

# The Limits and Opportunities of Practising Journalism in the Digital Space: A Gender Perspective

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**Abstract:** This study explores the professional debut of women journalists in the digital environment in Romania, focusing on the dynamics of gender identity. The research examines the phenomenon of the viralisation of the first material published by a young journalist and the subsequent online reactions to it on social media. The case study method is used to analyse the discursive and institutional consequences of this event, observing the reactions of various stakeholders (the author, readers, journalists, NGOs, and the academic community). The findings highlight the opportunities created by the viral nature of the debut article, which provides the journalist with a discursive platform post-publication to address gender-related issues and enhances her visibility. However, the analysis also exposes significant challenges faced by the journalist, such as sexist and misogynistic discourse in the comments on social media, demonstrating that in the public sphere of Romania, a woman journalist's online debut is viewed and analysed not just in terms of professional standards but also from a gender perspective.

**Keywords:** journalistic debut, gender identity, digital hostility, misogynistic discourse, viralization

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## Theoretical background

This article analyses the phenomenon of journalistic debuts in the digital space from a gender perspective. The goal is to identify the limits and opportunities that female journalists face in their current professional environment. In particular we observe

the empowering and disempowering effects that online exposure has on journalists. The digital space – after going through an optimistic phase in which the benefits of the democratisation of communication were highlighted along with the promise of egalitarianism and free expression – is regarded in the literature also as a medium in which the asymmetries and the unequal distribution of power in society are reproduced (Fuchs 2014; van Dijck et al. 2018; Zuboff 2019), in a setting permeable to hate speech and disinformation. Moreover, even if platforms are based on an inclusive philosophy, the inclusion appears exploitative, as it normalises the pervasive platformisation of social life and daily communication, which benefits certain actors who gain near-monopolistic control over platform communications and design (Hroch et al. 2024). Even for ordinary users, platforms offer technological affordances that enable them to become predators and exploiters.

Previous studies have highlighted the vulnerable position of journalists in relation to the public, drawing attention to the digital hostility they encounter (Stahel 2023; Holton et al. 2021; Riives et al. 2021; Lewis et al. 2020) and the lack of a systemic approach on the part of media organisations, which treat the problem of digital hostility as an issue for journalists themselves and not for the organisation (Holton et al. 2021). On the other hand, how fragile journalists are is also determined by the organisational culture of the media outlet for which they work, revealing gender-based asymmetries among colleagues/ staff and management (Apostol 2018), which are reinforced by the pressure of hegemonic masculinity in the behaviour of male journalists (Riives et al. 2021). Furthermore, from a feminist perspective the media transform women into objects and invite everyone to view them as such. Sarah Projansky argues that the ‘media incessantly look at and invite us to look at girls. Girls are objects at which we gaze, whether we want to or not. They are everywhere in our mediascapes. As such, media turn girls into spectacles-visual objects on display’ (Projansky 2014: 5 quoted in Banet-Weiser 2015: 56–57). The same phenomenon is found among men. There is empirical evidence confirming that men are objectified, too, though less than women, and presenting commercials, films, action figures, and video games as primary sources, noting that the methods of objectification are similar for both genders (Thompson 2020). This implies that the media create the rules through which gender norms are socialised and the context for exposure and, further, serve as the opportune setting for public criticism.

According to Reporters Without Borders, for many journalists, being targeted by hate speech after the publication of an article is now routine (RSF 2018: 7): “‘It used to be the news organisations that were attacked but now it is the journalists themselves as individuals”, the editor of a French media outlet told RSF’ (RSF 2018: 7). Previous studies have shown how online abuse and the pressure on journalists to develop a ‘thick skin’ in their online relationship with the public have become normalised (Lewis



et al. 2020; Riives et al. 2021). Furthermore, journalists are increasingly pushed to promote themselves and their work on social media, feeling obligated to build a brand and develop closer relationships with their audiences (Lewis et al. 2020). Equally important is the fact that, according to the conclusions of 'The Chilling: A Global Study of Online Violence against Women Journalists', 'the social networking platform Facebook was rated the least safe of the top five platforms or apps used by participants' (ICFJ 2022). The same study identified several types and methods of online attacks on women journalists worldwide, noting that these attacks are becoming increasingly sophisticated (ICFJ 2022). This sophistication aligns with the evolution of technological affordances in virtual spaces and the digital culture shaped by platform society.

Regarding the gender perspective, in this study we refer to the definition given by Laura Grünberg, according to which 'feminist theories for which gender is a central category of analysis emphasize the gender dimension of social reality, thus the gender perspective of any aspect of social life under study' (Grünberg 2002: 284 in Miroiu 2002; authors' translation). The author explains that 'from a feminist point of view, any study, theoretical analysis, sectoral or global policy must pay attention to the importance of the meanings and consequences of what is culturally defined as woman and man, as well as the feminine ways in comparison to the masculine ways of thinking, knowing, feeling, valuing, and acting' (ibid.; authors' translation).

Stahel (2023) notes that historically disadvantaged groups, particularly women and ethnic minorities, are those most likely to face hostility in journalism. However, there is a notable lack of research focused on the experiences of their advantaged counterparts (Stahel 2023).

In the field of journalism, the concept of digital hostility encompasses vulgar, pathologising, disparaging, offensive, and threatening verbal messages received via any electronic medium, whether publicly on social media or privately through email, text, or phone, and distinguished from merely negative comments by their pejorative and threatening tone (Stahel 2023: 412). Although explicit theoretical categories of hostility are rare in the literature on journalists, we identified three types based on observed recurrent forms of hostility relating to identity, professional devaluation, and severe threats, all based on empirical evidence (Stahel 2023: 412). These categories are: identity-based attacks relating to gender (sexism) or race (racism); the devaluation of professional work like job performance criticism; and particularly severe threats or threats from repeat offenders (Stahel 2023: 412).

From the perspective of gender identity and the occupational ideology of journalism, studies show that there are no major discrepancies between the ways in which women and men seeing their journalistic activity (Apostol 2018: 40). Feminist theory emphasises that differences and inequalities appear because 'female journalists are exposed to a sexist work environment, characterized not only by an unequal distri-

bution of social capital between genders but also by the symbolic privilege of the “masculine” (Apostol 2018: 3). Female journalists must handle a dual pressure: to prove their professionalism while maintaining traditional femininity and to adhere to occupational values and present themselves as feminine, accepting sexist jokes and benevolent sexism, including compliments and gestures from colleagues (van Zoonen 1998 quoted in Apostol 2018).

The International Center for Journalists (ICFJ), with support from UNESCO, published a study in November 2022 on online violence against women journalists. The study’s authors claim that ‘The Chilling: A global study of online violence against women journalists is the most geographically, linguistically, and ethnically diverse research ever published on the theme’ (ICFJ 2022). According to the findings of this study, nearly 73% of the journalists surveyed had experienced online violence. As per their responses, 25% of the threats were physical threats, while 18% were of a sexual nature.

Holton et al. (2021) identified notable differences between the online harassment of male and female journalists. Male journalists experienced less harassment, typically dismissing it as minor off-colour comments or jokes, often from persistent trolls or critics, with little impact on their social media engagement (Holton et al. 2021). Online attacks on male journalists refer to specific skills or competence, general knowledge, education, and age/generation stereotypes (Riives et al. 2021).

Conversely, female journalists faced more frequent and severe harassment, often focused on their gender or perceived sexuality, and this harassment is more sustained, spanning multiple social media platforms and blurring professional and personal boundaries (Holton et al. 2021). Women in politics or sports journalism were particularly targeted, facing a questioning of their credentials, verbal assaults, lewd images, threats of physical violence, and exposure of personal information, significantly impacting their well-being (Holton et al. 2021).

Other studies have shown that journalists with larger audiences, a strong social media presence, and working in television on political topics are those who experience more general digital hostility, with women and migrant journalists facing less general hostility but higher levels of sexist, racist, and xenophobic hostility, and a particularly strong link between television work and hostility, especially involving repeat offenders, was observed for these groups (Stahel 2023). This heightened visibility places journalists at greater risk of recurring and severe online abuse compared to ordinary internet users (Lewis et al. 2020).

Other scholars affirm that male journalists’ experiences with online abuse remain under-researched, partly due to masculine stereotypes that inhibit them from acknowledging and reporting harassment (Riives et al. 2021). This phenomenon is described in reference to hegemonic masculinity as a ‘blockage’ that forces men to re-

press emotions, potentially leading to severe mental and physical strain (Riives et al. 2021). Even though alternative masculinities have emerged, they are often ridiculed, reinforcing traditional gender norms (Riives et al. 2021).

Despite the abuse, journalists often stay online because of the demands of their job, and this leads them to develop coping strategies like avoiding reading comments or limiting their social media use, which can result in audience disengagement and impact their reporting or career longevity (Lewis et al. 2020). Female journalists are particularly likely to leave the profession, change positions, withdraw from social media, or self-censor due to harassment, even though they are encouraged to develop a 'thick skin' (Lewis et al. 2020). While harassment is pervasive and media organisations lack systematic approaches to address it, leading to self-censorship, this paradoxically does not deter journalists from engaging with audiences, as harassment is sometimes seen as misguided participation (Lewis et al. 2020).

The subject of this research cannot be understood without adequate contextualisation of the dynamics of gender roles in Romania, which could have explanatory value. According to the study 'Gender Barometer 2018', even though conservative pressures do not have the same magnitude as in other countries in the region, 'Romania is particularly facing anti-gender equality rhetoric and the demonetization of gender equality themes' (Grünberg 2019; authors' translation). Regarding legislative efforts and institutions focusing on combating discrimination, the following should be noted:

*In 2002, Parliament passed the Law on Equality of Opportunities and Treatment between Women and Men. In 2003, an article concerning the principle of equality of opportunities between women and men was introduced into the Constitution. In the same year, the Law on Preventing and Combating Domestic Violence was passed. Key institutions were established to implement these laws: the National Council for Combating Discrimination (CNCD) and the National Agency for Gender Equality between Women and Men (ANES). ... Unfortunately, with the implementation of new austerity measures at the beginning of 2011, ANES lost its budgetary autonomy, and the County Commissions for Gender Equality (COJES) were closed, thus indicating that gender discrimination was considered an unimportant issue for the political leadership of the ruling party (PDL). (Miroiu, Bucur 2019: 77–78)*

Another important aspect of the Romanian context relates to mentalities. Maria Bucur and Mihaela Miroiu address, in 'The Birth of Democratic Citizenship: Women and Power in Modern Romania' (*Nașterea cetățeniei democratice. Femeile și puterea în România modernă*), describe how women and men relate to marital relationships: 'In 2000, 92% of men and 91% of women approved the statement that men are the

“head of the family”. ... Seven years later, only 49.7% of men and 33.7% of women still believed that men should be the “head of the family” (Miroiu, Bucur 2019: 83; authors’ translation). The two authors also note that ‘before 1940, women considered themselves subordinate to men in marriage, but by 2010, they had come to expect partnerships and appreciation for their role in building and maintaining the household’ (Miroiu, Bucur 2019: 85; authors’ translation).

It is worth mentioning that, according to the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE), in 2023 Romania ranked last in the European Union on the Gender Equality Index (which highlights developments in gender equality every two years), with a score of 56.1 out of 100, which is 14.1 points below the EU average.

The debut analysed in this study takes place in the field of Romanian journalism that is historically perceived, in our country, as more of a literary expression motivated by talent rather than a solid professional education based on rules, techniques, and rigorous ethical norms oriented towards social responsibility (Gross 2023: 119).

To understand the sociocultural and professional context of our cases analysis it is important to note the following about the Romanian journalists condition: ‘Journalists are presented as timid professionals, with low self-esteem, subject to changes in their terms and conditions of work’ (Surugiu 2016: 182 in Randle 2016). It is worth mentioning, again with the aim of understanding the sociocultural and professional context in which Romanian journalists conduct their work, that, according to Reporters Without Borders, in 2023 Romania occupied the 53rd position out of a total of 180 countries on its index of press freedom in the world (Reporters without Borders 2023).

The present study analyses the example of a debut in digital media because ‘the mass media play an important role in contemporary society, shaping public relations and private practices, and maintaining and changing rules, representations, and ideological assumptions’ (Rovența-Frumușani 2002: 47; authors’ translation). An example in this sense is a study on the presence of women and men in audio-visual news programmes on internal and external politics. The study carried out by Media Trust Romania in 2023 analysed five national television stations and found that men overwhelmingly predominate on these TV programmes (74.2%) over women (25.8%) (Media Trust Romania 2023). On the other hand, our research does not start from the assumption that the digital environment and social networks are completely different from the society in which they operate. ‘In other words, there is no reason to think that gender representations within new media will be any different to the gender representations elsewhere. But having said that, the Web provides opportunities for individuals and groups to provide alternatives to the existing set of dominant ideas about women and men, on their own websites’ (Gauntlett 2005: 53).

Regarding the feminisation of the journalist profession in Romania, the 2015 GMMP report indicates that in Romania women dominate in the role of presenting news on



the radio (92%) and TV (69%), while there is a more balanced gender representation among authors of articles (55% women, 45% men) (Apostol 2018: 45).

In the report 'Media Freedom in Romania Ahead of Super Election Year: Mission Report on Media Capture, Legal Obstacles and Journalists' Safety', published in 2024, the International Press Institute (IPI), Osservatorio Balcani e Caucaso Transeuropa (OBCT), and Free Press Unlimited (FPU) describe the organisational culture within Romanian media institutions in which female journalists work:

*It is no coincidence that, with the exception of assaults in the forest,<sup>1</sup> every case the mission encountered involved the targeting of a woman journalist or the wife of a male journalist. So, while statistics suggest that threats to Romanian journalists are comparatively low, it is also clear that below the surface lies a hostile culture for women journalists, who are forced to operate with the expectation that misogynistic insults and threats of assault can be 'part of the job'. There is a freedom of expression crisis for women journalists which must be at the heart of the country's safety strategy.*

This shows us that despite the seemingly low overall threat to Romanian journalists according to statistics, there is an underlying hostile environment specifically targeting women journalists, who are compelled to accept misogynistic insults and threats as a normal part of their profession.

## Methodology

In our research, we aim to understand the discursive and institutional consequences of a young journalist's debut in the Romanian media, considering the opportunities and limitations that the digital space offers for professional legitimacy. The research questions are:

1. Do power structures in society reproduce in the digital environment?
2. How is user discourse configured in the online environment from a gender perspective?
3. How is a journalist who is just starting out in this professional field perceived?

We utilised the case study method, which Robert K. Yin describes as an investigation that examines a current phenomenon in its actual context (Yin 2005: 30). Ac-

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<sup>1</sup> This refers to the journalists and whistle-blowers who stood up to the phenomenon of illegal lumbering in Romania and were subjected to violence.

cording to the same author, case studies are most suitable when exploring 'how' or 'why' questions, particularly in situations where the researcher has limited influence over events and when the researcher is studying a recent phenomenon within a real-life setting (Yin 2005: 15).

In this work, we chose to analyse the case of a 19-year-old journalist, a student in the field of communication sciences who faced a dual phenomenon at the beginning of her press career. Her debut text – 'I pretended to be a foreign tourist at Neversea to see how friendly Constanța is with tourists from other countries' (M-am dat drept o turistă străină venită la Neversea ca să văd cât de friendly e Constanța cu turiștii din alte țări) – went viral on G4media.ro, a national media platform, and garnered approximately 100,000 views. However, the same text attracted around 900 comments from readers on the publication's social media platform, some of which were aggressive, sexist, or misogynistic in nature.

It's worth noting that Delia's text received over 46,000 views on *Info Sud-Est*, the regional publication in which the report was initially published. According to the author, the text had a reach (impact) of approximately 400,000 users on Facebook about two weeks after publication. On the other hand, the author mentions that approximately 80% of the comments 'were negative, abusive, inciting violence, defamatory, or contained unsubstantiated claims' (ibid.).

Journalist Delia Dascălu's text addressed a topic of public interest, namely how prepared the port city of Constanța was to welcome foreign tourists arriving for the Neversea music festival held on the beach near the historic centre of Constanța. Just a few days before the festival began, the journalist conducted an experiment from the perspective of a tourist, using participatory observation as a documentary technique. She found, on-site, that there were no road signs in English at the Constanța Train Station in the city of Constanța to guide tourists to the city's historic centre, nor were there any special signs in English with information about the Neversea festival. After interacting with several people, she concluded that very few individuals spoke or understood English and were able or willing to provide foreign tourists with directions. The conclusion of her report is that a foreign tourist coming to Constanța for the Neversea festival would greatly struggle without a mobile phone with internet access.

We viewed Delia Dascălu's first journalistic article as aligning with one of the specific types of case studies outlined by Robert Yin:

- (a) it serves as a critical examination of an existing theory;
- (b) it addresses a rare or distinctive scenario;
- (c) it represents a typical or common case;
- (d) it aims to reveal new insights;
- or (e) it involves a longitudinal study (Yin 2005: 65).



Her debut as a journalist can more specifically be categorised as rare because of the post-publication echoes that this first article generated, making the debut an event in itself. To understand this phenomenon in depth, we chose to use the embedded case study method, analysing the discursive and institutional reactions that this exposure produced from all the stakeholders involved: the text's author, readers, journalists, NGOs, and representatives of the academic community. Additionally, we examined the report 'Media Freedom in Romania Ahead of Super Election Year: Mission Report on Media Capture, Legal Obstacles and Journalists' Safety' published in 2024.

To study the readers' reactions, we opted for a quantitative content analysis of the comments on Facebook to the post 'I pretended to be a foreign tourist at Neversea to see how friendly Constanța is with tourists from other countries' (M-am dat drept o turistă străină venită la Neversea ca să văd cât de friendly e Constanța cu turiștii din alte țări), and we assessed the frequency of types of messages. To extract the comments, we used the ESUIT application. This gave us a corpus of 891 comments resulted, which we exported to Excel. We preserved the authors' spelling, punctuation, and original wording. We then manually categorised the comments thematically using the following coding scheme:

- C1. Comments unrelated to the post/without direct reference to the journalist/user-to-user replies
- C2. Comments related to the subject/with direct reference to the journalist
  - C2.1. Positive comments
    - C2.1.1. Comments that appreciate or admire Delia's journalistic initiative
    - C2.1.2. Comments that share the author's viewpoint in the journalistic text/provide arguments in support of the author's viewpoint
  - C2.2. Negative comments
    - C2.2.1. Insulting/misogynistic comments that trivialise women and contain explicit sexual content
    - C2.2.2. Disparaging comments about the journalist/comments criticising the subject matter/approach/execution of the report/the irrelevance of the subject/irony
    - C2.2.3. Comments that are insulting/contain profanity, not necessarily related to gender

This coding scheme resulted in the distribution of comments as indicated in Table 1.

Another key component of this study was the interview we conducted with the article's author. For this step of the research, we opted for a structured interview. We asked the following questions during the interview: 'How did you create the article and what were your expectations?'; 'How did you monitor its virality and what was

Table 1: Comments distribution

Code	No. of comments
C1.	521
C2.1.1.	29
C2.1.2.	74
C2.2.1.	58
C2.2.2.	187
C2.2.3.	22

Source: Authors.

relevant for you in this process?'; 'Did you receive messages of solidarity from other journalists?'; 'Was there contact with other institutions and NGOs after publication?'.

Additionally, we analysed the social media and media reactions of the following stakeholders: Andreea Pavel, editor-in-chief of *Info-Sud Est* newspaper (a post on her personal Facebook account); Daniela Palade Teodorescu, former editor-in-chief of *Avantaj* (Advantages) and *Cariere* (Careers) magazines, shared Andreea Pavel's post in the 'Feminism for Real' Facebook group; Victor Ilie, a former journalist at *Rise Project* and *Recorder* shared Andreea Pavel's post on his personal Facebook account; Adrian Mihălțianu, editorial director of *PressOne* publication shared Andreea Pavel's post on his personal Facebook account; Alexandru Tudor, a journalist at *Canal SUD* (Channel South) shared Andreea Pavel's post on his personal Facebook account; Ana Otilia Nuțu, a policy analyst at *Expert Forum* for energy and infrastructure shared Andreea Pavel's post on his personal Facebook account, a statement on the Facebook page of the feminist organisation *Centrul Filia* (Filia Centre) (a stand-alone post); a statement on the Facebook page of the Journalism Specialisation at the Faculty of Letters, Ovidius University of Constanța (a stand-alone post); journalist Sabina Fati wrote the article 'Is Gheboasă Misogynistic? Are the harassers of the journalist also going to get fined?' (*E Gheboasă misogin? Iau amendă și hărțuitorii jurnalistei?*)' for the Romanian edition of *Deutsche Welle*.

Findings

Opportunities

Regarding the opportunities generated both by the virality of her debut text and, seemingly paradoxically, by the social media comments on it, we learned from the interview with Delia Dascălu that these opportunities led to a context conducive to the young journalist expressing herself on gender-related subjects:

*This offered me space to start talking about similar cases to mine and about women's safety in the media. I mean, in a way, I wanted to write about this even before the report, but I didn't know how to package it. (...) It offered me space and it gave me a voice.* The attention on me at that time gave me the opportunity to speak and to be heard, so I wasn't speaking by myself. (authors' emphasis)

Another opportunity identified by the beginner journalist relates to her media exposure, in the sense that she was approached to publish a text about her situation in the Romanian edition of *Deutsche Welle*: 'DW contacted me to write that article'. Last but not least, Delia Dascălu's debut text allowed her to become popular online:

*A lot of people were telling me, 'This is you, look, you appeared [in my feed – eds.]. Or, 'Look, a friend of mine or a friend of a friend ... Everyone was messaging me and telling me that I had appeared somewhere and somehow just with the reposting of the article, not something written about me or anything like that. Many said it was a harmless experiment or a cute experiment about how Constanța prepares for tourists or how Constanța prepares for the summer season, meaning that those who shared it were actually quite positive overall.* (authors' emphasis)

Positive reactions of this kind, mentioned by the journalist, were also observed in the social media comments that we analysed. Thus, from a thematic point of view, we identified comments that appreciate and admire Delia's journalistic endeavour (C2.1.1.) and comments that share the author's viewpoint in the journalistic text/provide arguments in favour of the author's viewpoint (C2.1.2.).

Examples for each category of these comments can be found in Table 2.

The numerous comments surrounding Delia Dascălu's experiment before the Neveersea festival attracted the attention of both other journalists and organisations,

Table 2: Positive discourse

English (authors' translation)	Romanian
'I really liked how you wrote. You are very talented. I enjoyed reading it!' (C2.1.1.)	'Mi a plăcut mult cum ai scris. Ești foarte talentată. Am citit cu plăcere!' (C2.1.1.)
'Congratulations, this is how action should be taken to enlighten the minds of the authorities.' (C2.1.1.)	'Felicitări așa trebuie acționat să îi luminăm mințile edililor.' (C2.1.1.)
'Well done, clever girl! You showed the reality. Unfortunately, in some comments, we see that the truth hurts.' (C2.1.1.)	'Bravo, fată isteță! Ai arătat realitatea. Din nefericire, în unele comentarii, observăm că adevărul doare.' (C2.1.1.)

'Congratulations to the young lady for the article, and good luck with college. I hope she has the strength to stay in the country after graduation. I didn't last long. And for all the idiots with "get lost" and other garbage, if you had read the article to the end, you would know she's a journalism student at Ovidius. She has a future ahead of her. You jerks aren't even good enough to be trash. The latest edit – how can you say that Romania is a normal country, when in response to an okay and decent article by a journalism student, heaps of idiots with frothy mouths appear, but those same idiots bow down to people like FiRea,* who even steal from old people in nursing homes and treat them like animals?' (C2.1.1.)	'Felicitări domnișoarei pentru articol, și baftă cu facultatea. Sper ca ea să aibă puterea să rămână în țară după absolvire. Eu n-am rezistat prea mult. Iar pentru toți idioții cu „hai sictir” și alte mizerii, dacă citeați articolul până la capăt aflați că e studentă la Ovidius, jurnalism. Ea are un viitor în față. Sictiriții ca voi nici de gunoi nu sunteți buni. Ultimul edit-cum naiba să spui că România e o țară normală, când la un articol ok și decent al unei studente la jurnalism apar grămezi de idioți cu spume la gură, dar aceeași idioți le pupa mâinile și picioarele unora ca fiRea, care fura până și de la niște bătrâni din azile și îi tratează ca pe animale?’ (C2.1.1.)
'Congratulations on the experiment, this is who we are, we don't know or don't want to promote tourism!' (C2.1.1.)	'Felicitări pentru experiment, așa suntem, nu știm ori nu vrem să promovăm turismul!' (C2.1.1.)
'Congratulations for the initiative. Well done! You will become an excellent journalist.' (C2.1.1.)	'Felicitări pt inițiativa. Un mare bravo! Vei deveni un jurnalist excelent.' (C2.1.1.)
'Sad :( but true, on our highways and roads there are signs and indications only in Romanian, for those who don't speak Romanian, it's very difficult without a Romanian to guide them :( (C2.1.2.)	'Trist :( dar adevărat, pe autostrazile și drumurile noastre sunt indicații și indicatoare doar în română, pentru cine nu vorbește română e foarte greu fără un român care să îl ghideze :( (C2.1.2.)
'(:) :) Ignorance, everyone knows 2–3 words in English, but the rudeness is as big as the People's House! :) (C2.1.2.)	'(:) :) Ignoranță, toată lumea știe 2-3 cuvinte în engleză, dar nesimțirea este mare cât casa poporului! :) (C2.1.2.)
'It's a shame that this city with great potential is not at all prepared for foreign tourists who could contribute significantly to the country's economy. We are dumber than a box of hair.' (C2.1.2.)	'E păcat că acest oraș cu un potențial foarte mare nu este deloc pregătit pentru turiști străini care ar putea contribui destul de mult la economia țării. Suntem proști și pulbere de dobitoaci.' (C2.1.2.)
'We don't know how to promote ourselves, to turn what we have beautiful and natural into an oasis of peace and prosperity for both locals and tourists.' (C2.1.2.)	'Nu știm să ne promovăm, să facem din ceea ce avem frumos, natural o oază de liniște și bunăstare atât pentru localnici cât și pentru turiști.' (C2.1.2.)
'Incredible... I'm reading and it feels like going back in time... The same scenario as before '89... how sad...' (C2.1.2.)	'Incredibil... citesc și pare o întoarcere în timp... Același scenariu ca înainte de '89... ce trist...' (C2.1.2.)
'We want tourists, but we drive them away with our behaviour. Where is the Romanian hospitality?' (C2.1.2.)	'Vrem turiști, dar tot noi îi alungăm prin comportamentul nostru. Unde este ospitalitatea românească?' (C2.1.2.)

Source: Data collected by the authors.

\* A reference to former mayor of Bucharest and minister in various governments, Gabriela Firea, a controversial politician. 'Rea', which the author of the comment emphasised in her name, translates from Romanian into English as 'evil'.



creating an opportunity for solidarity to form with the rookie journalist. Andreea Pavel, editor-in-chief of *Info Sud-Est*, commented in a post on her Facebook profile on 28 July 2023 about how readers received Delia's debut:

*The debut in the Romanian press of a 19-year-old student who has been working with us for several months gave rise to a wave of bile and sickness. Delia was hit by a wave of hatred, misogyny, and incitement to violence and rape. If she were a man, these comments wouldn't exist. She published a report, which quickly went viral, claiming to be a foreign tourist who came to Neversea to see how friendly Constanța is to foreign tourists. The article's idea, construction, and illustration were discussed and decided in the editorial office, together with me and Leonte [Cristian Andrei Leonte, project manager at Info Sud-Est]. The opening featured a selfie of her at Neversea, after she'd finished the press experiment. But the real experiment came later. For her and for us as well.*

The comment about Delia Dascălu, written by journalist Andreea Pavel, was shared on 29 July 2023 by several individuals: by Daniela Palade Teodorescu, former editor-in-chief of the magazine *Avantaje*, in the Facebook group 'Feminism for Real'; by Ana Otilia Nuțu, an analyst at *Expert Forum* specialising in public policies on energy and infrastructure and public companies and regulatory authorities; by Victor Ilie, a journalist at *RISE Project*; and by Adrian Mihăltianu, editorial director of *PressOne*. Mihăltianu also made an ironic comment on Delia Dascălu's case accompanied by an emoji expressing anger: 'This really makes you want to do journalism, especially as a woman'.

Another young journalist, a graduate of the same specialisation as Delia Dascălu at Ovidius University in Constanța and currently a reporter at *Canal SUD*, shared the same comment by Andreea Pavel on his Facebook account on 28 July 2023 and added a comment: 'Take heart, Delia Dascălu!'

There were further reactions not only on social media but also in the actual mass media. The Romanian edition of the prestigious publication *Deutsche Welle* devoted space to this topic twice: first, in a text by Delia Dascălu titled 'Just Because I'm a Girl. Misogynistic Romania' (Doar pentru că sunt fată. România misogină) and published on 8 August 2023; second, in a text by journalist Sabina Fati titled 'Is Gheboasă Misogynistic? Are the Harassers of the Journalist also Going to Get Fined?' (*E Gheboasă misogin? Iau amendă și hărțuitorii jurnalistei?*), published on 11 August 2023.

Regarding the stance of institutions towards the aggressive comments directed at Delia Dascălu, the first reaction came from the journalism specialisation programme at the Faculty of Letters at Ovidius University in Constanța that Delia is enrolled in. The undergraduate study programme posted a message on its Facebook page on 28 July 2023, unequivocally expressing support for Delia's journalistic endeavour:

*After she penned a report on how Constanța welcomes tourists on the eve of the Neversea festival, a text that was picked up by G4 Media and garnered tens of thousands of views, Delia Dascălu, a second-year journalism student, faced a wave of extremely harsh comments, some with explicit language. Delia wrote about the tough experience that followed the publication of her first text in the national press, which you can read by accessing the link in the first comment. The team at the UOC Communication Sciences supports the honest and passionate work of all its students. Well done, Delia! We stand with you!*

Another organisation that took a stand against the phenomenon faced by journalist Delia Dascălu at the beginning of her journalistic debut was Centrul Filia, which defines itself as ‘an organisation that amplifies women’s voices through direct work in communities and activities of advocacy, activism and awareness, studies, and analysis’. It further describes itself as follows: ‘We build a supportive society where the diverse rights and needs of women are respected and where equal opportunities are offered to everyone’ (authors’ translations). On 11 August 2023, the organisation posted the following comment on its Facebook page:

*About violence and sexism against women journalists. A few days ago, Delia Dascălu, a 19-year-old student, made her debut as a journalist with a report about the Romanian seaside.*

*In response to her article, the young woman received a wave of sexist and insulting comments. (...) We express our solidarity with Delia and with journalists who constantly face incitements to violence, sexual harassment, sexist comments, and discrimination as a result of their work.*

In addition to the discursive reactions and reverberations in the media circles, Delia Dascălu’s case has become a subject of research for the International Press Institute (IPI), Osservatorio Balcani e Caucaso Transeuropa (OBCT), and Free Press Unlimited (FPU), who mention the journalist in the report ‘Media Freedom in Romania Ahead of Super Election Year: Mission Report on Media Capture, Legal Obstacles and Journalists’ Safety’, published in 2024:

*Her first article described her experience of pretending to be a foreign tourist arriving in Constanta and speaking only English. Her second article, ‘Did the Bitch Get Away Unraped?’ [A scăpat neviolată panarama?], described the avalanche of misogynistic abuse she received for having ‘defamed’ the city. Dascălu ends the article by citing ‘The Chilling’, a study by the International Center for*



*Journalists, which reports that in 2020 73% of women journalists experienced online harassment and that three-quarters of women have considered leaving journalism as a result.*

Being featured in a high-profile report increases Delia's visibility, enhances her reputation, and can lead to new professional opportunities, such as speaking engagements and collaborations, and can help her to advance her career and expand her network. However, this increased prominence may also make her a more appealing target for online trolls and harassers, potentially amplifying the harassment she faced.

### Limits

Delia Dascălu's journalistic debut with the report 'I Pretended to Be a Foreign Tourist at Neversea to See How Friendly Constanța is to Tourists from Other Countries' (M-am dat drept o turistă străină venită la Neversea ca să văd cât de prietenoasă e Constanța cu turiștii din alte țări) not only attracted what can be considered a series of opportunities, it also highlighted the limitations that accompany exposure in the online environment. Discursively, these can be observed in the numerous comments made by users on Delia's text on the G4media Facebook page.

For the author, as revealed by her responses in an interview with her, these limitations are related both to the very large number of comments and to the content of these comments, which she considers inappropriate:

*Interviewer: It was shocking from what perspective?*

*Delia Dascălu: Shocking mainly from the perspective of the large number of comments and what was on people's minds. How many sick ideas they pictured in their heads to be able to leave comments or imagine me as if I were an actress or a prostitute or many other things like that. It was shocking to see how far they could go with these things from a simple article about the fact that people are not friendly to foreigners in Constanța. It was shocking both in terms of the volume and the extremes they went to with the comments.*

The shock of the young journalist was even greater because she had no expectations about the impact of her debut text:

*I didn't expect anything at all. It was my first article, they told me to just write it as if it were a diary, to go and tell a friend what I did as an experiment. And I had no expectations. I mean, in my mind, the article was very harmless and experimental in itself.*

Table 3: Hostile discourse related to profession

English translation	Romanian
'In a few words, you've turned crap to dust.' (C2.2.2.)	'In cateva cuvinte, ai facut rahatul praf.' (C2.2.2.)
'Honestly, I find this post idiotic and in poor taste. It's not obligatory for everyone to speak English ... Let's be serious, inappropriate behaviour, with airs of ... I'll refrain from further comments...' (C2.2.2.)	'Sincer, mi se pare o postare idioata si de prost gust. Nu este obligatoriu sa stie toti sa vorbeasca in engleza... Sa fim seriosi, comportament deplasat, cu aere de... Ma abtin de la comentarii...' (C2.2.2.)
'Go to another country and speak Romanian. See who pays attention to you or tries to speak with you in the same language.' (C2.2.2.)	'Mergi în alta tara și vorbește pe Românește. Vezi cine te baga în seama sau încearcă sa vorbească cu tine pe aceeași limba.' (C2.2.2.)
'...Ciolacu* doesn't even know how to speak Romanian! How can you expect that the woman selling tickets at the restroom speaks English?' (C2.2.2.)	'...Ciolacu nu știe sa vb. nici lb. română! Ce pretenții ai la o femeie care vinde bilete la wc. sa vorbească English:!)' (C2.2.2.)
'And what do 'tourists' expect, to have English teachers employed at the kiosks or shops?' (C2.2.2.)	'Și ce-ar vrea "turiștii", să fie angajați profesori de engleză la tonete sau buticuri?' (C2.2.2.)
'-Daniela Stefanescu excellent journalist? An excellent journalist who conducts experiments and detective investigations to see how ordinary people promote tourism would add a few words to encourage tourism, so that ordinary people can learn how it's done! I mean, if the pretext of the investigation was to see if a foreign tourist can manage with information from locals to get to the Neversea festival, then write at least two words in the article about Neversea and why a foreign tourist should go there. Don't have expectations primarily of others, others like the lady in the restroom!' (C2.2.2.)	'-Daniela Stefanescu Jurnalist excelent ? Un jurnalist excelent care face experimente și investigații detectivistice să vadă cum știu oamenii de rând să promoveze turismul , adăuga și câteva cuvinte de promovare a turismului , ca să se învețe de către cei de rând cum se face ! Adică , dacă pretextul investigației a fost ca să vadă dacă un turist străin se poate descurca cu informații de la localnici cum să ajungă la festivalul Neversea , apoi scrie și tu în articol măcar două cuvinte despre Neversea și de ce ar trebui turistul străin să ajungă acolo . Nu cere în primul rând de la alții , alții ca doamna de la WC!' (C2.2.2.)
'These guys mimicked VICE until they messed it up.' (C2.2.2.)	'Au furat ăștia meserie de la VICE până s-au prostit.' (C2.2.2.)
'Well, be grateful that people helped you as much as they could. Surely you didn't expect to find English speakers in the public toilet in Constanța. Come on, get real! :rofl: :rofl:' (C2.2.2.)	'Ei na, zi merci că te-au ajutat oamenii așa cum au putut. Doar nu te așteptai să găsești vorbitori de limba engleza la toaletă din Constanța. Hai pi buni! :rofl: :rofl:' (C2.2.2.)
'Your expectations of the restroom lady, luggage storage clerk, or pastries seller are too high.' (C2.2.2.)	'Cam mari pretențiile de la o taxatoare wc, de la taxator bagaje de mână, vânzătoare fornetti etc.' (C2.2.2.)
'Why should the lady in the toilet or the shopkeeper know English ... I'm sure they don't know it in Germany or France either...' (C2.2.2.)	'De ce ar trebui femeia de la budă sau vânzatoarea din magazin sa stie engleză..sunt sigur ca nici in Germania sau Franta nu stiu...' (C2.2.2.)

Source: Data collected by the authors.

\* The Prime Minister of Romania and head of the Social Democratic Party (PSD) at the time.



A thematic analysis of the content of the comments indicates that the negative discourse from users can be divided into three categories: C2.2.1. Insulting/misogynistic comments that trivialise women and contain explicit sexual content, C2.2.2. Depreciative comments towards the professional/comments criticising the subject/approach/execution of the report/irrelevance of the subject/irony, and C2.2.3. Comments that insult/contain swearing, without necessarily being related to gender.

Although we anticipated, from a quantitative perspective, that these messages would be triggered by gender-related factors, the research shows that the predominant discourse involves criticism of the journalistic text Delia Dascălu wrote. Specifically, users reproach the journalist, among other things, for not including in her text actual information describing the *Neversea* music festival and for expecting the staff at the restrooms in the Constanța Train Station to speak English. This feedback reflects a keen sense of disagreement with the report's premise and a belief that the report does not provide meaningful information or fair commentary on the issues it addresses. Examples from this category of comments can be found in Table 3.

One distinct direction of the negative discourse from users relates to the gender dimension. Specifically, these are comments that insult, contain misogynistic compo-

Table 4: Hostile discourse related to gender

'Article written as a joke, all the shops have prices displayed, and she didn't have to point with her fingers, lies as big as China, go away you country-defaming rag.' (C2.2.1.)	'Articol scris la mișto, toate magazinele au prețul afișat și nu trebuia să arate pe degete, minciuni cât china, marș tu zdreanță care defăimezi țara.' (C2.2.1.)
'Isn't this the girl from OnlyFans?' (C2.2.1.)	'Păi așa nu e tipa aia de pe Onlyfans?' ('-') (C2.2.1.)
'I pretended to be a wh*re ... oh wait, that's what I am anyway!' (C2.2.1.)	'M-am dat drept o tâ*fă... aaah stai, oricum asta sunt !' (C2.2.1.)
'They figured out that you're just a bimbo and that's why they ignored you! So, IGNORED again.' (C2.2.1.)	'S-au prins si ăia ca esti doar o fandosita si de aia ti-au dat flit! Asa ca, FLIT, inca odata.' (C2.2.1.)
'And no one f*cked you?' (C2.2.1.)	'Și nu te futut nimeni?' (C2.2.1.)
'Cut off your hooves!' (C2.2.1.)	'Taie ti copitele!' (C2.2.1.)
'Idiot.' (C2.2.1.)	'Idioată.' (C2.2.1.)
'Did she get away not raped, the tramp?' (C2.2.1.)	'A scapat neviolata, panarama?' (C2.2.1.)
'Next year try being a prostitute.' (C2.2.1.)	'La anul să încerce ca prostituată.' (C2.2.1.)
'And ... The guys took you around the corner for a bl*wjob, and then you happily went to the festival ... The end!' (C2.2.1.)	'Si ... Te-au luat baietii dupa colt , la o mumu, si dupa ai plecat fericita la festival ... The end!' (C2.2.1.)

Source: Data collected by the authors.

nents, trivialise women, and have explicit sexual content. Despite the fact that these are not the predominant comments, they can be a warning signal regarding the safety of female journalists in the online environment because of the aggression, vulgarity, and explicit sexuality they express. In other words, they represent an indicator of the limits encountered by a journalist at the beginning of their journalistic debut and, at the same time, demonstrate how vulnerable they can be when exposed in the digital space. Examples of comments can be found in Table 4.

Table 5: Hostile discourse related to generational conflict, local pride, and anti-foreigner sentiment

'Blah blah blah and now go to a psychiatrist.' (C2.2.3.)	'Bla bla bla si acum du-te la Psihiatru.' (C2.2.3.)
'To hell with you, generation of illiterates, lazy people, and druggies!!!!' (C2.2.3.)	'La cacat cu voi, generatie de inculti, lenesi si drogati!!!!' (C2.2.3.)
'We sh*t on you!' (C2.2.3.)	'sa ne kkm pe tine!' (C2.2.3.)
'Oh, what "big" problems for the poor foreign tourists coming to Constanța. Isn't it so that in Cluj tourists had an official translator each? :rofl: XD (;-Ṽ-). P*ss off! (π) ;)' (C2.2.3.)	'Vai, vai ce probleme "mari" pentru săracii turiști străini veniți în Constanța. Nu așa că la Cluj turiștii, aveau fiecare translator din oficiu? :rofl: XD (;-Ṽ-). Hai SICTIR! (π) ;)' (C2.2.3.)
'Get lost!' (C2.2.3.)	'Hai marș!' (C2.2.3.)
'Oh, what shall we do ... Leave the country and that's it. P*ss off!' (C2.2.3.)	'Vai, ce sa ne mai facem... Pleaca din tara si gata. Mars!' (C2.2.3.)
'Like why don't shopkeepers know English? Like she took money from her parents to go to the concert and like they didn't want to tell her in English how much the water costs. When getting hired at a supermarket like you should at least know English. Jesus, it's unbearable to live in this country. Like parents send their kids abroad for studies. P*ss off and leave us alone.' (C2.2.3.)	'Gen de ce nu stiu like vanzatorii engleza?like ea a luat bani de la parinti sa mearga la concert si gen aia nu au vrut sa ii spuna in engleza cat e apa. La angajare la supermarket like trebuie sa stii gen macar engleza. Jesus, nu mai e de trait in tara asta. Like o trimit parintii gen in afara la studii. Hai mars si lasa-ne.' (C2.2.3.)
'You're pathetic, complaining that the toilet attendant and the grocery store cashier didn't know English. Let me tell you something in English: go to hell, worthless "journalist".' (C2.2.3.)	'Esti jalnica , te plangi ca nu stia engleza aia de la wc-ul public si vanzătoarea de la alimentara. Iți spun eu ceva in engleză : hai sictir , "jurnalistă" de doi bani.' (C2.2.3.)
'We write reports and think we're big shots.' (C2.2.3.)	'-Facem reportaje si ne credem balene-n galeata.' (C2.2.3.)
'And are we treated differently in other countries? Stop eating sh*t and get to work!' (C2.2.3.)	'Și ce noi suntem primiți altfel in alte țări? Nu mai mâncați căcat si la muncă cu voi.' (C2.2.3.)

Source: Data collected by the authors.

Another and no less important direction that we identified in the users' comment-son the reportage written by Delia Dascălu involves insults and swear words that are not necessarily related to gender. However, even in these comments, an aggressive attitude is evident. The comments reflect a generational conflict, with disdain for the younger generations, who are perceived as in moral or cultural decline, and expressions of nationalism and local pride through defensiveness about local language skills and criticism of those who leave or complain about the country. Additionally, there is strong anti-foreigner sentiment directed against tourists and a resistance to change, and particularly to the expectation that local workers should know English. To illustrate we selected the examples as presented in Table 5.

By contrast, Delia Dascălu's report drew predominantly unrelated comments that do not directly refer to the subject matter, ones that did not directly address the journalist or that represented back-and-forth responses between users. Following the analysis, we noticed the diversity of these comments, mentioning topics ranging from famous football players to the former mayor of Constanța, from user quarrels to invitations to download online games. These comments are illustrated by the examples below:

Table 6: Discourse unrelated to the subject matter

'Should have taken Raducioiu (footballer – ed.) too, he knows Italian!!!!' (C1)	'Trebuia să-l iei și pe Raducioiu, știe italiana!!!!' (C1)
'The.first.time.they.rip.you.off.Truth.is,a beer. costs.three.times.more.in.Italy.I've.been.on.the.beach.in.Italy.' (C1)	'Prima.data.te.fura.astai.adevarul.o.bere.pret.de.trei.fata.de.italiaeu.am.fost.pe.plaja.an.italia.' (C1)
'Dan Butnaru, stupid communist.' (C1)	'-Dan Butnaru comunist prost.' (C1)
'I recommend you this game. Install it here: <a href="http://www.remi-online.ro/rt/10144464">www.remi-online.ro/rt/10144464</a> .' (C1)	'Iti recomand acest joc. Instaleaza-l de aici: <a href="http://www.remi-online.ro/rt/10144464">www.remi-online.ro/rt/10144464</a> .' (C1)
'Mihai Micuțu, go to hell.' (C1)	'-Mihai Micuțu hai sictir.' (C1)
'Romania, land of yearning and longing.' (C1)	'România, plai de of și dor.' (C1)
'Howeverawful Mazare [former and controversial Mayor of Constanta – ed.] was, money was being made.' (C1)	'-Cat de nasol a fost Mazare, se faceau bani.' (C1)
'Shove that festival directly up your a**. Filth, drunks on the streets, junkies, and the list goes on.' (C1)	'Sa va băgați festivalul ăla direct în coooor. Mizerie, bețiți pe străzi, drogați, siista este lunga.' (C1)
'Whoa!' (C1)	'Haoleo!' (C1)
'Miu Nicolae George, applicable to you too, a peasant in LONDON.' (C1)	'-Miu Nicolae George valabil si ptr tine,un țăran la LONDRA.' (C1)

Source: Data collected by the authors.

## Discussion

The current study demonstrates that the digital environment, from a gender perspective, reproduces societal power structures. Our research shows how a journalist at the start of her career is perceived not only as a media professional but also as a young woman, or, in some cases, solely as a young woman. In other words, the inquiry highlights that some of the prejudices and stereotypes related to gender in society are replicated in online discourse. Nevertheless, the results indicate that the same digital environment empowers young female journalists, offering opportunities for visibility and engagement and a platform to address critical social issues, including gender-related topics, which could significantly boost their careers. In a broader context, this suggests that the digital space can be both constraining and liberating for female journalists: on one hand, it continues to propagate gender-based inequalities, while on the other, it offers tools to challenge these inequalities by amplifying diverse voices and encouraging democratisation in the media field. This aligns with European trends, where digital platforms are also seen as a way to bypass traditional media gatekeeping and exclusion, fostering inclusivity and greater diversity in the public sphere.

The paper further suggests that the misogynistic discourse of social media users leaves a female journalist making her debut exposed to denigration, ridicule, sexualisation, and aggression. These discursive forms from social media users can act as triggering factors that marginalise women in media and other public roles, diminishing their agency. Such hostility not only can affect the psychological well-being of female journalists but also poses a significant threat to their professional engagement and career longevity. The pressure to develop a 'thick skin' in response to online abuse, as noted by Lewis et al. (2020), often leads to self-censorship or withdrawal from the profession, thus limiting the potential impact of digital journalism. Regarding gender-based harassment, this form of hostility is not unique to Romania but is reflective of broader European and global trends, where female journalists are disproportionately targeted with misogynistic abuse and many experience severe and sustained harassment (Stahel 2023; Holton et al. 2021; Lewis et al. 2020).

Another key finding of this study is that the digital space puts newcomers in the media at risk of professional cancellation by social media users. While some users harshly criticised, often without justification, the editorial approach of the debutant journalist, others praised and supported her work. This highlights the precarious nature of media careers in digital environments, where the actions of users can influence public perception and professional standing. The expressions of solidarity from various stakeholders in this research – whether by sharing the journalist's perspective or challenging the online violence driven by her gender identity – serve as indicators of

acceptance and professional legitimisation in the industry. This solidarity may counteract online violence and could potentially shape public perception of the journalistic profession, shifting the narrative from negativity to recognising it as a vital and credible field. Such support networks are essential for fostering resistance among female journalists in the digital age, providing a safety net against online hostility and empowering them to continue their careers in journalism despite the risks they face.

## Conclusion

The research demonstrates how the viral spread of an article can generate a mixed perception, where the journalistic work is simultaneously praised and criticised. This duality implies that while the digital environment may reinforce traditional societal biases, it simultaneously offers journalists opportunities for resistance and empowerment. The study highlights important dimensions for examining the impact that an a debut in journalism can have in the digital environment, emphasising the complexity and heterogeneity of online discourse, which cannot be reduced to a single variable. Our findings reveal that the digital hostility experienced by journalists at the start of their careers has two facets: the first relates to gender issues and reflects the power structures within society, while the second involves professional criticism, which may be more or less justified but sometimes even seeks to discredit the journalistic profession.

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