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7 CLICK HERE! To Find More About Organ Transplantation: Ethical Aspects of Media Stories on Organ Donation from Romanian Newspapers

7.1 Introduction

Discussion concerning organ donation and transplantation is always a conversation of generosity because the topic encompasses the idea of a gift (Frunză et al. 2010). Gifts situate us in a place of the opening toward each other, offering us the opportunity for profound reflection about what we are, the meaning of our lives, and the resources available to save and improve the lives of others.

As such, careful discourse about donation and transplantation is a necessary part of overcoming the ethical dilemmas surrounding organ donation decisions. This debate is needed regardless of whether we speak about the donors or their families who are tasked with making decisions on their behalf. The discussion also involves those who perform the medical procedures, examining everything from their professional responsibilities to the ethics of their social responsibilities (Frunză 2011).

Organ transplantation is a life-saving procedure whose full potential, unlike other medical procedures, depends on the public's willingness (which encompasses the willingness of donors and of their next-of-kin) to provide organs for patients in need. Therefore, the "social acceptability" of medical strategies that result in public acceptance is crucial in the establishment of an effective national transplant system, as are the proper medical infrastructure and qualified medical professionals (Rodríguez-Arias 2013). Traditional and nontraditional media play a central role in mobilizing the public because organ donation is not a frequent topic of conversation in Romania¹.

Although organs may be donated by either living or deceased donors, the focus of this article will be on deceased donation; due to the transplant risks for living donors, the communication strategies that might be used to mobilize them are very different. However, while we do not want to minimize the contributions of living donors, it is a separate topic that must be addressed with a different set of research tools.

¹ Some studies suggest that even if organ donation would be present more often in daily conversations, affirming one's opinions on donation does not guarantee that they will be implemented by one's family, in the event of a sudden death (Holman et al. 2013).

Mass media campaigns can promote positive changes or prevent negative changes in health-related behaviors (Wakefield et al. 2010). Public communication campaigns that aim to encourage organ donations by deceased persons are carried out all over Europe. These campaigns aim to inform the general public about the benefits of organ donation and how future donors can register, depending on the type of consent² required in the national context. Even if the long-term impact of organ donation campaigns is difficult to accurately estimate, their relevance in terms of promulgated information has been well-documented across Europe as well as globally (Krekula et al. 2009; Feely and Moon 2009; Morgan and Harrison 2010).

Until these campaigns are effectively organized in Romania, the general public will use traditional media as the primary source of information on organ transplantation (Karner-Huțuleac 2012; Ioan et al. 2011). Therefore, media depiction of transplantation is one of the factors that shapes peoples' attitudes and behaviors (Ioan et al. 2011; Holman et al. 2013). For instance, the media may perpetuate the existing urban myths and stereotypes on transplantation, or it may act to better inform the public about organ donation in general and the importance of increasing the overall donation rates.

Traditional media, particularly paper-based media (newspapers and periodical magazines), has been shaken by significant crises in recent years. These scandals affect the perceived legitimacy, circulation, number of copies sold, and public impact. For the surviving periodicals, these events pushed them toward tabloidization, commercialization, and the ever-increasing emphasis on “infotainment”. Nevertheless, paper-based media remains an important outlet for the dissemination of mass-scale useful information, such as knowledge concerning the national transplant system and organ donation.

The aim of our paper is to offer the readers insight into the way organ donation and transplantation have been depicted in the Romanian media. Thus, our paper draws on previous research that the members of our team have performed on the subject matter: namely, the analysis of the depictions of transplantation within Romanian media over the past decade, which is presented in the section “Sensational stories on organ donation in the Romanian paper-based media (2008–2012)” (Frunză et al. 2011; Holman et al. 2012). In addition, we have performed a new analysis for the year 2015 (January–December), which is detailed in the section ““Look, mom, now I've got hands!”. Unlikely Stories of Transplantation from the Recent Romanian Periodicals”.

² Generally speaking, there are three types of default solutions that are used worldwide when registering consent to organ donation: explicit consent (when the default position is the nondonation and the would-be donors must actively register their donation intention while alive), presumed consent (when the default position is the donation and the people who do not wish to donate may register their refusal while alive), and mandated choice (when everybody is actively asked whether they wish to donate or not and their decision is registered) (Van Dalen and Henkens 2014).

In order to give the reader some positive, if limited, examples of what can be done at a small scale to correct the pessimistic image of transplants in the media, the section “From Mutual Ignorance to Mutual Partnerships: Students’ Campaigns Promoting Organ Donation” presents examples of student-inspired campaigns to promote organ donation in Romania.

7.2 Sensational stories on organ donation in the Romanian paper-based media (2008–2012)

The year 2008 serves as a landmark in our analysis because in this year, there was an attempt to change the Romanian legislation on transplantation and to introduce presumed consent. This sharply diverges from the existing legislation that requires explicit informed consent by a member of the donor’s family (Frunză et al. 2011). It is for this reason that we decided to monitor the articles published during 2008 (January–December) in two influential Romanian newspapers – *Adevărul* (www.adevarul.ro) and *Cotidianul* (www.cotidianul.ro). *Cotidianul* was selected because, apart from its wide circulation, it is the only periodical openly in favor of presumed consent (despite the public opinion leaning toward conserving the status quo).

Experts worldwide compared the relative efficacy of the two types of consent systems – explicit and presumed – and their results are subject to ongoing debates. Legislation promoting presumed consent has been singled out as a significant factor that increases the donation rate (Mossialos et al. 2008; Abadie and Gay 2006; Gimbel et al. 2003). In addition, presumed consent has been proved to improve the attitude toward donation in the case of undecided respondents (respondents who do not have a definite opinion concerning organ donation) (Van Dalen and Henkens 2014). Nevertheless, one of the most thorough meta-analysis on this comparison (Rithalia 2009) concluded that, despite the reportedly increased donation rates following the introduction of presumed consent, the type of consent is unlikely to be the only factor responsible for the high donation rates seen in certain countries.

However, even if presumed consent is not a magical recipe for increasing donation rates, the case study of Romania shows that it generated the first consistent public debate on transplant matters, with a notable argumentative and ethical component. In the premier study carried out in Romania, the authors studied the articles and the readers’ comments from two national newspapers, *Adevărul* and *Cotidianul*, during the year 2008 (Frunză et al. 2011). In this respect, the two periodicals echoed the fate of the proposed bill in the Parliament (where the bill was finally rejected). From an ethical perspective, the authors note that there was a significant difference in argumentation between the two sides: those favoring the adoption of presumed consent provided either utilitarian or evidence-based views, whereas those favoring the status quo were highly emotional or hypothetical. Romania’s ad hoc “rhetorical battle” was settled in favor of those opposing presumed consent.

Another study done in the Romanian context studied articles and user-generated comments from eight periodicals: three quality newspapers (*Adevărul*, *Gândul*, and *Evenimentul Zilei*), three tabloid newspapers, and two regional newspapers (*Monitorul de Cluj* and *Bună Ziua Iași*), followed during 2010 (January–December) (Holman et al. 2012; Holman et al. 2013). The analysis had an important quantitative dimension made possible through discursive analysis. There were plenty of ethical topics presented in the 309 articles published on transplant/organ donation in 2010. However, the apparent opening in articles with seemingly positive messages was rhetorically undermined by various factors, most significantly, the avoidance/underrepresentation of important issues such as consent or small donation rates.

7.3 “Look, mom, now I’ve got hands!” Unlikely stories of transplantation from recent Romanian periodicals

We have picked up for analysis articles and user-generated comments from one quality newspaper (*Adevărul*) and one tabloid newspaper (*Click!*) for the period spanning 2015, in order to provide comparable results with previous research (of 2008 and 2010). In the interest of consistency, we again selected *Adevărul* and, due to its high circulation, the tabloid *Click!* (also previously covered in the 2010 analysis). Our main focus remained on the public attitudes toward transplantation with special emphasis on the issue of consent for donation. We wanted to add a dimension that previous research had not accurately captured and that we deemed important in modern “videocratic” society, so we also explored the visual elements (both photos and videos included in the online edition of the newspapers) that accompanied the articles. A keyword search including relevant terms (organ transplantation, organ donation, and consent for donation) was performed in the archived data of the two newspapers (by author MF). Articles had to mention the medical procedure of transplantation in order to be selected³. Two researchers (authors MF and IG) read the content of each article and reached a consensus concerning their relevance for the research.

Table 1 summarizes the number of articles in our previous study and current research. Overall, if we look at the average number of articles mentioning transplantation that were published in a month, we can see that their number increases in time, which reflects a gradual increase in the interest of both the editors and the readership.

³ The initial search resulted in 167 articles, out of which ten were removed due to the lack of relevance for the topic.

Table 1. Total number and percentage of articles on organ donation in the selected periodicals (2008–2015)

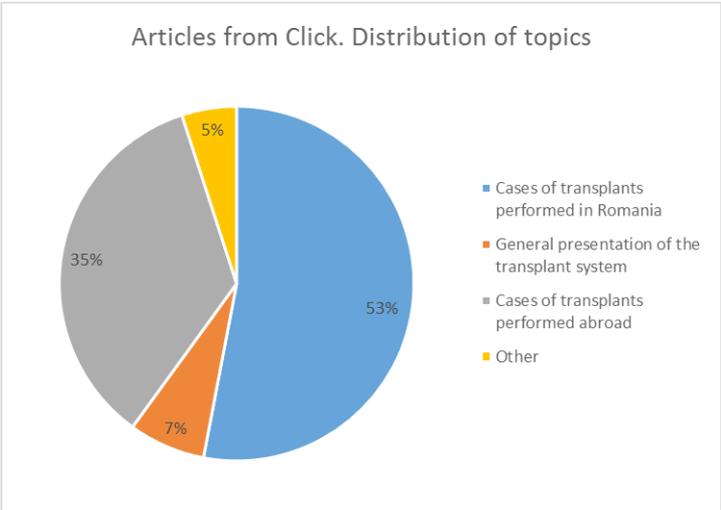
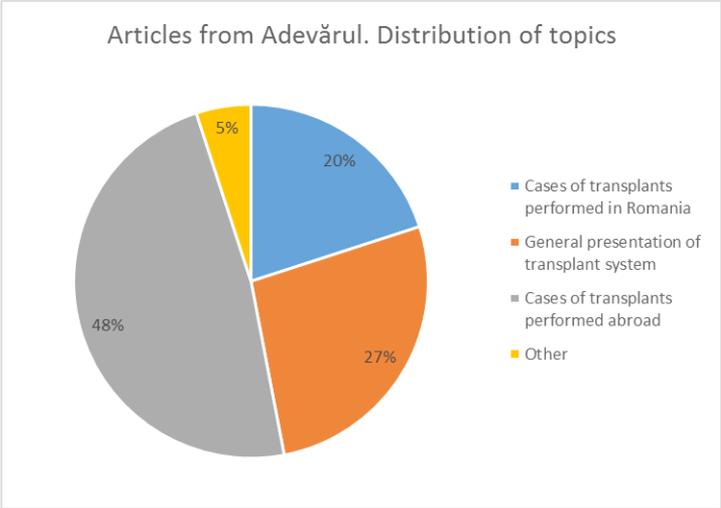
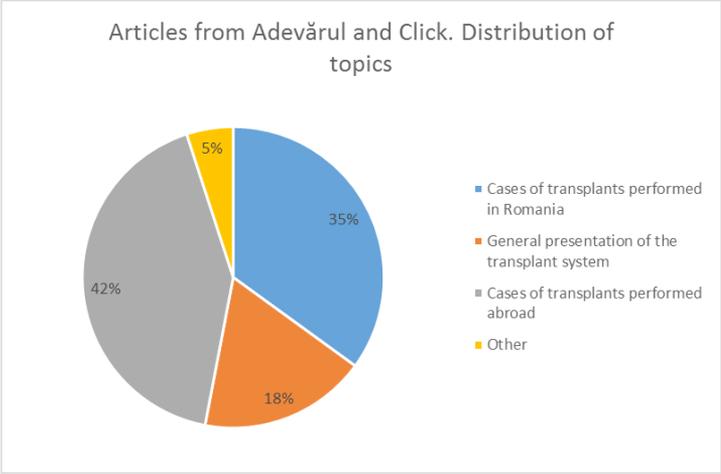
Current number	Year	Periodical name	Total number of articles on organ donation	Percentage (number of articles in one publication/month)
1	2008*	<i>Adevărul</i>	67	5.58
2	2008*	<i>Cotidianul</i>	43	3.58
3	2010**	Quality press (3 titles, including <i>Adevărul</i>)	124	3.44
4	2010**	Tabloid press (3 titles, including <i>Click!</i>)	139	3.86
5	2015 ***	<i>Adevărul</i>	85	7.08
6	2015 ***	<i>Click!</i>	72	6.00

* Data for 2008 is retrieved from Frunzã et al. 2009; ** Data for 2010 is retrieved from Holman et al. 2012. *** Data from 2015 has not been published before.

In our analysis of the articles from 2015, we have followed a qualitative rather than a quantitative perspective; thus, we were guided by what Moshe Idel labels “an eclectic methodology”. When he performs the analysis of religious phenomena, he follows the “major concerns that define the specificity of particular styles” (Idel 2007). Similarly, we were interested in discursive patterns and strategies that emerged both from a diachronic reading of the articles and from a synchronic reading of the whole textual corpus.

When discussing the main topics covered by the two newspapers, the articles from both *Adevărul* and *Click!* display a variety of transplanted organs and tissues (head, hands, heart, kidney, liver, pancreas, small bowel, lungs, penis, hair, skin, cornea, ovary, and bone marrow), although only a minority of transplant procedures are described as being actually performed in the Romanian context (kidney, liver, heart, skin, cornea, or bone marrow).

There were three major categories of articles in both newspapers that emerged after the analysis: 1) articles depicting cases of transplants performed/planned to be performed in Romanian transplant centers (35% of all articles); 2) articles describing/diagnosing the general situation of transplantation in Romania, without focusing on a particular case (18% of all articles); and 3) articles depicting cases of transplants performed/planned to be performed abroad (42% of all articles). A small percentage of articles (5%) had topics that did not fit into the three categories and were too unrelated to fit into a new one. Within the first category, a subcategory found massively in *Click!* consisted of articles depicting a Romanian celebrity who either had undergone a transplant procedure a while ago (in Romania) or has been waiting for a transplant during the time frame of the article (40% of all articles from *Click!*).



The articles from the first category (transplants performed/expected in Romania) generally display a duality of perspectives: that of the happy recipient who has been given a new life chance, and that of the donor for whom nothing could be done from a medical perspective. When doctors are being cited in these articles, they speak about complications, problems, and financial limitations. When recipients or donor relatives are cited, they express a variety of emotions (happiness, grief, and concerns) (Bochiş 2015; Ion 2015). The subcategory “celebrity articles” from *Click!* usually revolves around a celebrity who is displayed in vivid and detailed pictures, replete with sensational details about former lovers, scandals, and personal (mis)fortune. The issue of transplantation is mentioned somewhere as accessory, even if it represents the main element why the said celebrity appears in the newspaper. Moreover, 14% of articles from *Click!* describe the case of a celebrity (whose daughter also works in the showbiz field), who tragically died of kidney failure (transplant was scheduled but the procedure could not be performed because of medical complications); however, the main issue covered in the article was the disputed mother–daughter relation with all the fights, insults, and obscenities exchanged between them during the mother’s lifetime⁴.

The second category of articles displays various presentations of the overall situation of the transplant system in Romania (citing statistics, comparing the relative performance of local centers). Regional discrepancies are particularly commented upon: thus, “Oradea occupies the first place among centres, after Bucharest” (Bonchiş 2015), or “Bucharest has been overpassed, now the donors from Ardeal are more numerous than in the capital city” (Spiridon 2015), or “Half of the kidneys from Moldova ‘fly’ to the capital city” (Ciuhu 2015). We find that there are many centers with little-to-no transplant activity: only one donation performed in an entire year in Sălaj (Pop 2015) or in Vâlcea (Rîpan 2015). In addition, there are announcements for inauguration of new centers or programs, which are not yet functional: the most notable example is the new transplant center in Braşov, which is announced as “almost” functional over the entire year 2015; various financial problems prevent its opening (six articles in *Adevărul*: Suci 2015a, 2015b, 2015c; Dan 2015a, 2015b, 2015c). Other examples are the center for pediatric heart transplant in Bucharest, to be opened some time during 2015; or the national program for lung transplantation, which is still in preparation, although there are patients in need. This category of articles is underrepresented in *Click!* (only 7% of articles).

The third category of articles describes transplants performed or planned abroad. One subgroup depicts world premieres (penis transplant, hand transplant, ovary transplant, head transplant, and so on) (Ştefan 2015a, 2015b; Băltăreţu 2015). The other subgroup covers cases of Romanian patients who are either

⁴ Among these articles, one can see, for instance, those by Albert 2015; Văcaru 2015; Pavel 2015.

unable to find their treatment in their own country or are actively seeking to find a transplant procedure abroad (for which they attempt to raise funds). Here, one encounters cases of desperate people who are depicted as being left at the mercy of their fellows: parents attempting to raise money for their children; students raising money for their colleagues; patients contemplating risky and controversial procedures abroad. As most of these cases are merely indicated and not followed afterward, readers may wonder whether people’s pain and suffering are adequately depicted in these articles.

Another finding is that the image depicted in the media is profoundly disconnected with the pressing issues of organ donation. If one asks the professionals about the most pressing problems that the transplant system is facing, one will usually find out about the great discrepancy between the number of available organs and the long waiting list; the lack of education of the general public on matters of organ donation; and the relevance of the consent type for increasing donation rates (Frunză and Gavriliuță 2012). However, when reading the newspapers, among the most pressing issues in transplant for the Romanian society seem to be head transplant (not less than 8% of articles from both *Adevărul* and *Click!*) (Ștefan 2015a; Băltărețu 2015) or (perhaps surprisingly) penis transplantation (Ștefan 2015b, 2015c). These very unlikely (at least for Romania) types of transplant are discussed in great detail with lots of visual elements, in both the tabloid periodical and the quality one.

Unsurprisingly, there are numerous ethical issues that might be discussed in relation to these articles, when we approach the texts from an ethical standpoint. One worrying finding is that we found numerous cases of incomplete articles that provide misleading, if not outright false, information. Unfortunately, we are not referring to inexperienced media outlets and dubious websites, but of two well-known and widely read publications with large editorial teams and staff teams with licensed journalists. One telling example was an article on penis transplantation entitled: “Good news: penis transplantation in Romania.” Closer reading of the body of the article revealed that this type of transplant is not yet performed in Romania and remains a distant possibility in the future (Ștefan 2015b).

We can accept that these articles can raise awareness of the general audience about the delicate and complex aspects of human existence that organ donation entails. We can also safely assume from the comments that at least some readers come across the transplant articles only because of its presentation as a taboo story for the public debate and the novel approach that goes beyond the journalist ethical code. But apart from this possible positive effect of increasing topic awareness, we believe the incorrect depiction of such a delicate and controversial issue will only hurt efforts to inform the audience and shape their donation behaviors. It is difficult to assume that a tabloid depiction of a sensitive issue can lead to a valuable input at the level of moral decision-making.

Ethical requirements for public communication (Frunză and Frunză 2011) should be reinforced when dealing with “vulnerable populations”, a category that traditionally encloses children, incapacitated individuals, and patients in general, due to their level of dependence on the medical system (Frunză et al. 2016; Grad 2015; Sandu and Caras 2013; Loue 2000). Furthermore, we need to pay attention to deontological aspects when influencing and commercializing people’s suffering and pain. This is especially appalling when the subjects of the suffering are small children. As such, one of the cases of hand transplantation is illustrated with the picture of a youngster and his mother, displaying the moving headline: “Look, mom, I’ve got hands! First transplant to the youngest patient” (Damian 2015).

One can further note the unnecessary repetition of subjects and topics, even if the public interest is minimal. The same stories are rerun many times, even though the level of public involvement (assessed by comments, social media interaction) is essentially non-existent. For instance, the head transplant announced as novelty for 2017 and projected to be performed by Dr. Canavero on a wealthy Russian patient has been extensively covered (including videos), even though the event was only a distant possibility during the time frame of 2015 (Ștefan 2015; Băltărețu 2015).

Sadly, there are still some cases of plagiarized articles (pieces copy/pasted from science magazines). The practice of plagiarism and this omission of sources in the media, apart from the practice of copy/paste, are ethically significant in the Romanian cultural context, wherein accusations of plagiarism are endemic in the media debate, especially in association with the scientific papers of widely known public actors (Șercan 2017). Certainly, this issue is of utmost importance due to the growing ethical responsibilities that the journalism profession implies (Frunză and Frunză 2011).

Concerning the topic of deceased donation, one can note that a small number of articles reveal the identities of donors by including pictures and recognizable personal details, even if the law requires maintaining their anonymity. (Ion 2015; Rotaru 2015; Bonchiș 2015; Both 2015). Even more seriously, there is the issue of disputable usage of minors’ photos (whose pictures would have to be blurred or made unrecognizable) (Rotaru 2015).

All these ethical problems are endemic not only for transplant stories, but in general for the wider Romanian media. However, if tabloidization is a symptom, the consequences of a bad story, or a poorly told story, can be extremely harmful for the medical field in general and for the transplant field in particular, where the issue of trust plays such an important role (Frunză et al. 2012). When we analyze the content of the two newspapers, the marks of tabloidization are apparent, both in the tabloid paper and in the quality one: articles with deceiving headlines, with unreliable content, with redundant repetition of the same topics, and articles breaking the deontological code of journalists. The proportion of deceiving articles is higher in *Click!* (75%) than in *Adevărul* (25%), but the trend of tabloidization is present in both newspapers.

7.4 From mutual ignorance to mutual partnerships: students' campaigns promoting organ donation

In this part, we want to change the tone and evaluate some successful (even if limited) public communication campaigns enacted by students. We do not want to imply that students' contributions are enough or that they compensate for the lack of a planned public campaign. However, we do wish to emphasize that peer-to-peer promotion campaigns in favor of organ donation, such as these, represent a successful trend in the field of communication campaigns on this topic.

Researchers investigating this topic emphasize the enthusiasm and professionalism brought by the so-called “digital natives” when performing campaigns, their good knowledge of the habits of their peers, and the efficiency of combining education, information, and entertainment.

We provide the example of two student campaigns promoting organ donation, based in Cluj and analyzed in detail elsewhere (Frunză and Guga 2017). Both campaigns were developed by students from the Faculty of Political, Administrative, and Communication Science at Babeş-Bolyai University as a course-based request (this did require the format of a promotion campaign but did not impose the content of the campaign, i.e., students freely chose donation campaigns).

The two campaigns performed by students managed to combine a variety of activities; for instance:

- mobilize local celebrities (football players) to endorse the campaign;
- organize formal educational events (workshops) with experts;
- organize nonformal educational events (a treasure hunt with clues);
- mobilize online communities (via Facebook pages, Facebook events, personal Facebook accounts).

Both campaigns managed to attract the attention of traditional media, and their messages were disseminated in the local press. In both articles, the content was positive and reflected the message of the campaign.

The potential weaknesses from an ethical perspective concern the accuracy of the message. Additionally, these campaigns depend on the enthusiasm of their initiators, which cannot be prescribed. If we take into account the other student peer-to-peer campaigns from the UK and the US, we can affirm that these campaigns manage to construct partnerships with the media and, thus, improve the way audiences are informed on these topics.

7.5 Conclusions

The encouragement of a positive public attitude toward organ transplantation and cultivation of public support for this medical procedure is essential for a functional

transplant system. Media have the capacity to influence the public attitudes to health-related behaviors. In Romania, in the absence of a coherent public campaign on organ donation, media remains the major source of information on organ transplantation.

Referring to previous Romanian studies on the topic published, this article underlines the growing interest manifested in Romanian media for the topic of organ transplantation, as suggested by the increasing number of articles on the subject. However, the analysis of the content of the articles shows that what the Romanian media presents to the public is many times (75% in *Click!*, 25% in *Adevărul*) a “tabloid” picture of the organ transplantation process, characterized by quasi-relevance of the content to the topic of organ transplantation, neglecting of the actual pressing issues related to organ transplantation, and ethically flagrant practices that have a negative impact on the field of transplantation as it is perceived by the Romanian readership. Yet, by analyzing the phenomenon of peer-to-peer campaigns promoting organ donation, the article draws attention to the resources offered by both traditional and new media to promote organ transplantation.⁵

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