech 1992:77-79). Second, the authors of the insurrection and the members of the provisional government, the National Salvation Front, included a number of anti-communist dissidents, but it was clearly dominated by leaders whose anti-communism was of much more recent vintage (Fischer 1996:189; Gallagher 1996:208-213; Brown 1994:101; Calinescu and Tismaneanu 1992:14-26; Rady 1992:122-131; Codrescu 1991:195-210). Finally, despite the grim record of human rights abuses and the increasingly desperate economic conditions of the population, explaining conditions under Ceaucescu as the behavior of a Soviet client state made little sense. Of all communist countries in Central or Eastern Europe, the United States and its

allies had the warmest relationships with Ceaucescu's regime after Tito's Yugoslavia. Ceaucescu permitted no Soviet military bases in Romania, refused to contribute Romanian army units to the 1968 Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia and maintained diplomatic relations with Israel, China and Albania (Lewis 1985:24). Moreover, Ceaucescu is reported to have permitted the sale of Romanian gasoline and meat to the U.S. Armed Forces in the Federal Republic of Germany (Kamm 1988).

That the Romanian revolution appeared primarily directed at the overthrow of a personal dictatorship and that the revolutionary seizure of state authority was violent and confusing would both have militated against reporting Romania as simply a chirpy or triumphal "end of communism" story. Journalists would have been tempted to continue reporting events in Romania as a conflict narrative because of several days of fighting between the revolutionaries—including civilian opponents of the regime and units of the Romanian army—and the units of the *Securitate* loyal to Nicolae Ceaucescu (Carothers 1992:78). However, the opportunities to report a range of stories from post-communist Romania, particularly ethno-national tensions in Transylvania and divisions within the National Salvation Front provisional government, emerged soon after the fighting. Plus, Romania would have presented American journalists with an unambiguous post-communist reporting problem.

NARRATIVE COHERENCE

Among the common observations about international coverage by the American press is that the Cold War, the protracted ideological and military conflict between the Soviet Union and the United States, served as its primary narrative. Arguably, four decades of reporting within that narrative ought to have atrophied the capacity to report events within other narratives. Heuvel (1993:13-31) argues that a crucial problem in covering events in Central and Eastern Europe is compounded because the United States government has failed to offer journalists a satisfying and simple replacement narrative to explain the post-Cold war international environment. O'Tuathail and Luke (1994:387-388) and Grunwald (1993:14) assert that journalists have fastened onto simpler themes of "tribalism" and "religion" as an explanatory narrative rather than adopting "enlargement," the Clinton Administration's policy strategy and implicit explanatory narrative. "Enlargement" emphasizes expanding the

community of market democracies, extending humanitarian assistance and deterring aggression by regional powers (Haass 1995:44). That journalists accustomed to reporting international events as battles in a larger Manichean struggle between nuclear-armed superpowers would find enlargement less compelling is not surprising. Unfortunately, "market democracy" is not a phrase likely to inspire great sacrifice or even substantial public attention. However laudable as real policy, it smacks of the prissy virtues of peacetime. In contrast, tribalism and religious fanaticism suggest the more newsworthy unleashing of irrational and murderous political passions.

The conflicts exposed with the end of the Cold War clearly made the world a more complicated and less familiar place for both American journalists and American foreign policy makers. A number of analysts attribute some of the difficulty faced by American foreign policy makers to American journalists. Maren (1997:203-215), Maynes (1996:36; 1993:4-6), Haass (1995:43-44) and Rieff (1995:7-8) assert that the U.S. foreign policy agenda has been largely determined by heavy news coverage of humanitarian crises. As a result, the end of the Cold War may have made news coverage decisions more influential in foreign policy making just at the point in time when journalists were least prepared to play that more responsible role (Maynes 1993:4-5).

One possible consequence is that political news coverage of events in Central and Eastern Europe simply lost and never regained its former narrative coherence. In this scenario, the struggle to select, describe and interpret news events in the absence of a dominant narrative would be recognizable not only in the increased range of news events covered, but also in the increased inferential and judgmental content of the coverage.

A second possibility is that political news coverage lost its narrative coherence only briefly. This would be evident in a brief increase in the range of news events covered and a brief increase in the inferential and judgmental content.

The third possibility, one ignored by most critics of the press, is that political news coverage never lost narrative coherence, as journalists quickly shifted to new narratives. This would be evident in little or no change in the range of news events covered and little or no change in the inferential and judgmental content. Evidence that the narrative transition was either comparatively brief or virtually instantaneous would support inferences that the American foreign

affairs press was both more flexible and less dependent on American foreign policy makers than generally has been assumed.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND HYPOTHESES

The primary research inquiry driving this investigation is whether a coherent narrative reemerged after the 1989 Romanian revolution. Specific empirical questions involve the change in the numbers and proportions of specific narratives in play at different points in time and change in the judgmental and inferential content of reporting at different points in time. Although the product of impressionistic analyses, the weight of the scholarly comment on American news coverage of post-communist Central and Eastern Europe suggests a prolonged, perhaps continuing, loss of narrative coherence. Yet this grim assessment that international news coverage was effectively disoriented by post-communism is likely to have underestimated the adaptability of the journalists. Post-communism may have engendered more disorientation among scholars than among journalists. Despite the feeble evidence supporting the scholarly consensus, some change in news coverage narratives was inevitable. If for no other reason, a somewhat large number of narratives may have emerged in an atmosphere of greater journalistic freedom. Reporters were free to pursue a wider range of stories. Thus, we articulate the following hypotheses:

> **The use of inferential and judgmental sentences increased during the revolution and later decreased to pre-revolution levels.**
>
> **A broader distribution of articles among narratives occurred after the revolution.**

The Cold War narrative required geopolitical description. News coverage located countries in geographic regions defined by the global conflict. But in the absence of the Cold War narrative, assigning any country a regional geographic location in news coverage probably became much less useful. Rather than a straightforward rendering of the former "Eastern Europe" designation into separate designations - "Central Europe," "Southeastern Europe" and a rump, "Eastern Europe" - news coverage was less likely to locate countries as part of any geographic region. Thus, we hypothesize that:

> **Romania was assigned a regional geographic location less often after the revolution.**

DESIGN, DATA AND MEASUREMENT

A content analysis design was adopted to test our hypotheses. Content analysis involves the systematic collection of empirical data from textual material. In this case, newspaper articles served as the unit of analysis. The data were collected from every news article referring to Romanian politics published in *The New York Times* from 1985 to 1997. Editorials were not included in the analysis because of their inherent judgmental nature. Among other excluded articles were letters to the editor and articles with no discernible political relevance, such as those about Nadia Comaneci after her flight to the United States. As the year in which the Romanian revolution began, 1989 was selected as the appropriate midpoint in the resulting time series.

Our initial examination of the articles did not detect a single Cold War narrative, but, instead, suggested several, more specific narratives. These included human rights, the revolution, the post-revolutionary situation and the economy. In each case, narrative was coded by reading each newspaper article to determine its primary or dominant narrative. Although secondary narratives were evident in a minority of the articles, a primary narrative was clearly discernible in each case.

In their content analysis of the portrayal of the 1986-1987 Iran-gate scandal in government and print media, Brown and Vincent (1995:71) coded sentences as reports, inferences, or judgments. Reports presented verifiable statements of fact. Inferences included educated guesses, conjectures and speculation based on fact. Judgments were positive and negative evaluations. We adopted a similar coding method. Examination of the articles in our study revealed that straightforward inferences and judgments were comparatively rare, but that judgments and inferences were more commonly used when quoting named and unnamed sources. Reporters thus routinely used indirect quoted inferences and judgments to avoid making direct inferences or judgments. In response, we coded the proportion of each article's content comprised of five kinds of sentences: factual statements, inferences, inferences in quotes, judgments and judgments in quotes.

To code regional geographic assignment, we recorded all of the references to region in each of the 457 articles in the study. Five regions were identified. The most frequent assignment was simply to "Eastern Europe" while the next most frequent was to a composite

reference includes the Warsaw Bloc, the Soviet Bloc, the Communist Bloc, the Soviet Camp or the Communist Camp. Articles coded as using the composite regional reference tended to present several different versions of the Bloc or the Camp reference. Remaining articles were coded as regional assignments to "Europe," "Central Europe" or "the Balkans."

ANALYSIS

Table 1 reports the total numbers of articles in our study and the mean numbers of sentences in each of the five categories of sentences.

TABLE 1: MEAN NUMBER OF SENTENCES

	Time Period		
	Pre-Revolution	Revolution	Post-Revolution
Total Articles	84	78	295
Mean Sentences	19.83	25.60	24.93
Mean Factual Sentences	19.14	22.85	23.95
Mean Inferences	0.50	0.97	0.38
Mean Inferences in Quotes	0.01	0.67	0.49
Mean Judgment	0.07	0.13	0.11
Mean Judgments in Quotes	0.11	0.64	0.29

N = 457

Examination of the data reported in the first row of Table 1 reveals an expected increase in media interest in Romanian political events during the revolution. The number of articles for that period is almost equal to the number of articles of the previous four years. Along with this increased interest is a marked increase in the average number of total sentences per article. The greater length of the articles clearly continues in news coverage after the revolution. The number of stories on Romania increases, with approximately three times as many articles after the revolution as before the revolution.

The data represented in Table 1 tend to confirm our first hypothesis that the use of inferential and judgmental statements increased during the revolution and then decreased to pre-revolution levels. Comparing change in the mean numbers of sentences, the data show that factual sentences comprised the overwhelming proportion of sentences in each time period and that the mean numbers of sentences in all five categories increased markedly during the revolution. What is significant is that this increase in the mean numbers of inferences, inferences in quotes, judgments and judgments in quotes was more striking than the increase in the mean numbers of factual sentences. Reporters clearly relied more on the use of inference or judgment to report the Romanian revolution. It is also apparent that reporters later reverted to a mix of factual, inferential and judgmental sentences more like those sentences used before the revolution. What is different about the post-revolution period is the greater reliance on inferences in quotes and judgments in quotes. Reporters either felt a greater need to place inferences and judgments in the mouths of interview subjects-perhaps because of the complexity of post-revolution Romanian politics-or they simply encountered more willing interview subjects. In either case, the heavier use of quotes meant that reporters now put greater distance between themselves and the conclusion reached via inference and judgment.

Our second hypothesis is that a broader distribution of articles among narratives occurred after the revolution. Table 2 displays the percentages of articles falling within the narrative categories in the three time periods.

TABLE 2: NARRATIVES BY PERCENTAGE OF ARTICLES

	Time Period		
	Pre-Revolution	Revolution	Post-Revolution
Revolution	0.0	69.23	1.35
Post-Revolution	0.0	16.67	23.73
Government	21.43	2.56	38.64
Human Rights	40.48	0.0	7.46
Economy	16.67	0.0	11.53
Other	20.24	11.54	17.29

N=457

The bulk of articles fall into three narratives prior to the revolution, into two narratives during the revolution and into four narratives after the revolution period. As would be anticipated, rival narratives were eclipsed by the "revolution" narrative during the revolution. Journalists find conflict on such a scale irresistible. Human rights and economy, which were among the principal narratives before the revolution, entirely disappeared as narratives during the revolution. Although articles written within these two narratives reappeared after the revolution, neither received the same proportion of news coverage as they had prior to the revolution. The relatively meager coverage of the "economy" after the revolution may reflect the slow pace of economic reform under President Iliescu.

After the revolution, the "post-revolutionary situation" and "government" emerge as the two principal narratives. Articles written within the post-revolutionary narrative include those stories that could become news only because of the change in regime, a plurality of those stories involved environmental issues. That so much was written within the government narrative makes perfect sense. After decades of authoritarian government, democratization is high drama and thus inherently newsworthy.

Our third hypothesis was that Romania was assigned a regional geographic location less after the revolution. Table 3 reports the total numbers of regional assignments and the percentages of articles featuring regional assignments. The data shown in the second column supports our third hypothesis.

TABLE 3: REGIONAL ASSIGNMENTS

	Time Period		
	Pre-Revolution	Revolution	Post-Revolution
Regional Assignments	49 (58%)*	35 (45%)	76 (27%)
Eastern Europe	22 (45%)**	25 (71%)	53 (69%)
Bloc/Camp	22 (45%)	8 (23%)	8 (11%)
Europe	2 (4%)	1 (3%)	8 (11%)
Central Europe	1 (2%)	1 (3%)	3 (4%)
Balkans	2 (4%)	0 (0%)	4 (7%)

* percentage of total articles, N = 457
** percentage of regional assignments, N = 160

The percentages of regional assignments fall from 58% before the revolution to 45% during the revolution and to 27% after the revolution. Several interpretations of this finding are possible. The decrease may mean that journalists no longer believe that locating Romania in a region is an important element in reporting Romanian politics. It may also mean that journalists believe the larger number of articles after the revolution effectively locate Romania and obviate the necessity for further repetition. Finally, it may mean that journalists are uncertain of the appropriate regional assignment.

Examination of the specific regional assignments in Table 3 also reveals a concentration of regional assignments to "Eastern Europe" during and after the revolution. As expected, assignments to "Bloc/Camp" decrease in the same period. This finding would tend to support the explanation that regional assignment is less important in reporting Romanian politics.

CONCLUSION

This content analysis investigated the work of American journalists challenged to report political events in Romania after being deprived of what was assumed to be a familiar Cold War news narrative. The empirical findings reported here demonstrate that they were much more adaptable than one would have thought from reading the scholarly commentary on post-Cold War American journalism. While larger proportions of inferential and judgmental sentences compared with factual sentences were used during the revolution than before, their use decreased to pre-revolution levels after the revolution. This greater reliance on inference and judgment was simply a temporary phenomenon, a product of necessity. The only lasting change in the structure of news coverage appears to have been a shift from direct inference and judgment to quoted inference and judgment. While the number of important narratives increased slightly after the revolution, perhaps in response to opportunities to report a greater variety of stories, interpreting this as narrative incoherence would be unwarranted. Taken together, these findings suggest that deep pessimism about post-Cold War American news coverage may overstate its failings.

With respect to the question of change in the geographic regional assignment of Romania, our findings indicate that assignment is less frequent after the revolution and that "Eastern Europe" has emerged as the dominant assignment. This represents less a

"relocation" than a "dislocation" in geopolitical space. As a consequence, political events in Romania are now less likely to be described by references to their geopolitical implications and more likely to be explained in terms of their domestic causes and implications. Foreign policy scholars may have been distressed by the loss of the familiar Cold War map, but dislocation perhaps rendered political events in Romania more understandable to the American attentive public for foreign affairs.

The coverage of the 1996 election revealed a degree of pessimism on the part of the reporters. Though obviously enthusiastic about the prospect of a new government in Romania with unambiguously democratic credentials, the coverage of the new Constantinescu government was still pessimistic in tone. This is evident in an article printed immediately after Constantinescu was elected. Referring to the planned economic reforms that Constantinescu has proposed, the reporter wrote that "...Constantinescu has made an array of promises that will be almost impossible to keep..." The implication is that even though Constantinescu portrays himself as a reformer, once in office many of the promises of the campaign will have to be abandoned.

More recently, coverage of the new government has taken on a more positive tone. As the new government has worked to implement reforms, fulfilling some of its campaign promises, the focus of coverage has moved to government initiatives and the tone has been generally positive even when the initiatives fail. This is particularly apparent in the coverage immediately before and after Romania was denied membership to NATO. The shift to a more positive tone is shown in an article printed ten months after the election of Constantinescu. The article reports the postponement of an arms deal by Romania and the United States because of the response by the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Prime Minister Victor Ciorbea is quoted as saying that because of "...limited resources... priority had to go the severely depleted health and education systems." Rather than simply report that Romania postponed the purchase to please the IMF, the article explains that Romanian authorities see the need to reform social service provisions before embarking on a large arms deal. For the immediate future, coverage of Romania should remain positive in tone.

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