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Using attribution theory to identify how media and the public frame the case of a Romanian religious leader

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In June 2017 the Romanian press talked about an Orthodox bishop, Corneliu Onila, who had been blackmailed by three priests with a video showing him in a homosexual relation with a 17-year –old student, now a priest. A month later, the Romanian Patriarchy confirmed the bishop as the person in the video. Even though the bishop insisted that someone else was in that video, after public pressure, he gave up his position in the Orthodox Church and became a simple monk. The purpose of this paper is to use attribution theory to examine press coverage in Romania in the case of a religious leader. The paper aims at answering two research questions: 1- what are the frames used by a) journalists and b) the public when covering or discussing issues and events involving religious leaders and 2 – a) is there a correlation between the frames used by journalists and the public? – and b) how do they reflect the stereotypes on religious leaders? In order to analyze the array of factors involved, this paper employs Attribution Theory and qualitative content analysis on two online newspapers.

Introduction

In June 2017 Romania has experienced its first news coverage about pedophile religious leaders. The Orthodox bishop Corneliu Onila, had been blackmailed by three priests with a video showing him in a homosexual relation with another priest. A month later, the Romanian Patriarchy confirmed the bishop as the person in the video. After an investigation, the Mitropolis of Moldavia and Bucovina demanded that the priest be suspended from worship service. In August 2017, Corneliu Onila gave up his function in the Church while still declaring himself innocent.

The purpose of this paper is to use attribution theory and content analysis to examine press coverage in Romania dealing with Corneliu Onila’s case. The paper aims at answering two research questions: 1- what are the frames used by a) journalists and b) the public when covering or discussing issues and events involving religious leaders and 2 – a) is there a correlation between the frames used by journalists and the public? – and b) how do

they reflect the stereotypes on religious leaders? To this aim, we have selected articles and their subsequent user comments from two major Romanian online newspapers during June, July and August 2017. The research focuses on the attributions of cause and responsibility and, thereby, the practices of media-brokered selection and interpretation of events. The methodology used is a qualitative content analysis of selected Romanian online media. Media reporting and user comments are analyzed using attribution theory approaches from the field of psychology. When applied to media coverage, we can identify the frames that emerge from the perceived responsibility of the media and the public.

Theoretical background

To analyze the factors involved, the present paper employs an approach borrowed from the domain of motivational psychology – Attribution Theory. This theory has been broadly used to explain attribution of responsibility in risk, crisis situations or social issues (Rickard, 2014; Coombs & Holladay, 1996; Klein, Apple & Kahn, 2011; Niederdeppe, Shapiro & Porticella, 2011). People do what they can to predict and control their environments, and control and prediction are achieved by understanding the causes of one's behavior. Observed behaviors are attributed to a person, in the case of internal or dispositional attributions, or the environment, in which case we can talk about external or situational attributions. The manner of response to observed behaviors is closely connected to whether dispositional or situational attributions are selected. According to Kelley, observers make attributions about how someone responds to a situation, depending on three factors: consensus, consistency and distinctiveness. Attributional patterns are determined by combining these factors, which leads to situational, dispositional or circumstance attributions (Klein, Apple & Kahn, 2011:93). Consensus refers to the way in which others experience the stimulus, compared to the actor. If other people experience the stimulus in the same way as the actor, there is high consensus. Otherwise, it constitutes low consensus. Consistency refers to the actor's response to the stimulus over time. If the actor repeats the reaction to the stimulus, it indicates high consistency, while low consistency indicates that the actor usually has a different reaction to the stimulus. Finally, distinctiveness shows whether the actor reacts along with the stimulus and not without it. If the actor responds differently, it indicates high distinctiveness and if he reacts the same way to other stimuli alike, it indicates low distinctiveness.

The situational cause is determined by high consensus, high consistency and high distinctiveness, which means that observers would consider the situation responsible for the outcome. The dispositional cause, determined by low consensus, high consistency and low distinctiveness focuses on the actor's characteristics, which means that observers will blame him for the outcome. Finally, low consensus, low consistency and high distinctiveness

puts the focus on the specific circumstances of the outcome, which leads observers to attribute blame to the circumstance and not the actor.

Weiner's attribution model (2010:368) identifies two dimensions that describe causes for success and failure. The first, locus of causality, defines the origin of the cause as internal or external. This is related to Kelley's dispositional versus situational model. Furthermore, Weiner adds the stability dimension. According to this dimension, causes can be considered stable or unstable depending on their recurrence.

For the purpose of this study, we have chosen to employ Kelley's framework, since his studies deal with how people attribute causes to the behavior of other people. On the other hand, Weiner studies how people attribute causes to their own behavior (Martinko & Thomson, 1998). Another difference is that Kelley's model focuses on the psychological process of assigning causes, while Weiner's model aims at defining the consequences of causal attribution.

Priests and scandals

Over time, perceptions about religious leaders have been tied to social-political and moral platforms as they have started to express their opinion about right-to-life/pro-choice agendas or gay marriage.

There are many factors that influence perceptions about religious leaders: professional behaviors and skills of the religious leaders, their observed attitudes and behaviors and standards and expectations (Kane & Jacobs, 2013:225). People expect religious leaders to have high standards of professional conduct (Kane & Green, 2009; Kane & Jacobs, 2010) and live accordingly. Moreover, civil, criminal and religious laws add penalties to prohibited behaviors (Kane & Jacobs, 2013:229). If they abuse the difference in power that exists between them and the help-seekers, especially through sexual activity, religious leaders fall under media scrutiny and might find themselves in a difficult situation, both juridically and morally (Hammer, 2000; Kane, 2006, Lebacqz & Driskill, 2000). These activities have resulted over time in media scandal, ecclesial sanctions or dismissal from leadership responsibilities (Kane, 2006, Lebacqz & Driskill, 2000). Some religious leaders have engaged in sexual behaviours with adults, while others have been discovered engaging in criminal behaviours such as pedophilia (Ciarrocchi & Wicks, 2000; Cozzens, 2002). Media coverage has focused on the abuse of minors by Catholic religious leaders in Europe and the United States.

The age, gender and sexual orientation of religious leaders and their sexual partners also represent important variables that can influence the public perception about them. While people found the press to be too harsh with religious leaders involved in a relation with an adult woman, they criticized more the activities which involved a 19-year-old boy. The latter situation was clearly seen as a boundary violation and abuse of power, while towards the first one, respondents were more understanding. According to

Jenkins (1995), the emphasis upon sexual abuse committed by the clergy is due to a shift in media coverage during the 1980s. This has resulted in the „pedophile priest“ as a stereotype.

Media coverage on sexual abuse committed by clergy extends also to Europe. The archdiocese of Dublin indicates that at least 350 allegations of sexual abuse involving over 100 of its priests have been made since 1940 (Donnelly & Inglis, 2010:8). In 1994, Ireland had its first „pedophile priest“ case, when Fr Brendan Smyth pleaded guilty to 74 charges of sexual and indecent assault involving children. Media coverage of all these stories has had consequences on the image of the Catholic Church in Ireland (Donnelly & Inglis, 2010:15). Nevertheless, surveys showed that the church community viewed media coverage of child sexual abuse favorably (Kenny, 2009:71).

Religious belief in Central and Eastern Europe has been the subject of a survey between June 2015 and July 2016 in 18 countries (Pew Research Center, 2017). In Romania, 86% of people identify as Orthodox, and 21% of them say attend church weekly. 82% of Romanians say homosexual behavior is morally wrong, while 33% of young adults show a higher acceptance of legal gay marriage than people over 35 (23%). The survey also showed that in the Central and Eastern European landscape, Romania is the country where the most people think that belief in God is connected to good values and morality.

Methods

Data for the current study were collected from two online publications: www.adevarul.ro and www.hotnews.ro. These two online newspapers have been selected because they cover a wide range of subjects and are considered as a quality source of information. Moreover, they both rank among the news websites with the most views and visitors. Finally, these websites also have a forum section at the end of their articles, which enabled us to extract the reader comments and analyze their opinion.

This study analyzes the coverage of the news involving Bishop Corneliu Onila from June 2017 to August 2017. The time frame covers the story from the first article covering the story until Corneliu Onila gave up his religious function as a Bishop. The articles were selected conducting a search in online database of the two publications using „Corneliu Onila“ and „Corneliu Barladeanu“ as keywords to narrow down the search results. The process resulted in 10 articles from www.adevarul.ro and 13 articles from www.hotnews.ro.

Findings

The research focuses on the attributions of cause and responsibility and the practices of media-brokered selection and interpretation of events. The methodology used is a qualitative content analysis of selected Romanian online media. The first aspect that we took into consideration were the portrayals the two websites made of Corneliu Onila. In *adevarul.ro*, he was presented under the following main frames: as *bishop, gay, complainant, victim* and *pedophile*.

The comments section followed the frames used by the articles and the readers used the frames *bishop, gay* and *pedophile*. Also, the public focused more on the Romanian Orthodox Church as an institution, more than on the specific case of the bishop.

The content analysis made on the comments section for the two articles revealed mostly the same frames used by the readers. Generally, the frames identified in the comments were *pedophilia, homosexuality, preferential treatment for priests, similar cases, the need to purify the Romanian Orthodox Church (BOR), politics, abuse from priests, morality, society, juridical issues, traditional family* and *Catholics*.

Discussion and conclusions

For this aim of this paper, we have selected articles and their subsequent user comments from two major Romanian online newspapers during June, July and August 2017. Media reporting and user comments are analyzed with the help of attribution theory approaches from the field of psychology. Thus, we can identify the frames that emerge from the perceived responsibility of the media and the public. Based on a preliminary research, we expected to identify internal attributions: the media and the public assign the cause of behavior to internal characteristics (personality, motives, beliefs), rather than to outside forces. Finally, we expected the frames identified in media coverage and user comments to reflect the stereotypes ascribed to religious leaders in Romania.

Our first research question referred to the frames used by the media compared to the ones used by the public to cover and discuss the news about the sexual scandal involving the religious leader bishop Corneliu Onila. The first aspect we identified is that the articles had a rather negative tone. The frames identified in the articles matched the frames in the comments, but the readers used additional frames, putting the focus more on the Romanian Orthodox Church than on the specific case discussed in the article. The general tone of the comments was mostly negative towards Corneliu Onila and the Romanian Orthodox Church. About 10% of the comments had a neutral tone, in which we identified frames such as *politics* or *society*. There was no comment supporting the bishop or presenting arguments in his favor. The two websites that used less frames for the

religious leaders got fewer comments, and the public discussed issues related to the Church and society.

Our second research question referred to the correlation between the frames used by the media and the public and how they reflect the stereotypes on religious leaders. Using Kelley's attribution model, we can state that articles ascribed internal attributions when presenting the case of the religious leader. On the other hand, the public used both internal and external attributions of blame. People discussed the personal traits of the priest ("he's a hypocrite"), but also ascribe external attributions when saying "other priests knew, but didn't say anything", "his superiors knew but did nothing about it", "priests get preferential treatment", "there have been other similar cases".

Regarding consistency, the frames identified in the articles and the comments showed high consistency: "it's not the first time", "everybody knows he has been doing this for years". We have also identified low consensus, given the comments of the public: "a priest with no morality", "it's not moral for a priest to do such things". Concerning controllability, the articles ascribed responsibility to the religious leader ("he can decide his future", "he should resign"), while the readers ascribed responsibility to the Church as institution ("they should take a decision", "the Church has to investigate", "the Church should eliminate him")

We would conclude that mostly the comments section reflected the stereotypes on religious leaders. The case of Corneliu Onila provided a reason to the public to make correlations with other religious leaders. Thus, the readers discussed the bishop, but also the other three priests that blackmailed him with the recording. The public discussed the fact that priests get preferential treatment, that priests are hypocrites and that several priests are gay or pedophiles. They have also made references to the cases reported by the media involving pedophile Catholic priests. To conclude, the comments were a good image of the stereotypes that exist in Romania about religious leaders.

Limitations and future research

The results of this study are limited to two online newspapers on a short period of time. Further research on all media coverage on this subject would offer a better image of the correlation between the frames used in the articles and in the comments. Also, further research should take into consideration social media, where the number of comments is higher than the number of comments in online newspapers.

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