

# STRENGTHS AND SHORTCOMING IN THE CONFIGURATION OF INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALISM IN THE ONLINE ENVIRONMENT IN THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA

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## Abstract

On the media market, more and more platforms specialized in publishing journalistic investigations are being configured. The investigative journalist's possibilities have expanded to such an extent that currently a good professional can carry out journalistic investigations without going out into the field and without conducting interviews with information sources. At the same time, new technologies have also enormously influenced the structural aspect of journalistic investigations, because online platforms also allow the publication of rather voluminous materials, accompanied by many photos, graphics, diagrams and even video and audio content. The journalist also applies numerous innovative tools such as: geotagging, real-time geolocation, hashtags, accounts of individuals on social networks, access to free and paid databases. In the Republic of Moldova, the interest in the field of investigative journalism is fuelled by several essential aspects; the increased level of corruption in all social fields; the intensification of anti-corruption policies, with the aim of aligning the Republic of Moldova with European policies; increasing the level of liberalization and independence of the media in setting their agenda independently; new technologies have significantly simplified the work of investigative journalists.

**Keywords:** *journalism, investigation technologies, internet, methods, anti-corruption, database.*

The technology and digitalization of the media process made their mark on all aspects of the journalistic activity, starting with the organization of specific activities and ending with journalistic ethics and professional responsibility. The Internet, as a unique source of search, comparative analysis, but also evolutionary of processes and phenomena and storage of information, allows journalists to obtain, in a very short period of time, access to official documents, databases or the electronic resources of other media institutions, libraries, archives, press agencies, etc. As a result, on the media market, more and more platforms specialized in publishing

journalistic investigations are being configured, the work in the public interest is carried out more intensively, being animated by the feedback of consumers of media content. The possibilities of the investigative journalist have widened so much that currently a good professional can carry out journalistic investigations without going out on the ground and without conducting interviews with information sources. Even if in the last decades the idea existed that investigative journalism is configured on topics related to corruption, the connections of public officials with the underworld and the abuse of power, in reality the investigation as a journalistic genre can be carried out on the most diverse topics. A good investigative journalist can also produce an outstanding material about lowering water levels in wells or increasing landslides in a certain area. But an investigative material of the case will contain not only facts, but also comments, arguments and counterarguments, proportionally displayed, so that the work on an investigation can take at least a month, in order to avoid the tendentious presentation of the information.

At the same time, the new technologies have also influenced enormously the structural aspect of journalistic investigations, because online platforms also allow the publication of quite bulky materials, accompanied by many photos, graphs, diagrams and even video and audio content. With the alert development of technologies, numerous innovative tools have been invented and widely applied in practice, which the journalist can use if necessary: geotagging (geolocation) (a technique for joining geographical metadata to photographs, websites, etc.), real-time geolocation (a technique used to determine the geographical location of

resources and people), hashtags (clicking on the hashtag redirects us to all posts that focus on a certain topic), the accounts of individuals on social networks (very useful for journalists and which are actively used), access to open and free databases, but also to those with payment. With their help investigative journalists can obtain a much larger volume of information than by applying traditional techniques and methods, such as observation and interview, for example. And there is another advantage – fortifying the interest in this kind of journalistic content among young consumers, accustomed to technological innovations and to whom the use of the Internet represents a daily necessity.

Thus, in the present scientific research we shall deal with the exhaustive analysis of the peculiarities of investigative journalism in the Republic of Moldova in the online environment. In order to achieve this goal, two platforms specialized in publishing investigative materials represented the subject of the analysis: *rise.md*, *anticoruptie.md* and a highly rated periodical publication on the media market: *zdg.md*.

In order to establish a correct diagnosis of the researched phenomenon, we used the following research methods: *the quantitative-qualitative method* to see the topics approached and the co-report of such materials on different information platforms, but also the techniques used in the process of documentation and exposure of the acquired information; *the method of comparative research* to identify the advantages and disadvantages of the Internet and information technologies in the preparation and production of investigative materials; *the method of observation* and *the historiographical method* were applied to give us an opinion about the characteristics of investigative journalism and the evolutionary peculiarities of the investigation as a privileged journalistic genre. The purpose of this research is to study the topics of materials and topics of interest to investigative journalists in the Republic of Moldova, to analyse the tools and techniques applied in the search for and acquisition of information, to elucidate the methods applied in the editorial process for presenting and visualizing information.

The interest in the field of investigative journalism is constantly growing, being fuelled by several essential aspects:

- a. The increased level of corruption in all social fields;
- b. Intensifying anticorruption policies, with the aim of aligning the Republic of Moldova with the European policies;
- c. Increasing the liberalization and independence of the media in setting their agenda independently;
- d. New technologies have significantly simplified the work of investigative journalists.

It is worth mentioning that investigative journalism differs enormously from other types of journalism, although it includes elements from all of them: the informative aspect and the analytical aspect, synthesis and contextualization techniques, the historiographical and forecasting aspect, all of which feed the essence – the investigative process and its final purpose – some original research, carried out according to the journalistic rigors. According to researcher David Randall “originality results from the discovery, based on the available data, of some schemes and connections that no one has noticed before” (Randall, 1998). The author refers here not necessarily to a rigorous and long process, as the journalist can find out novel facts from a simple, very well-prepared, interview or even from a simple analysis in dynamics or comparison of facts and figures accessible to the general public. In the Republic of Moldova, access to information of public interest is guaranteed by the Constitution (Article 34) and the *Law on Access to Information* (Legis.md, 2000) and the *Press Law* (Legis.md, 1994). In addition, journalists can consult other sources such as, for example, sites with information about companies, registers of companies with state funding, the websites of ministries, bank reports, arbitration courts attached to associations and agencies, courts of law, the Tax Inspectorate, the Court of Accounts, I.P. Public Services Agency Cadastre, open data catalogues, statistics, etc. As researcher Paul N. Williams states, “The transition to computer-aided production has quickly and significantly affected the way information is transmitted” (Williams, 1982). First of all, it increased the speed of collecting, sorting, selecting and transmitting data, and also broadened the possibilities of documentation, given that the Internet can be considered a kind of toolbox for

the craftsman, who is the reporter, and in the kit there are blogs, social networks, video and audio files, specialized forums, webpages of institutions, including those of press institutions, with all the archives, and "to know what tool to use according to the purpose pursued in the journalistic activity represents a first step in the efficient use of internet resources" (Wendland, 2002), says Mike Wendland. We must also recognize that in the digital age, journalism is also reconfigured, especially in the investigative field, once the techniques of computer-aided journalism "give articles a deeper context than ever before" (Houston, 2003), and computer-assisted journalistic investigations are "cheaper, better and faster ways to analyse an excessive amount of data and information". The contemporary information consumer is no longer satisfied only with attractive titles and a picture - two that accompanies the text, but also the journalist, being continuously engaged in an active race for the public's attention, strives to use all the possibilities offered by the Internet, in order to make his materials accessible and attractive: infographics, video sequences, documents, photographs, schemes, etc., that help the journalist to visualize the information, to present it in a concentrated, summary, but attractive form. In fact, modern content presentation platforms have become very attractive to investigation journalists, for example, the vis visual investigation scenario platform, very useful in illustrating corruption schemes.

Another aspect we would like to refer to is the interaction with sources. The investigation journalist must be very cautious when it comes to the anonymous sources of information or those who are looking for the journalist to convey something unofficial to them, because usually these people pursue a certain interest in providing information: either they do it out of a pronounced civic sense (which is commendable), or that they pursue a self-interest. However, even if the information is provided informally or comes from anonymous sources, it is often a trail, a starting point for an impactful journalistic investigation. At the same time, in the investigative process, due attention must also be paid to the statements of official sources, the journalist must understand what is behind these statements, for what purpose they were made, the context in

which they were made, the tone of the statements, etc., and here we subscribe to those mentioned by the researcher Paul N. Williams who said the following about the interaction of the investigation journalist with the official sources: "You are here to say how things happen, not how officials say they happen" (Williams, 1982).

In this sense, equally important for a journalistic investigation is the consultation of specialists, experts in the field, because an economist, for example, better understands how a fraudulent economic scheme is built and works, how financial resources circulate and how public money is embezzled and what laws have been violated by exponents. However, even if he has discovered the truth and revealed the acts of corruption or violation of the law and also knows the people involved, the journalist is obliged to present in the material the point of view of all the parties subject to the investigation, even if one of those concerned refused to comment on the accusations, it important for the journalist to offer him this possibility. In the local environment, the situation is spread when the public persons concerned in the press materials, including journalistic investigations, address complaints and complaints to the Press Council of the Republic of Moldova, asking for the obligation of the press institution to provide the right of reply, on the grounds that the press material lacks the opinion of the author of the complaint. In addition to all this, it is essential that in the investigation process the journalist knows and respects the precepts of the Code of Ethics, among them being the respect for private life and the dignity of the person. According to principle 3.2 of the Code, interference in private life is allowed only when the disclosure of facts pursues a public interest, and Article 3.3 of the Code provides the following: "The journalist relates about the private conduct of a public person, who exercises a public office, without his consent, only when such conduct affects his capacity to exercise the public office or there is another well-founded reason to offer this information to the company" (Consiliul de presa, 2019). According to researcher Georgeta Stepanov "journalists must establish a fair balance between the public and private interests, so that press materials about the lives of citizens can generate understanding and correction of injustices, but, at

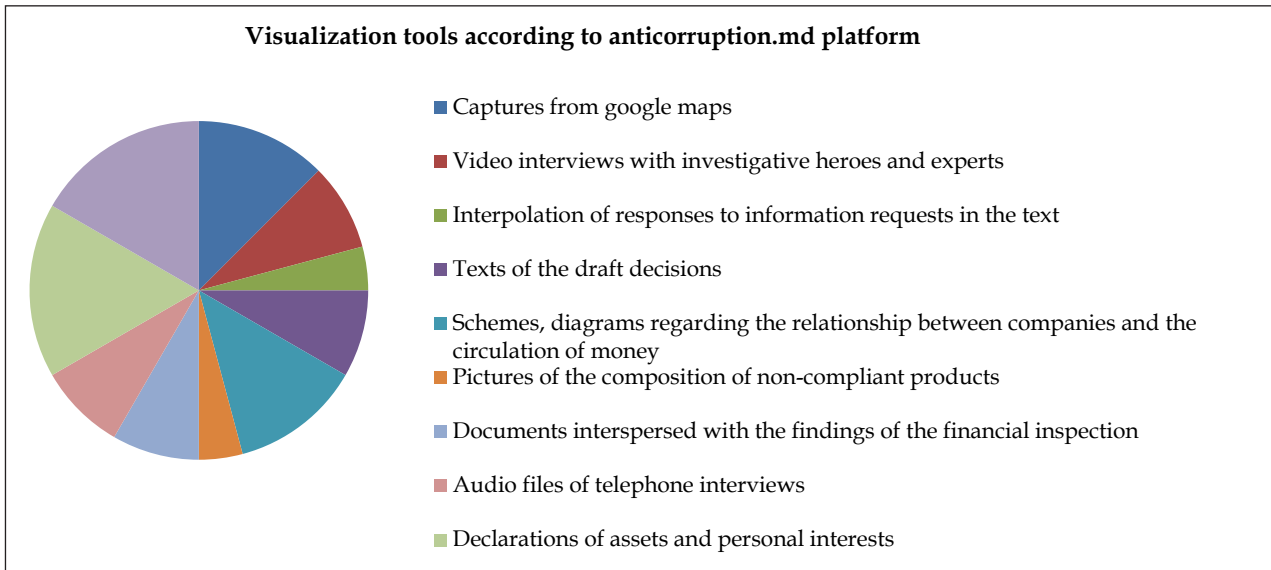
the same time, not to violate the right to private life and their dignity" (Stepanov, 2014).

Of course, in most cases, investigation journalism relates to topics related to corruption and abuse of power, topics that require serious, long-term documentation and in the work process on which the journalist must overcome the reluctance of certain structures to provide the information that interests him. In this regard, the purpose of journalistic investigations is to reveal the links between public officials, officials and organized crime or cases of corruption and abuse of office, or involvement in various fraudulent schemes or illicit enrichment, etc. The difference in essence between informative-analytical and informative journalism lies in the fact that the reporter is not limited to noticing the problem, in many cases he may not even do so, instead he gives answers to questions, he does not present conclusions, he presents facts, that's because a journalistic investigation starts from an idea, a situation or fact, perhaps even unimportant at first glance, and the finality is always a material with a value of news, of public interest and a great significance for society.

We analysed the journalistic investigations published on three platforms specialized in publishing investigative materials: *rise.md*, *anticoruptie.md* and *zdg.md*, the online version of the periodical *Ziarul de Garda*, the only investigative newspaper in the Republic of Moldova. The investigative approach was carried out between 28.12.2021 – 28.12.2022, and a total of 152 materials with investigative content were analysed.

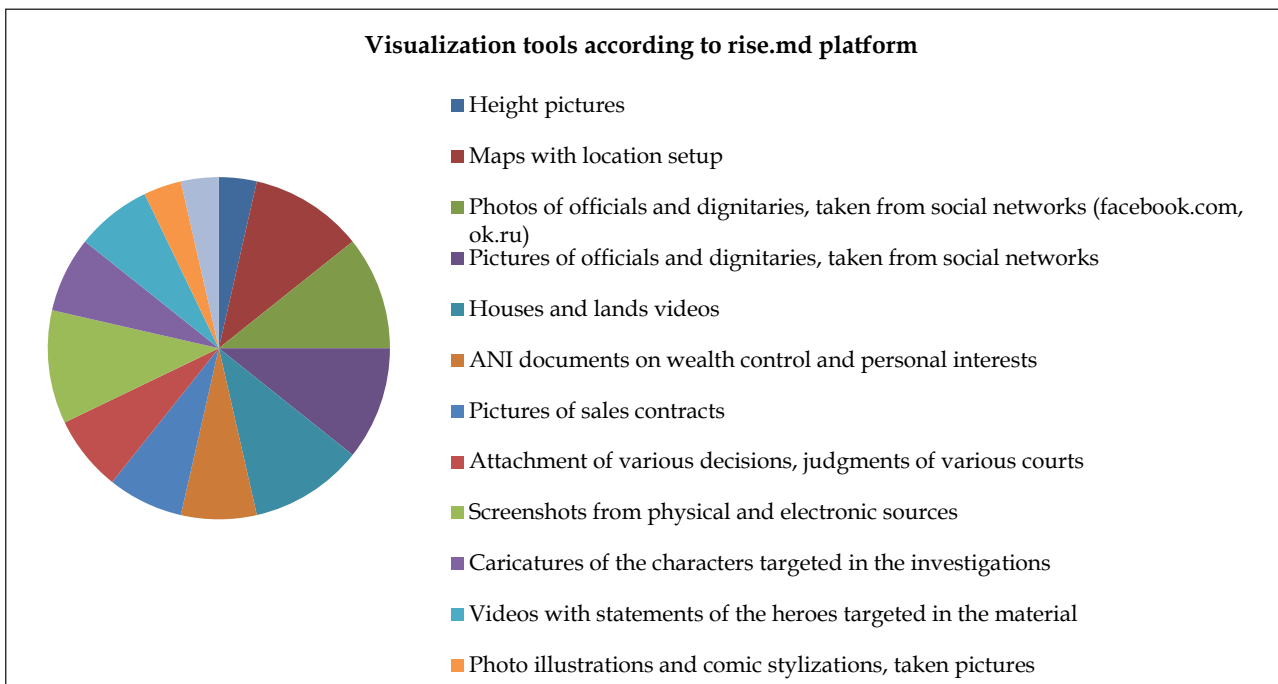
Thus, on the *anticoruptie.md* platform, launched by the Centre for Investigation Journalism of the Republic of Moldova during the analysed period, 54 materials with investigation content were placed in the following categories: economic (5), justice (9), public money (4), public procurement (1), social (19), integrity (16). For example, from the "social" category, the following materials with investigative content drew our attention: "The second Chernobyl," "Invisible children," "Gender revolution," "Roma women and children – labour force for business with beggars from Odessa," "Tiraspol relapses, over 5000 farmers from Dubasari risk losing agricultural production," "No roma, no problems!" The usual techniques that reporters resorted to in the documentation and drafting

process are related to observation and interview (testimonies of characters, exposures of civil servants, experts, etc.), traditional documentation techniques, among which the consultation of the legislation in the field and statistical reports. A different picture is attested in relation to the elaboration of the investigations placed in the category "integrity." The subjects of the materials usually concern the integrity problems of dignitaries, magistrates and other public officials, cases of illicit enrichment, hidden affairs, or directed from the shadows, cases of tax evasions, offshore accounts, the ties between dignitaries and the underworld, open files on behalf of magistrates and the secrets and skeletons that they keep hidden from the public space. Here are some examples: "Vlad Filat: how he escaped his wealth from confiscation," "Artur Reșetnikov: The real estate empire registered with brother, mother-in-law and grandmother," "Igor Dodon: money from Russia, fortunes and interests, influence peddling and favouring relatives," "The fight for CSP: The fortunes, files and skeletons in the closet of the candidates," "In the footsteps of the "billion": 30 million from Banca de Economii "drowned" on the bank of a pond," "Politicians with subscriptions to the millions of the state and companies with roads paved to gain." Among the officials most often targeted in the investigation materials are the former President of the Republic of Moldova Igor Dodon (5 materials), the former director of the Information and Security Service Artur Reșetnikov (3), the former deputy Igor Munteanu (2), the vigilantes and former vigilantes (4), the former Prime Minister Vladimir Filat (2). Through these materials, the reporters aimed at bringing out the relations, affairs and fortunes, exorbitant in certain cases, of the public dignitaries. These materials are mostly made in front of the computer, journalists are documented from open sources, free or paid databases, to which the editorial offices are subscribed, and the data taken do not even require expertise, once they are extracted from official electronic sources. The interview as a source of documentation is used much less, compared to the investigation materials on social topics. With regard to the techniques of structuring and exposing information, the analysis of the investigated contents allows us to ascertain the use of the following exhibition techniques:



The *rise.md* platform places on the site during the analysed period 18 materials with investigation content, which are not divided into categories. All 18 investigations, in one formula or another, refer to the subject of corruption, 6 of these investigations are aimed at the oligarch Vladimir Plahotniuc, and 2 at the former president Igor Dodon. Other identified topics are the following: real estate affairs of public officials, illegal transactions, apartments for judges, the passport factory, illegalities in the activity of charitable

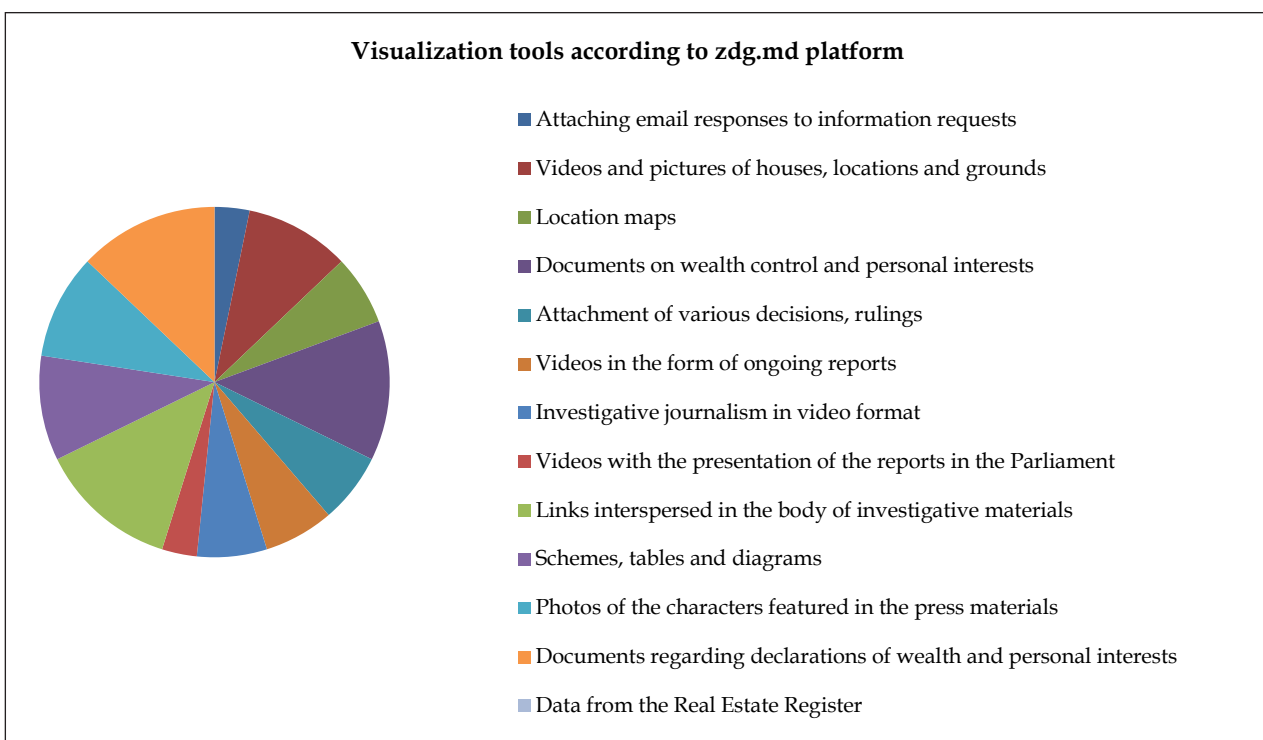
companies, integrity of civil servants, fictitious employments at the border police, the Russian secret agency on the territory of the Republic of Moldova (3 investigations). Here are some examples: "Recruiters from Tiraspol," "The oligarch's plane," "FSB agents, responsible for Moldova," "The secret of the city hall," "The money behind the uniform," "Moldovan companies affiliated to Russian military corporations." The structural analysis of the 18 investigations allowed us to point out the following expository techniques used:



It is worth mentioning that rise.md proved to be the most inventive site in terms of the techniques of structuring and exposing the information acquired in the investigation process, even if it published the lowest number of investigations among the 3 entities analysed within this scientific endeavour.

The electronic version of *Ziarul de garda*, the only investigation newspaper on the domestic market, *zdg.md* published 51 investigations and 27 files during the period under investigation. Here, too, journalistic investigations are not grouped into categories, but refer to various topics: cases of fraud, laundering of public money, illicit enrichment, rigged auctions, the business of protests, the integrity of dignitaries and magistrates, exceeding the duties of the service, illegal deforestation, seizures and confiscations, monopoly on the metals market, etc. It is worth mentioning that investigations on social issues were also placed on the site, they made up 27% of the total materials, and in the following we refer to some of them: "Waiting for firewood," "Behind the scenes of false bomb alerts," "Masters of Covid tests," "Non-existent forests," "The army from which recruits flee." The other 73% targeted politics, justice and economy. Here are some titles: "Luxury

apartment put up for sale by the family of a judge," "Another million for the rest of officials," "Seizures of millions, confiscations of less than 1%," "All attorneys general: fortunes, occupations, secrets," "Schemes of Varnita in the fight with justice." Given the fact that the newspaper appears in a printed version, the documentary techniques applied in the investigation process are primarily the traditional ones, with the presence of reporters in the field and the conduct of interviews (especially in investigations on social topics). At the same time, the reporters from this publication also capitalize on the undercover work as a documentation technique, this being applied, for example, in the investigation entitled "Protesters in rent." We also noticed that reporters work a lot with open databases and the statistical background, but the presentation of figures is not dry. For this purpose, journalists use different software that allow the creation of maps, diagrams and tables, the attachment of documents, transcripts of dialogues by phone, etc., which are not found in the printed version of investigative materials, for lack of space. Thus, in the investigation contents placed on the site we have identified the following tools and techniques for presenting information:



In conclusion, the investigation journalists from *anticoruptie.md*, *rise.md* and *zdg.md* use in the process of documentation and production of materials both the traditional tools and techniques and the vast possibilities of the Internet, by accessing databases, social network contents, software that lends itself to work in the investigative field specialized sites, which allows them to make a much broader and exhaustive documentation. For *anticoruptie.md* and *rise.md* it is less specific to the exit of the reporters to the field, while the journalists from the *zdg.md* are very present in the field, to observe how things are going on the spot and to conduct interviews. Another finding refers to the topic of investigations, which is a varied one, however, the investigations on social issues give way in number to the investigations regarding integrity issues, and the data from the register of real estate and the documents regarding the declarations of assets and personal interests are substantive information in all investigations of this kind.

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