



Assoc. Prof. PhDr. Antonio Momoc, PhD.
Faculty of Journalism and Communication Sciences
University of Bucharest
Panduri 90
050663 București
România
antonio.momoc@gmail.com

Antonio Momoc served as the Dean at the Faculty of Journalism and Communication Sciences, at the University of Bucharest, from 2020 to 2024. With a PhD in Sociology, he works in the Department of Cultural Anthropology and Communication as an Associate Professor. His research focuses on the relationship between populism, illiberalism, disinformation, and digital media. In 2022, he was a visiting scholar at the Scripps College of Communication, E. W. Scripps School of Journalism, Ohio University, with a Fulbright Programme scholarship. Antonio Momoc is the author of several scientific studies with international impact and conference papers, key-note speaker for scientific communications. His newest book is entitled *Political communication and Internet. Populism and the crisis of liberal democracies*.

THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC: A CATALYST FOR INCREASED CONSUMPTION IN TELEVISION AND SOCIAL MEDIA USAGE IN ROMANIA

Antonio MOMOC

ABSTRACT:

The general perception is that the COVID-19 pandemic led to significant shifts in social media usage patterns, resulting in increased Internet traffic for communication purposes. This study analyses the use of social media and television by the Romanian population before (in 2018), during (in 2020), and after (in 2023) the COVID-19 lockdown. The results indicate that during and after the lockdown, the most frequently used social networking sites and mobile apps in Romania were Facebook and WhatsApp. TikTok experienced a significant increase in user registrations, surpassing Instagram. Despite the presumption that TV lost market share compared to the Internet, television not only remained the most utilised medium, but TV consumption increased during and after the pandemic. The data was collected by the media agency Dentsu Romania, combining information obtained from BRAT (Biroul Român de Audit Transmedia) and Dentsu Romania, based on a collection methodology involving online and face-to-face interviews, on a representative sample of the Romanian population. BRAT and Dentsu Romania media consumption data was cross-referenced with information on consumption behaviour monitored through people meters by ARMA (Asociația Română pentru Măsurarea Audiențelor).

KEY WORDS:

internet, media consumption, news, social media usage, television

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1 Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in major changes in work, education, purchasing, and (media) consumption habits. During the state of emergency, citizens' ordinary activities were struck by social restrictions. As a consequence of lockdown, the time spent online, on mobile phones, on various devices, on the Internet, and on social media has increased. Previous studies indicate that there are differences in media usage behaviours based on consumer typologies (Mast, 2018). The general perception was that during the pandemic Internet usage reduced television viewing and exposure to audiovisual media (Obae, 2020a). The common impression was that news television channels were losing audience to news consumption on websites or social media platforms (Barbu, 2022).

As Romania's population has aged, the television audience has also grown older. Hence the concern has arisen that an increasing number of young Romanians prefer to obtain news from the news feeds of social networking sites, even if they are less reliable, rather than relying on verified news produced by newsrooms. According to the data from the January 2024 survey conducted by Save the Children Organisation among parents, teenagers aged 16 – 17 spend a considerable amount of time browsing the Internet, with 34% of them being online for 4 – 6 hours per day and 14% exceeding 6 hours per day. 75% of parents declare that their greatest concern regarding their children's Internet usage is their exposure to inappropriate content online or the possibility of them being contacted online by people they do not know in real life (70%). Additionally, 59% of parents fear that their children could become victims of Internet crimes. 32% of parents with children aged 5 to 10 say that their son/daughter uses TikTok, 21% Instagram, 19% Facebook, and 17% Snapchat, according to a study conducted by Save the Children Organisation (Neagu, 2024).

During the pandemic, amidst the spread of fake news, social media amplified the disinformation (Tkáčová et al., 2023), and the Internet seemed to be a favourable environment (Bărgăoanu, 2018) for deep-fake videos, rumours, and conspiracy theories proliferated, generating what the World Health Organisation (WHO) named the *infodemic* (Simon and Camargo, 2021). The influence of online disinformation on public perceptions has led some researchers to describe the citizens who are "infodemically" vulnerable" (Rožukalne et al., 2021).

However, television remains the most used medium for obtaining information among Europeans, according to the 2023 Eurobarometer data, while social media platforms are registering a significant gain in this regard (Ion, 2023). 71% of Europeans have stated that television is their main source of information. Online news platforms come in second, with 42%. Nearly 80% of Romanians have specified that they use television to stay informed. Social media platforms come in the second place, used by 48% respondents from Romania. In the 2021 Eurobarometer, Romanians reported trusting television (56%), online press (37%), and social media (28%) (Ștefan, 2021).

According to an INSCOP research conducted during pandemic at the request of the Strategic Thinking Group (September 15 – 17, 2021), 53.1% of Romanians rely on TV stations as their source of information, 21% on social media, and 15.5% on online publications. Those aged over 45, especially the inactive, residents of rural or small urban areas, and state employees are the most likely to regularly get informed from TV. On the other hand, young people, residents of the capital city Bucharest, TikTok and Instagram users tend to rely more on social media for information compared to other demographic groups.

The lack of trust in television news is significant, but the lack of trust in news from social media is almost as high. According to 3rd edition of 2021 opinion poll entitled Public Distrust: West vs. East, the Rise of Nationalism in the Era of Disinformation and Fake News conducted by INSCOP Research (in September 2021) in partnership with Verifield at the request of the Strategic Thinking Group think tank, 49% of respondents consider TV stations to be the most exposed to disinformation and spreading fake news (compared to 52.6% in June), 35.3% consider social media to be in this situation (compared to 34.9% in June). 55.6% of respondents considered they have been exposed to fake news or disinformation to a very large or large extent (compared to 50.1% in June and 55% in March), while 40.8% considered that they have been exposed to a small extent or very little/not at all (compared to 45.6% in June and 42.6% in March) (Strategic Thinking Group, 2021).

Even though the technological and economic changes produced a climate of uncertainty about the future of the traditional media like newspapers and television, television retains a considerable share of the audience and has, in reality, expanded its news and current affairs broadcasting. Television news is far more easily available than in previous decades, and it continues to appeal to a broad cross-section of the public, more than newspapers or the Internet. Post-industrial societies have experienced the emergence of what can be termed *postmodern communications*, characterised by greater diversification and multiplication of news sources, leading towards a richer and more pluralistic news environment (Norris, 2000). Television consumption was linked with domestic life and with the family universe (Silverstone, 1999), while Internet consumption was associated with the global information society (Castells, 2002).

In the context of digitisation and the intensification of online activities, the research question that drove the secondary analyses of media consumption data was whether during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, television consumption decreased in Romania, while social media usage and Internet data consumption increased. I used the year 2018 as a reference point, before the COVID-19 pandemic started. The media consumption information was compared with the year 2020, when the state of emergency was declared and restrictive measures were imposed, and with the year 2023, several months after the pandemic was officially declared over. The objective was to develop a deeper understanding of how COVID-19 and the numerous economic and social transformations it caused led to modifications in consumers' TV viewing habits and Internet usage. The study aims to fill a gap in the specialised literature addressing media consumption in Romania, which lacks quantitative data on television and Internet consumption. Quantitative research on television or Internet consumption is costly and typically conducted by polling institutes or communication agencies in the media market. The article considers and analyses the current results and information from qualitative studies and quantitative research conducted by communication agencies to compare the media consumption in Romania before and after the pandemic.

2 Media Consumption in Romania: Before and After the Pandemic

The total population of Romania was 19.53 million in the year 2018 (O'Neill, 2023). The number of Internet users increased by 4 million in just 5 years, from 13.7 million in 2018 to 17.8 million in 2023. At the beginning of 2018, there were 13.74 million active Internet users, of which 10 million had a Facebook account in Romania and 3.2 million had an Instagram account (Kemp, 2018). In January 2020, there were 15.35 million Internet users and 11 million social media users. In January 2020, there were 9.8 million Facebook accounts registered in Romania, slightly down from 2018, and 3.7 million Instagram accounts (Kemp, 2020).

In June 2020, there were 4 million monthly active users of TikTok and 2.4 million daily active users from Romania. During the same period, Instagram had 4.4 million monthly active users (Duveanu, 2020). In 2020, there were 2.8 million active accounts on the professional networking platform LinkedIn.

After the pandemic, there were 17.82 million Internet users at the beginning of 2023, and Internet penetration remained at 88.9% of the total population. 13.5 million Romanians were on social media platforms, representing 67.3% of the total population (Kemp, 2023). At the beginning of 2023, 9.5 million Romanians had a Facebook account, 7.5 million were active on TikTok, 4.9 million on Instagram, and 3.6 million on LinkedIn. There were 13.5 million YouTube users at the beginning of 2023, with video materials being the most consumed digital media.

Romanian users' media consumption changed during the 2020 pandemic, according to data from the Media Fact Book Romania 2021 (Olteanu et al., 2021). In 2020 Romanians spent the most time on messaging services – WhatsApp (48%) or social networking sites (43.8%), followed by online news (47.1%), YouTube videos (46.8%), television on broadcast channels (41.8%), or streaming services like Netflix (40.8%). The mobile phone was the

primary device for almost all generations, except Baby Boomers who still prefer desktops or laptops; the most common activities on mobile were using messaging apps (85%), photography (78%), social networking (76%), sending text messages (72%), and watching online video and audio (65%) (Olteanu et al., 2021). The number of social media users reached 12 million in 2020 (63% of Romania's population), with 11.77 million accessing social media on a mobile device (Olteanu et al., 2021).

Meanwhile, during the social restrictions and due to the lockdown, local media suffered severe losses in revenues (Lupu, 2020), and a large part of magazines and national publications shut down their print versions (Obac, 2020b). During the pandemic, the number of newspaper readers and advertising revenues for print media dramatically decreased (Olteanu et al., 2021). The "Report of the Centre for Independent Journalism 2021" reveals that after the first year of the pandemic, the print press, especially the local media, was the most financially affected by the pandemic and was "on the brink of collapse due to the erosion of the business model, economic and political pressures. The state of emergency and travel restrictions closed most small businesses, which immediately cut their advertising costs and nearly zeroed out direct newspaper sales. ... One by one, most nationally circulated weeklies suspended their paper editions, and many local printed newspapers reduced their number of pages to keep costs under control. Editors from the local press reported that in March-April 2020, their revenues dropped by 70 – 90%" (Holdiş et al., 2020, p. 17). The financial crisis of 2008 – 2010 also affected traditional media and restructured entire editorial teams, forcing print newspapers to close print editions and continue publishing on websites (Momoc, 2020). The printed press drastically reduced its circulation and survived during the pandemic in the online environment. (Momoc, 2022).

By the end of 2022, approximately 13.5 million Romanians used at least one social media platform. A consumption habit from the pandemic, Romanians of all ages access and use social media platforms daily. 67.3% of Romanians were using social media by the end of 2022, with an average of 2.5 hours spent each day (Olteanu et al., 2023). Despite the significant increase in Internet consumption in Romania, television remains not only the most watched medium but also the most profitable even after the pandemic, with the highest advertising revenues (Olteanu et al., 2023).

Obviously, in Romania Internet consumption and exposure to social media platforms increased significantly during the pandemic. But television remains the most preferred medium of information, especially for the age group of 35 to 74 years, adults, and seniors. More and more segments of the public, young people between 18 and 34 years old, TikTok and Instagram users, affirm that they select their news from online sources, news websites, and social networks. (Strategic Thinking Group, 2021) According to an *Avan(t?)garde* survey conducted for Digi24 TV (August 2023), the majority of Romanians get their information from television. The next sources of information are online press and social media. People aged between 31 and 60 years old, as well as those over 61 years old, watch television the most to get informed: 57% get their information from TV, 18% from online press, and 14% from social media. Respondents aged between 18 and 30 years old get information more from online press and social media: 35% from TV channels, 31% from social media, and 29% from online press (Kiss, 2023).

3 Media Market Data Collection

Starting from the empirical observation that, during the pandemic, Romanians used Internet applications for live streaming and messaging, web sites, social networks and search engines for communication, purchasing products and services, studying, playing, socialising and obtaining information, the research hypothesis of the paper was that television consumption decreased, while Internet and digital platform consumption increased in the Romanian media market during and after the 2020 restrictions. I chose the year 2018 as reference before the COVID-19 pandemic began. For media consumption during the pandemic, I opted for the year 2020, when the state of emergency was declared, and lockdown was imposed. The year 2023 represents the post-pandemic period, when all social restrictions were lifted.

I collaborated with members of the media market research team at Dentsu Romania, whom I asked for assistance in collecting media consumption data to compare the years 2018, 2020, and 2023. For the comparative analysis between the daily time Romanians believe they spend watching TV (hours of TV consumption declared in the interview) and the actual daily time spent in front of the television (hours of TV consumption measured by people meters), I used public data from BRAT and ARMA. The online interviews conducted by Dentsu team deep-dived into the activities Romanians engage in online at least once a day or weekly.

This research on the media consumption in Romania combines data obtained from BRAT (Romanian Transmedia Audit Bureau – Biroul Român de Audit Transmedia) and Dentsu Romania, based on a research methodology of collection through online interviews and face-to-face interviews through standardised questionnaires, and it is sociologically representative for the Romanian population. BRAT and Dentsu Romania data on media consumption was corroborated with information on consumption behaviour monitored through people meters by ARMA (Romanian Audience Measurement Association – Asociația Română pentru Măsurarea Audiențelor). Dentsu Romania conducted online interviews – large scale surveys using structured questioning - on a nationally representative sample for the age group of 16 – 64-year-olds, using the Consumer Connection System application.

Application	Owner	Methodology	Population	Sample	Universe (000)	Period of Time
CCS – Consumer Connection System	dentsu network	online interviews	16-64 y.o.	2,711 3,000 3,017	13,012 12,571 12,247	2018 2021 2023
Instar Analytics	ARMA	people meters	4+y.o	3,573	17,292	2018-2023
SNA	BRAT	online and face to face interviews	14-17 y.o	2,726	15,539 15,539 14,873	Feb18-Jul19 Apr19-Oct20 May22-Jun23

Figure 1. Sources of data on media consumption in Romania

Source: own processing, 2023

4 Media Consumption Evolution

The data collected by BRAT through the SNA Focus application reveals an increase in Internet usage during the pandemic: from 65.9% in 2018 to 71.5% in 2020, and 79.8% of the total population (14 – 74 years old) in 2023. There is a 13.9% increase in Internet usage in Romania compared to the period before the COVID-19 pandemic.

The increase in Internet usage between 2018 and 2023, especially from the perspective of age groups, is observed in the age categories of 35 – 44, 45 – 54, and 55 – 64 years old. However, an increase from 90% to 97% can also be observed in the younger age group intensively using the Internet: 25 – 34 years old. In the 35 – 44 age group, the increase in Internet usage is 14 percentage points, from 80% in 2018 to 94% in 2023; and in the 45 – 54 age group, the increase in Internet usage was 21 points, from 63% to 84%. The growth is impressive, with a 25-percentage point increase, from 38% to 63%, in the 55 – 64 age group. The population that embraced the Internet the most during the pandemic was the older population, as the younger age groups were already using online tools. In 2023, women use the Internet more than men, with 82% of females compared to 78% of males.

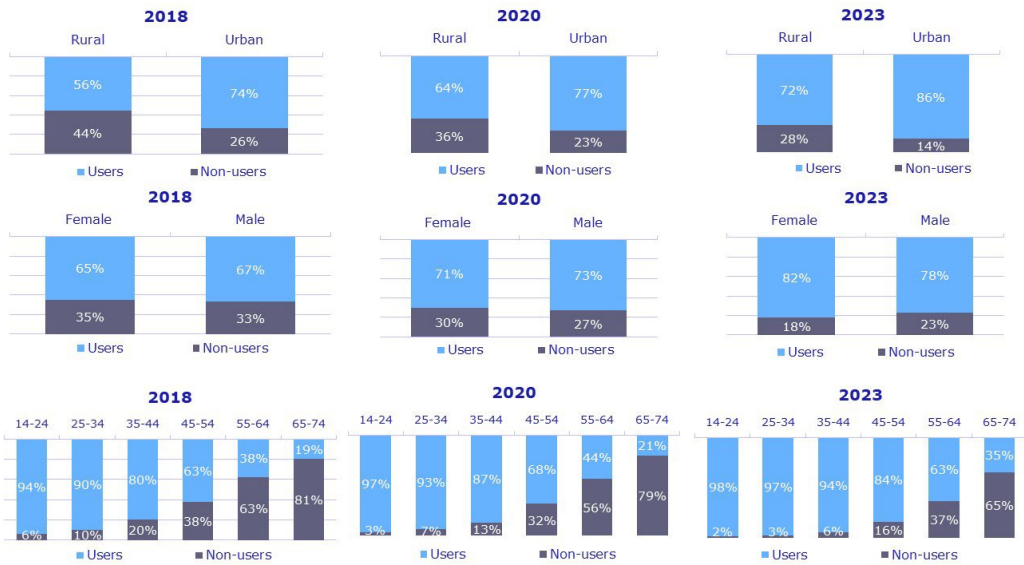


Figure 2. Internet usage. Residential area, gender, age groups
Source: own processing, 2023

The mobile phone is the preferred device for accessing the Internet: in 5 years, the usage increased by 20.9 percentage points, from 55.8% in 2018 to 65.7% in 2020, and up to 76.7% in 2023 for the population aged 14 – 74. We observe a change in mobile adoption in the age group of 45 – 54 years: from 48% to 80%; and in the group of 55 – 64 years: from 25% to 59%.

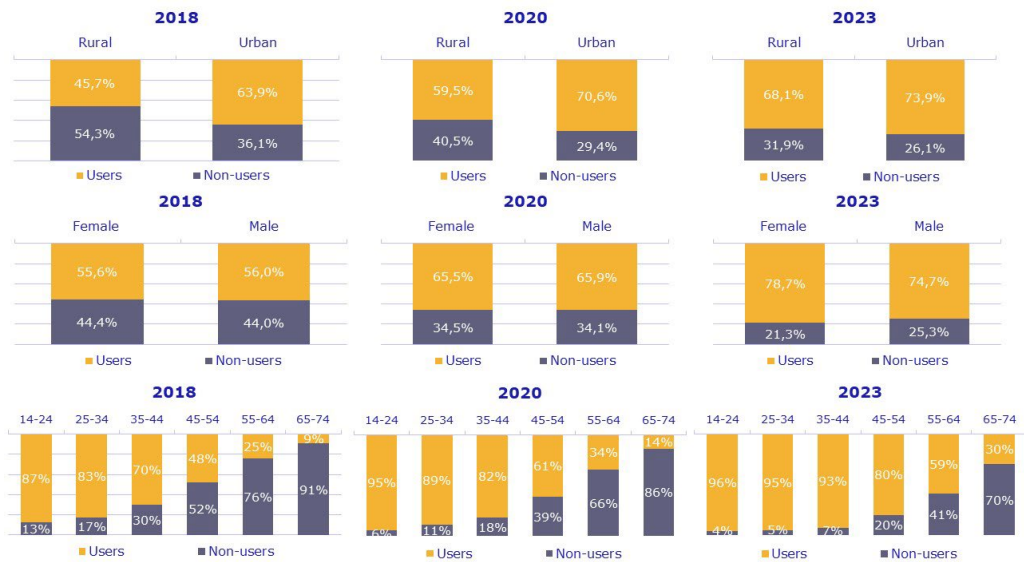


Figure 3. Internet using mobile. Residential area, gender, age groups
Source: own processing, 2023

In response to the Dentsu agency question regarding online activities at least once a week, Romanians (aged 16-64, all population) list their top 5 weekly online activities: using a search engine, instant messaging apps, browsing social media, seeking information on services/products, and watching online user-generated content, especially video content. In 2023, social media (90%) lost its leadership position in favour of search activities (97%). Instant messaging applications are emerging: 97% of all Romanians use a search engine, and 94% use an instant messaging application at least once a week. Romanians (in 2023) go online daily on search engines (85%), instant messaging (76%), and social media (75%).

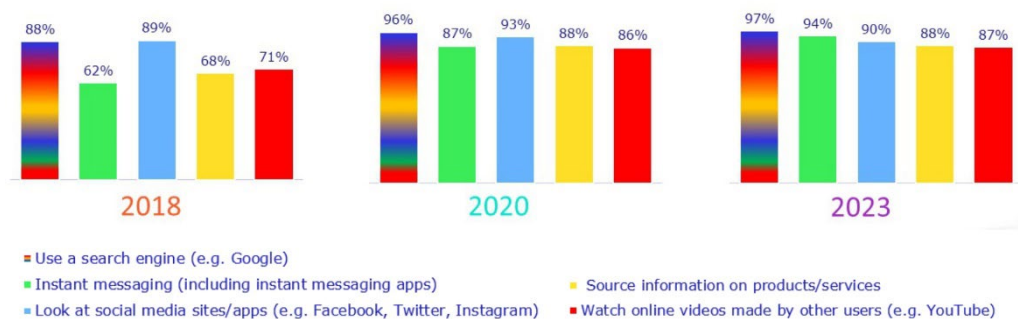


Figure 4. Where do Romanians go online? Activities done at least once a week

Source: Dentsu Romania (2023a)

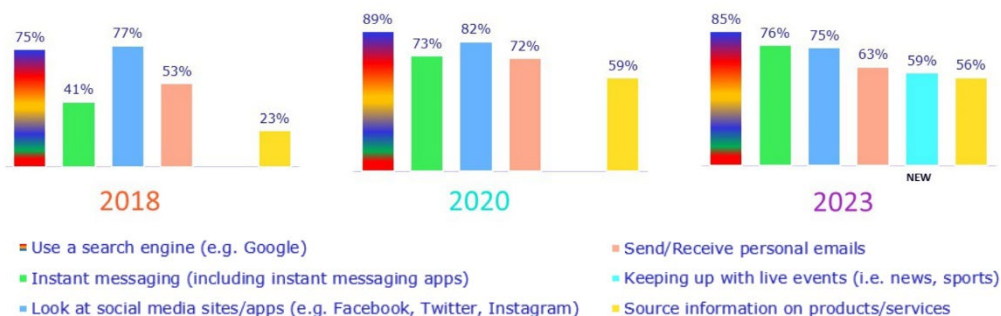


Figure 5. Where do Romanians go online? Activities done at least once a day

Source: Dentsu Romani (2023)

The Dentsu Romania study shows that television consumption (all population, aged 16 – 64) has not been affected by the rise of social media platforms, but rather that TV is convergent with the use of new technologies. Television consumption based on residence environment, gender, and age group reveals no differences in usage; Romanians are significant TV consumers regardless of urban or rural settings. In 2023, television is equally attractive for the age group of 16 – 18, as it is for the age group of 55 – 64.

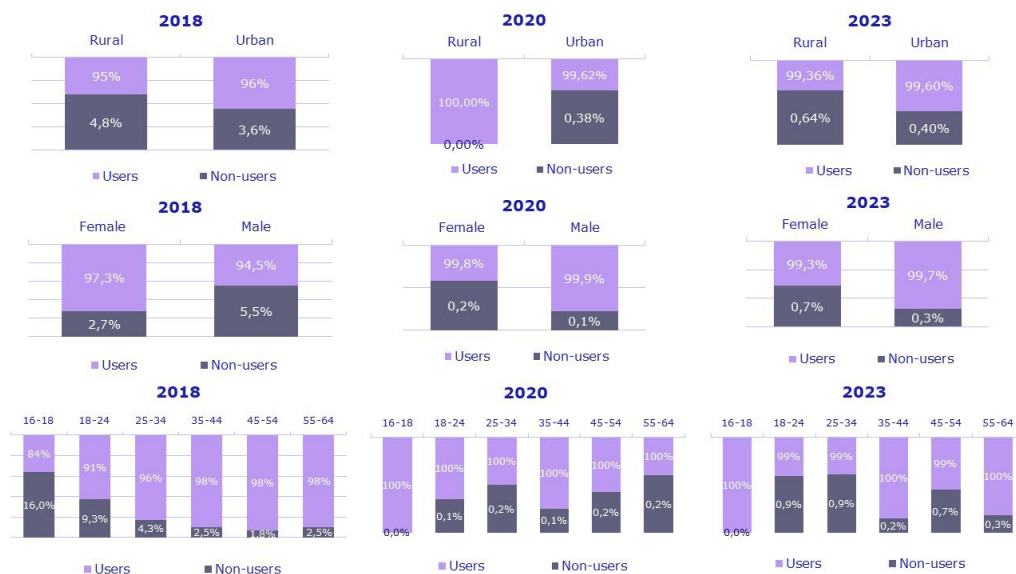


Figure 6. TV Usage. Residential area, gender, age groups
Source: own processing, 2023

Obviously, there is a difference between the amount of actual television consumption and the amount that Romanians declare. The difference may stem from each viewer's perception of the time spent passively watching television content or from the fact that the television can serve as background noise, while the individual engages in other activities around the house with the TV on. Viewing implies an encounter with a visual medium, "reception, interpretation, behavioural effects or needs gratified" (Shimpach, 2014, pp. 62-63). Measurements of consumption behaviour monitored through people meters (ARMA research – Romanian Audience Measurement Association) reflect a significant gap between actual and perceived and reported consumption (Dentsu Romania survey interviews). Romanians' perception is that they spend less time watching television than they actually do: in reality, they spend more time in front of TV than they declare or perceive. There was a constant decreasing trend in consumption, except the pandemic year 2020.

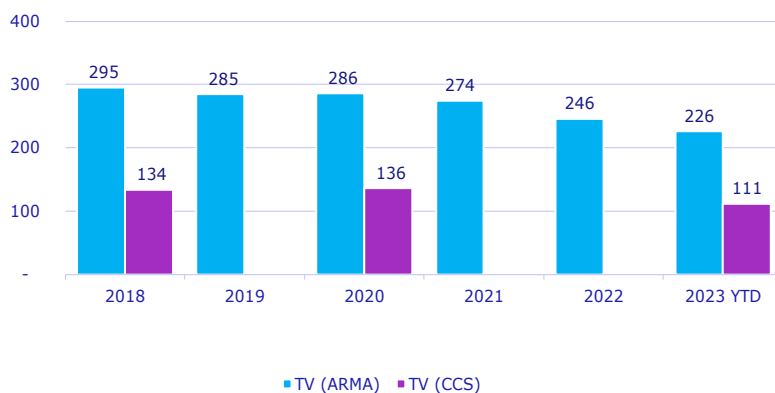


Figure 7. TV Consumption – Time spent per day. Declarative vs. behavioural gap
Source: own processing, 2023

5 Conclusions

The print media market was significantly disturbed by financial crisis (2008 – 2010), the COVID-19 pandemic (2020 – 2022), and the ongoing Internet revolution. The impact of the Internet technology on the functioning of traditional media (print, radio, television) cannot be underestimated. However, the research hypothesis that television consumption decreased during or after the COVID-19 crisis was not confirmed. Romanians remain heavy TV viewers regardless of urban or rural settings and regardless of age group, whether young (the age group of 16 – 18) or old (the age group of 55 – 64). However, audience analysis should not be one of predefined individuals or rigidly defined age or social groups, but rather one of daily practices and activities, within which the complex act of watching television is situated alongside others, such as simultaneous consumption of social media or Internet searching. Internet consumption did indeed increase, especially among the older Romanian population; however, younger individuals used to be early adopters and consumers of digital media even before the pandemic.

The research study revealed that in 2023, social media (90%) lost its leadership position in favour of search activities: 97% of all Romanians used a search engine, while 94% used an instant messaging application at least once a week. In fact, even social media platforms were used as search engines to find information of public interest. We found out that social media platforms tend to supplement rather than replace the old medium of television. More sources of news are available on digital platforms than ever before; thus, news consumption has increased, and the audience has broadened.

Today, the consumption media trend is that, for young people, the primary source of information is no longer represented by television, but by social media platforms, instant messaging apps, and user-generated (video) content. Still, traditional media in Romania, especially television channels, hold the largest share of advertising revenue and mass audience. Moreover, television is a convergent medium that, through smart TVs with Internet access, broadcasts digital media content. Also, Internet users consume television through their smartphones.

The pandemic has increased the Internet data consumption among all age groups. The limitation of the research is the fact that the collected data do not say much about the effects of digital media exposure. Clearly, COVID-19 lockdown and social restrictions acted as a catalyst for increased television consumption in search of credible news sources. Paradoxically, while imagining and declaring that they consume less television, Romanians were actually spending more time in front of their TV. In reality, print media, publishers, magazines, and newspapers were the most affected by the changes in media consumption habits because of the ascension of websites, digital platforms, social media and instant messaging applications.

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