

# Mass-Media and Democracy in Romania. Does the Press Still Represent the Public Agenda?

Ștefan CIOCHINARU\*

**Abstract:** *The traditional press currently finds itself in the middle of a profound crisis: its role as a pillar of democracy is being intensely questioned. New / modern / contemporary / digital forms of media are offering journalists a renewed chance of survival in an increasingly saturated landscape, while the more traditional media have been seized by political and economic interests which have led to a grave distortion of the medium's functions and objectives. In order to succeed in these trying times, the written press needs to be able to consistently find creative ways of reinventing itself. The education, voice, ethics and professional morals reflected by journalists are all prerequisites for safeguarding one of the noblest professions in the history of human civilization.*

**Keywords:** *mass-media, democracy, local press, public interest, public agenda*

Motto: *“The Romanian press is a captive watchdog. In order to represent a higher ideal, it should act only as the guard of the ordinary citizen. Its master*

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\* Hyperion University of Bucharest, Faculty of Journalism

*should be the reader.”* - Ion Cristoiu.<sup>1</sup> (my translation)

Not too long ago, the institution of Journalism was still understood as primarily constituting an exercise in critical expression for the benefit of the public. This was after the Romanian Revolution of 1989, when, after fifty years of Communism, the press was finally granted freedom. You could find a new publication at every *kiosk*, and all sold out almost instantly. The circulation figures were extremely high and the public was buying indiscriminately, hungry for every new kind of information. The first decade of freedom was thus linked to the apex of the free press: an educated, enthusiastic and trusting readership led to the highest possible sales. Papers did not fail to turn up daily, were read “ritualistically” starting with the early hours and exerted a strong influence on both the political class as well as on the Romanian society at large.

Nowadays, the daily papers have all but disappeared, having been replaced by tabloids whose sales numbers seem to be inversely proportional to the level of public education. The independent press has ceased to exist as soon as mass-media started being run by a handful of “moguls,” who are naturally more concerned with the political and economic aspect of the business, and not the quality of the work being published. True, dedicated professionals have also disappeared after being subjected to attacks by high-ranking individuals and morally-handicapped mercenaries, who in turn only show loyalty to those who can guarantee a better payday. According to certain analysts, the classic press is constantly losing its audience - not just because of the creative outlet afforded by the digital media or late night talk-shows exhausting the possible options for talking points - because of the implicit or explicit requirement for partisanship.<sup>2</sup> The public is abandoning a press it does not feel represented by, a press that falsifies the real daily agenda and that has lost any semblance of professionalism.

Over the past few years, the following newspapers and magazines have either come to publish their content online, or disappeared altogether: *Tineretul Liber*, *Cotidianul*, *Meridian*, *Lumea*, *Jurnal Internațional*, *Gardianul*, *Ziua*, *Cronica Română*, *Curierul Național*, *Gândul*, *Privirea*, *Puterea*, *Atac*, *Independent*, *Expres*, *Interesul Public*, *Realitatea*

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<sup>1</sup> <https://evz.ro/cristoiu-presa-romaneasca-un-caine-de-paza-pus-in-lant-882614.html>

<sup>2</sup> <https://evz.ro/presa-moare-dar-nu-se-preda-882794.html>

*Românească*, *Național* and *Ultima Oră*. The only publications able to resist this shift have been the ones that did not have to worry about relying exclusively on journalism. Such publications had been taken over by media corporations long before this shift even occurred, and had been heavily promoted by their owners for reasons that have little to do with cultivating an informed readership. These owners – the likes of Dan Voiculescu, Sorin Ovidiu Vântu, Silviu Prigoană, Adrian Sârbu, Dinu Patriciu, Cozmin Gușă, Ioan and Viorel Micula, Dan Adamescu or Peter Imre – have rather tried to protect their own political and economic interests. Examining the current state of newspapers such as *România Liberă* and *Jurnalul Național*, one could easily argue that this is an ongoing crisis. Ștefan Câdea, the head of the Romanian Center for Investigative Journalism (CRJI) and the author of a database concerning shareholding structures coordinated by the Center for Independent Journalism – [www.mediaindex.ro](http://www.mediaindex.ro) – maintains that Romanian politicians have tried to apply the “Berlusconi-model” of shielding themselves from the possible legal repercussions to their actions. Ștefan Câdea states that:

“The most profitable businesses for politicians have been their dealings with the state, and in order to distance themselves from any potential criminal convictions, they have striven to control the media. Controlling the media guarantees their influence over investigations and trials, as well as the possibility of being re-elected. Politicians have been training to corner this market for twenty years. First they suffocated the public airwaves, which they seem to consider their private goods. Then they started building their own small media empires, especially in the sphere of the local press. The business model they are following is not original, it has already been accomplished in Italy by Berlusconi. Politicians’ appetite for press enterprises has also been observed by the *RSF* mission in Romania in 2004. Things have not changed for the better since the last decade. Maybe certain people interposed on the path of the documents. That is why politicians are the last people to wish for transparency in regards to financing for the audiovisual field.”<sup>1</sup> (my translation)

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.mediafax.ro/revista-presei/moguli-de-provincie-baronii-conduc-judetetele-cu-telecomanda-in-mana-4055906>

The Bucharest model has since been adopted in the rest of the Romanian territory. So-called “local barons”<sup>1</sup> have quickly learned how freedom of expression can be exploited: the variety of television, radio stations and newspapers that they either directly or indirectly own is a testament to this fact. Besides, owning so many media outlets serves as a means to control different counties, as well as having a way to settle personal scores with other political or economic adversaries that represent a serious threat to one’s own political rise. The political win that they are able to secure by having a television channel is often more important than the financial aspect, as more often than not, businesses involving the mass-media prove themselves to be colossal money-losing endeavors – this is one of the many ways Romanian politicians end up squandering their money on a yearly basis. They do, however, retrieve it in other ways. Let us take a look at a few examples<sup>2</sup>.

Laura Bijboacă, the wife of former Minister of Defense Teodor Atanasiu, owns half the shares of the radio station *Ardeleanul FM*, while the other half is owned by a former adviser to the Minister - Claudiu Roman. The news media company that the two own also has a TV broadcasting license at its disposal. In the town of Arad, PNL<sup>3</sup> - affiliated politician Gheorghe Drăgan owns the radio station *CNM*. The mayor of Baia Mare has also greatly benefitted from owning a television station - *Axa TV Transilvania* - during the electoral campaign. While the glory days of Bacău city-based, formerly PSD<sup>4</sup> - backed baron Dumitru Sechelariu are long gone, his family continues to own a significant share of the local press: a TV station (*Bacău TV*), a radio station (*Alfa FM*), and the most popular daily paper (*Deșteptarea*.) Former Liberal senator Aron Ioan Popa is the proprietor of *Radio Kitt Onești*: needless to say, his party - PNL - has not once lacked coverage during the electoral campaign. The co-owners of Oradea station *Radio Partium* are two UDMR<sup>5</sup> - Party leaders. The former president of the Bihor County Council, Kiss Iosif, has associated himself

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<sup>1</sup> Similar to the so-called *nouveau riche*, these businessmen amassed their fortunes during the transition from Communism to Capitalism (oftentimes using rather unorthodox methods and towing the line of legality.) This term is hyper-specific to Romanian media coverage, and will be heretofore used as defined.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.mediafax.ro/revista-presei/moguli-de-provincie-baronii-conduc-judetele-cu-telecomanda-in-mana-4055906>

<sup>3</sup> PNL – Romanian National Liberal Party.

<sup>4</sup> PSD – Romanian Social-Democratic Party.

<sup>5</sup> UDMR – The Democratic Union of Magyars from Romania.

with the former deputy mayor, Biro Rozalia. Another media patron that comes from a political background, the Liberal-leaning Mircea-Ioan Bradu, is the majority shareholder of *Radio Transilvania*. Teodor Gavrițaș, a former PD<sup>1</sup> - Member of Parliament, is also involved in the *Transilvania* venture. PNL - baron Aristotel Căncescu has barely any competition in the Brașov radio and television market. Căncescu served as a senator for eight years, after which he took over the Brașov County Council, where he subsequently won three terms. He owns three television stations: *Mix TV*, *MIX 2*, *TV F(ăgăraș)* and even more radio stations: *Super FM*, *Radio Brașov*, *Radio Brașov Montan*, *Radio Brașov Popular*; as well as shares in *Super TV*. Also in Brașov, the person in charge of *Nova Tv* is former IMM<sup>2</sup> - Minister Constantin Niță.

In the Caraș-Severin County, *Radio Reșița* technically operates under the umbrella of the Romanian Radio Broadcasting Company: its indisputable owner, however, is an individual named Sorin Frunzăverde. The *Reșița* editorial staff works in the offices belonging to the regional Chamber of Commerce, which is run by the same local baron. For several political families from Călărași, the local radio stations represent a true battleground. The son of former PSD-senator Doru Ioan Tărăcilă owns 50% of the *Stil FM* shares, a station that broadcasts in Călărași and Oltenița. Former PNL-senator Ion Mihai Dumitrescu owns the Radio Minisat network, which broadcasts in no less than nineteen districts spread over several counties in South and Central Romania.

Before he fled to Madagascar, the PSD-baron Radu Mazăre retained control over everything mass-media-related in the County of Constanța. This did not happen directly- he assigned this task to those close to him. While Mazăre does not, at the present moment, officially represent any of the formerly mentioned stations, his influence persists. He passed on the baton to his old partners, who now act as shareholders for *TV Soti*, a company that consists of *Neptun TV*, the *Neptun* radio station and the *Telegraf* newspaper. The Liberals have their own station, *CTV*. It is represented by MP Gheorghe Dragomir and PNL-senator Puiu Hașotti.

Sorin Toader, a former chauffeur for the PD-member of Parliament Gheorghe Albu, backed his former boss during the electoral campaign using his television station, *Dâmbovița TV*: PNL and PSD representatives were not exactly staples in the electoral coverage produced by the network. In

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<sup>1</sup> PD – The Romanian Democratic Party.

<sup>2</sup> IMM = Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises.

Dolj County, controversial businessman Dinel Staicu used to own the television station *Oltenia*. The same goes for the city of Galați: PSD politician Florin Pâslaru owns both the major television and radio stations. As manager of *TV Galați*, he has axed the broadcast of two debate shows, suggesting that such programs are detrimental to the income gained from advertisements. Yet another PSD politician involved in local media is the former Galați-baron Ilie Plătică Vidovici, who served four terms as a senator. Plătică-Vidovici owns the radio station *Lider FM*. In Giurgiu County, MP Victor Boiangiu owns *Muntenia TV*. Dan Ilie Morega, a Gorj baron affiliated with the National Liberals, was likewise unable to stay away from the charms of radio broadcasting. Morega figures as a minority shareholder (15% shares) in *Omega*.

Harghita and Covasna are two counties in which UDMR leaders are seemingly embroiled in a competition for who runs the most radio stations. The mayor of Sfântu Gheorghe, Antal Arpad and former Member of Parliament (deputy) as well as former president of the Covasna County Council, Tamas Sandor, co-own *Radio Regio*. The leader of the Miercurea-Ciuc branch of UDMR, Hajdu Aron Peter, currently holds the majority of shares in *Radio Energy*, *Retro Energy* and *Radio Fun FM* - on top of minority shares in *Fix Radio*. Former PNL deputy/ Member of Parliament Ioan Timiș and his wife own two Hunedoara television networks: *TV Mondo*, *T5 ABC* and two radio stations: *Radio Cristal* and *Radio Mondo*. Timiș, however, represents only a smaller part of a much more complex structure. Timiș appears again as owner of local newspaper *Mesagerul Hunedorean*, only this time, Mircea Lepădatu - a former chief of staff to the Hunedoara prefect - joins him. There is also a TV-station, *Deva TV*, which is run by a relative of Hunedoara County Council's president. In Mehedinți, politicians Nicolicea and Stănișoară also compete for control of the television market. Miron Mitrea's godson, PSD politician Eugen Nicolicea, is competing for the airwaves with former Minister of Defense Mihai Stănișoară. Nicolicea owns a TV-station as well as a radio station: *Galaxy TV* and *Galaxy FM*. They function as networks, with local branches in cities such as Târgu-Jiu, Slatina, Reșița, Râmnicu Vâlcea, Drobeta-Turnu Severin, Craiova, Caransebeș, Calafat and Alexandria. Stănișoară's wife, Codruța, appears to be the owner of the major Mehedinți broadcast and of the *Radio Severin* station.

Mureș politicians seem equally interested in the local press: UDMR-senator Frunda Gyorgy is a minority associate of *Radio Gaga*. His colleague from the former PDL (The Romanian Democratic-Liberal Party), Petru

Başa, owns a small chain of radio stations called *Radio Son*. Furthermore, he owns two newspapers: *24 Ore Mureşene*, regarded as being one of the most important daily papers in the county, and *Jurnalul Sighişoara Reporter*. The local baron in this instance is Petre Basa, an ex PDL-senator, who owns six radio stations within the *Son* network, two newspapers, as well as a TV-station, *Târnavă TV*. Additionally, he owns a cable television station in Sighişoara and a few other Mureş villages - thus also taking on the role as their internet provider.

Even though the undermining of the notion of ownership which I have aimed to demonstrate might seem quite straightforward to a casual reader, things are not often as simple as they seem. In fact, the people in control of local mass-media outlets are oftentimes omitted from any comprehensive lists.

The mayor of Târgu-Mureş, Dorin Florea, serves as such an example. Most television stations and local newspapers are informally attributed to him. You do not necessarily have to be an owner in order to lead, or to be in charge. Neamţ County is not only the empire of baron Gheorghe Ştefan aka “Pinalti,” but also the scene of a veritable political battle for control of the television market. The baron owns, by way of his daughter, a television and a radio station: *Unu TV* and *Radio Unu*. The Liberals are represented by Petru Frăsilă, who owns *M Plus TV Roman*, *Tele ‘M Neamţ* and local radio *‘M Plus*. PSD-members ought not to be forgotten: Cristian Liciu controls the station *Actual TV*. Another one - *TVM* - is owned by former PSD deputy/Member of Parliament Iulian Țocu. The local media market hosts another PDL member, Constantin Stafie, a former Secretary of State in the Ministry of Industry (current Ministry for the Economy). Stafie and his wife own the radio station *Pietricica FM*. In Olt, the Liberal Democrats, followed by the Liberals, controlled the local *OLT TV* and various newspapers - daily and weekly alike - such as *Gazeta de Olt*, *Glasul Oltului*, *Linia întâi*, and *Ziarul de Olt*. PSD uses the daily paper *Eveniment de Olt*.

In the County of Prahova, Liberal politician William Brânză - the one in charge of representing the Romanian Diaspora - owns a small media empire. Not in his own name, but by using his mother's - Steliana. His two television stations, *WYL TV* and *Columna WYL TV*, as well as the radio, *WYL FM*, also cover the County of Dâmboviţa. Prahova station Alpha TV is also worth mentioning, considering that it was founded by the famous company Petromservice. The oil company was controlled by Liviu Luca, then the head of the petrol-syndicate, and equally notorious businessman Sorin Ovidiu Vântu. *Telegraful de Prahova* belongs to the same group, as

do *RadiOK* and the newspaper *Observatorul de Prahova*. The latter is owned by Mihai Sorin, a business partner of Liviu Luca.

In Satu Mare, the former Liberal Minister of Commerce, Ovidiu Silaghi, is the owner of *Radio Unu Satu Mare*. Silaghi indirectly controls *TV1 Samtel* through an intermediary, his former adviser Marius Ionescu. PSD-senator Valer Marian was the general manager of the *Nord Vest Media* group, known for *Nord Vest TV*. UDMR also has its “in-house” radio station: *City Radio*, owned by former candidate to the Chamber of Deputies, Turos Lorand.

The Sibiu County press is still under the subtle influence of its former mayor and current Romanian president, Klaus Johannis. The sitting president has never been involved in any affairs linked to local media, but this perspective would be incomplete if I did not mention the fact that he has never been bothered by any bad press during critical moments in his legal career. The explanation is fairly simple: a contingent of the local media honchos own businesses that carry on contracts with the mayor’s office. In Suceava, former deputy Aurel Olărean owns the station *Radio Gold*. Another former parliamentary deputy turned county-adviser, Sabin-Adrian Drăgan, owns shares in *Radio Dorna*. Former Tăriceanu-era prefect, Ovidiu Doroftei, showed his gratitude to the National Liberals last fall by using his television station, *Plus TV*. Baron Dragnea of Teleorman, who, at the present moment, acts as leader of the embattled Social Democrats, competed in the past for the media market with another politician, (PDL member turned Liberal) Alexandru Mocanu. In his time as chief of the Teleorman County Council, Dragnea controlled through a close company not only the *Tel Drum* network, but also a select number of radio stations such as *Radio Sud* and *Radio Z*. Meanwhile, senator Alexandru Mocanu owned a significant number of shares in *Radio Impact*. Some might still remember how, in 2009, during a local electoral campaign, CJ chief Liviu Dragnea tried to shut down an opposing publication by taking matters to court. In Vaslui, the airwaves are split between PSD and PNL. The Social-Democrat former deputy Dumitru Buzatu owns a third of the *Media TV* and *Radio Smile* shares, along with Ioan Ciupilan, the party’s former candidate for mayor in the town of Huși. Liberal Dumitru Marin also owns some stations of his own, such as *TV Vaslui* and radio *Unison*. Moreover, he owns a weekly paper: *Meridianul de Vaslui*.

At last, in the County of Vrancea, PSD baron Marian Oprișan has long had a reputation for being a darling of the local television channels. *Diplomatic TV* and *Atlas TV* were owned by two businessmen close to the politician - Constantin Bușcă and Ioan Martiș, respectively. The former had

all but disappeared from the media landscape, but has since resurfaced as *Focus TV* after being sold. In 2008, *Atlas TV* received three warnings for favoring PSD. Oprișan also has at his disposal an affiliated newspaper - *Monitorul de Vrancea*.

The harsh reality surrounding the destruction of the Romanian press has also been exposed in the international media by Oxford Analytica.<sup>1</sup> The report states that for the first time following the groundbreaking events of 1989, the Romanian press has ceased to play a “positive role in shaping political opinion,” and that the “effort to build an independent press as a progressive force in a fragile democracy has failed”<sup>2</sup>.

Most media have been “taken hostage by moguls that seem intent on using it to influence national policies in ways that benefit them”. The prestigious institute shows that media trusts led by Sorin-Ovidiu Vîntu, Dinu Patriciu and Dan Voiculescu have coordinated their activities in 2009 with the goal of reducing public interest in politics. According to the report, the press is no longer a space for discussing “serious” options that concern the future of politics, but instead acts as a poisonous agent between political competitors/ seems intent on poisoning political competition.

Meanwhile, press trusts go after state advertising using any available means and acting like true mafia clans, demanding taxes from politicians in exchange for protection. By using methods that are antithetical to the institution of Journalism, press trusts undermine the workings of a real constitutional state. In short, they fail to fulfill their purpose as one of the pillars of democracy.

Thus, TV news networks establish the *de facto* public agenda, pushing fake topics that other publications from the same trust can later elaborate on. This practice of playing with the topics is embraced by a meandering press because it seeks to influence and de-mobilize curious, interested and politically active citizens. The main target has never been the tabloid reader:

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<sup>1</sup> Oxford Analytica is one of the most prestigious consulting and strategic analysis firms in the world. It was founded in 1975 by Dr. David Young, a former employee of the American National Security Council. The firm publishes reports based on “open source intelligence,” meaning sources that can be accessed by the general public. Nineteen governments, including that of the United States, as well as international institutions from all fields of expertise count themselves amongst Oxford Analytica’s clients. The firm has access to scientific papers and analyses belonging to over 1000 world renowned scientists. Operating in Oxford, England, and connected to many of the university’s revered academics, the company does not have any official ties to the University of Oxford.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.revista22.ro/raportul-oxford-analytica-presa-ciinele-de-paza-al-mogulilor-trustul-l-6521.html>

it has, and continues to be, an informed public. Oxford Analytica takes a critical stance when it comes to a significant part of the Romanian press, “which seems to be an extension of business interests.” Furthermore, “the ownership that is focused in the hands of a few wealthy characters has led to dramatic shifts. Quality journalism has been buried. [...] Trivial or sensationalized content has replaced serious reporting”. Besides, many independent-minded writers have remained penniless, or have been forced to comply with a new editorial focus.

The same conclusion can be drawn from last year’s *Reporters without Borders* analysis, which shows that the Romanian press has become a tool for spreading political propaganda. “The excessive politicizing of the press, corrupt financing mechanisms, exercising control over the editorial agenda depending on the interests of the employer, as well as secret services infiltrating journalists - all this has led to transformation of the press into an instrument for political propaganda, more visible than ever in Romania, especially during elections.”<sup>1</sup> (my translation)

The social consequences of this alarming state of affairs are devastating. In conclusion, Oxford Analytica states that the number of those willing to emigrate should be expected to grow, with many citizens now thinking Romania is poorly governed, on top of there being no room for professionalism. Middle class Romanians, the ones entrusted with bringing about economic and social progress, regard “the political game as a vulgar media spectacle, but remain too apathetic to replace the disgraced parties with ones that tout solution-based approaches.”<sup>2</sup> The report consequently shows that Romania continues to embrace the very character traits that have held it back since the fall of the communist regime. It is perhaps worrisome that millions of energetic Romanians who value progress are excluded from the upper echelons of power. This is, quite possibly, the reason why many think the country is headed in the wrong direction and want to leave it.

The following reasons are also invoked every time people look for accountability: mediocre efforts made by the press, the fact that Romanians do not necessarily have a tradition in consuming information, meager financial offerings that incentivize, amongst other things, economic agents to look for other means of communication, or the fact that paper is quite

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.caleaeuropeana.ro/libertatea-presei-in-scadere-in-toata-lumea-reporteri-fara-frontiere-pres-a-din-romania-a-devenit-un-instrument-de-propaganda-politica/>

<sup>2</sup> See above, *CaleaEuropeana*.

frankly *passé* in an era of internet and the Three-Dimensional Revolution. One further explanation for Romanians' mistrust in mass-media is the forty-five years of Communism in which the press really was an instrument of manipulation for the regime. This claim has been disproven, given the interest most people took in the press after the 1989 Revolution.

There are, of course, other opinions that give insight into the international discourse on the topic. Thus, we are being asked not to decry the faith of established publications as opposed to the growing popularity of tabloids- it is, at the end of the day, a global trend. In my opinion, this argument does not take into account something crucial - the consideration that these trends differ greatly from one another, depending on a variety of factors that are entirely specific to each country. Countries such as Great Britain, Germany, Austria, Switzerland, the Czech Republic, Sweden and also Romania have to fight for the upper hand in the battle against tabloids, whereas the French, Italian, Spanish and Russian people prefer established newspapers. However, it should be taken into account that publications such as *The Times*, *Le Figaro*, *Le Monde* and *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* - all premium - continue to have exceptional circulation, selling a minimum of 400.000 copies. They also enjoy great editorial independence and exert remarkable influence in their respective countries. The explanation of sociologist Mircea Kivu is particularly suitable in this context: in his opinion, the "European press benefits from having access to various perks that certain states extend to the mass-media, such as reduced value-added taxes. Last but not least, these successful newspapers have originally been designed as independent, self-sustaining businesses as opposed to what has happened in Romania, where press trusts have always been intended to exist as mere appendages of economic trusts."<sup>1</sup> (my translation) Beyond the explanations regarding factors external to the press, there remain questions about what happens within the profession itself.

What is the press lacking nowadays? Media analyst Iulian Comanescu proves to be prophetic when he asks the following question: "If the biggest circulation rates for top tier publications are less than 60.000 copies, we have the right to ask ourselves if anyone really cares about their existence. Are the Romanian readers perhaps mean, idiotic assholes for not buying quality newspapers? Or is the quality of self-touted 'quality newspapers' lacking?"<sup>2</sup> (my translation)

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<sup>1</sup> <https://evz.ro/presa-moare-dar-nu-se-preda-882794.html>

<sup>2</sup> See above, *EVZ*.

Parallel to the dramatic drop in quality written press, the statistics point to an increased consumption of television - often to the detriment of other methods for informing oneself, including reading newspapers, books, or even going to the movies and the theater.

Furthermore, data from the European Union seems to confirm this evolution. According to a study conducted by the European Audiovisual Observatory, prior to Great Britain's vote about exiting the EU, there were over 7.200 television channels broadcasting programs in the other 27 member-states, including candidates Croatia and Turkey. More than half of these were regional TV channels (43% national televisions and 6% international channels). Taking into account non-EU stations, there are more than 8.600 television programs available in European households. Most of the European channels, excluding the local and regional ones, are registered in Great Britain - 1.033, closely followed by Italy with 388, France with a total of 297, Germany counting up to 227 and Spain with 195. Film and sports networks dominate the European audiovisual landscape with 496 and 419 channels, respectively. What follows are entertainment television networks - 318 - and generic channels - 218. Another noteworthy fact is that, outside of the European channels, programs belonging to various news or entertainment networks from the U.S.A., Russia, China and Turkey are distributed to EU countries.

As for the situation in Romania, opinions seem to vary. Sociologist Mircea Kivu thinks that the aforementioned drop in television consumption and the current press crisis is due to the competition with new channels of information created by technological progress. "I think this drop can be primarily attributed to the substantial market competition, especially by television and the internet. In this context, newspapers have not managed to create a formula that is able to provide the public with a valuable specific use for its reading. Investigative pieces (not necessarily in a detective sense) and knowledgeable commentaries (not just op-eds) are rare in our press, especially because of their relatively high price," (my translation) argues Kivu.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, Cristian Tudor Popescu, who is arguing from an insider's perspective, is of the opinion that the crisis "has different causes, mainly the lack of training for writers, their lack of ability to craft a distinctive persona, their expression, and also money, which are poured into the press without being made inside the profession."<sup>2</sup> (my translation)

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<sup>1</sup> <https://evz.ro/presa-moare-dar-nu-se-preda-882794.html>

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

Analyst Iulian Comănescu rallies behind this opinion, stating that, “there is an essential inadequacy between what the political press offers and what readers wish for. In cases where the readers would rather receive explanations for politicians’ troublesome activity, they are provided with lackluster remarks by commentators sporting bloodshot eyes instead. If what they long for is an impartial point of view about any given situation, what they receive is partisan hysteria contrived under various pretenses, as the stringent necessity of the writer’s involvement.”<sup>1</sup> (my translation)

Without doubt, the current state of crisis in which the press finds itself, and the Romanian press in particular, has multiple causes - some profound, systemic, others more or less having to do with the broader conjuncture. The reality is that this crisis exists, and the public is on the verge of losing its’ trust in mass-media. *Something’s gotta give*. Arianna Huffington, co-founder of *The Huffington Post*, maintains that the “mass-media se află într-o incredibilă perioadă de tranziție“. On the topic of old vs. new media, she states, “Capacitatea unică a noilor media este aceea de a insista asupra unui subiect și de a insista cu încăpățânare asupra unui subiect până când se obține un impact. Până când subiectul se impune (...) Viitorul aparține acelor care vor combina cele mai bune elemente din vechile media - verificarea informațiilor, acuratețea, transparența - cu cele mai bune elemente din noile media - interactivitatea, implicarea cititorilor și furnizarea de informații în timp real“ (Arianna Huffington translated by Florin Bădescu)<sup>2</sup>. Tim Armstrong, CEO of the AOL group, has an interesting take on this matter: he thinks that in the current journalistic landscape, “oamenii nu sunt transparenți în legătură cu lucrurile în care cred, înainte de a scrie anumite știri, iar acesta este lucrul pe care dorim să îl vedem în viitor - mai multă transparență din partea jurnaliștilor în legătură cu lucrurile în care cred, înainte de a-și scrie articolele“ (Tim Armstrong

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<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.gandul.info/magazin/arianna-huffington-mass-media-se-afla-intr-o-incredibila-perioada-de-tranzitie-8500570>

“mass-media finds itself in an incredible phase of transition”; “The unique capacity of the new media is to consistently argue and consistently focus on a subject or topic until it makes an impact (...) The future belongs to those who will combine the best elements from the old media - confirming information, accuracy, transparency - with the newer ones - interactivity, involving the readers in the process and supplying information in real-time.” (my translation).

translated by Florin Bădescu)<sup>1</sup>. Furthermore, Armstrong believes that it is just as important to create a press-related product for a future era, in which people „consumă” informații mai mult prin intermediul telefoanelor inteligente decât prin intermediul publicațiilor tipărite“ (Tim Armstrong translated by Florin Bădescu)<sup>2</sup>.

Professor Pierre Moeglin, a specialist in the fields of education, communication and media digitization, created *Maison des sciences de l'homme Paris Nord* in the early 2000s and currently works at *Université Paris XIII*. According to him, traditional media will not cease to exist in the way that is commonly imagined: the role of the medium will, however, change in our space and our culture. The newspaper-loving public will always exist. There is a probability that the role of said newspapers could change, but they will not be entirely gone. Great, scandalous information that goes beyond the daily routine is first intercepted by new media. This information often amounts to rumors that circulate on the internet, that after proper vetting and examination are covered by traditional media. New media is able to be more dynamic and react faster. Thus, the role of traditional media outlets would be focusing more on analysis and exclusives, leaving the greater influx of news to be dealt with by the new media. There is also the question of credibility, which has historically been attributed to the traditional media. If an article is signed, submitted, and happens to contain errors (be they factual or grammatical), the journalist is the one held responsible for them. Credibility is tied to one's name just as much as it is linked to the specific brand of the newspaper. Blogs that publish unsigned articles allow for rumors to be spread easily. The issue of accuracy is becoming increasingly important as blogs continue to evolve, aiming to replace the profession and authority of journalism.<sup>3</sup>

Walter Isaacson<sup>4</sup>, the man responsible for leading CNN through its „glory days,” is advocating for responsibility not just to the viewers, but to

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<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.* “people are not being transparent about the sort of things they believe in before penning their news stories, and this is what we would like to see in the future - more transparency from journalists in regards to what they believe in, before writing their articles.” (my translation).

<sup>2</sup> “consume information through smartphones, rather than from written publications.” (my translation).

<sup>3</sup> <https://evz.ro/jurnalismul-va-deveni-un-camp-de-lupta-877254.html>

<sup>4</sup> Walter Isaacson began his career in journalism working for the London publication *The Sunday Times*, later joining the staff of the *New Orleans Times*. He went on to write for *Time* in 1978 where he worked successively as a political correspondent,

one's own country, citing as an example the type of journalism employed during great debates. He says that, "Quality press has a double duty, to its' readers and country. There is no crisis of the press, it is only the expansion of the internet. Journalism has become, in large part, free of charge. There are many good newspapers and magazines in the world, but it is hard to convince people to pay for online content. This has hurt the business aspect of journalism. During my career, I have seen how quality journalism can be unifying by providing society with the information that a democracy needs. But sometimes, it can separate us because it attacks different politicians, which is why I believe that journalists need to wear many hats. They have to be good journalists and good patriots. They need to realize they have a duty both to their readers, and their country."<sup>1</sup>

For his part, renowned American professor of Romanian origin, Peter Gross,<sup>2</sup> believes that "the growth of the internet as a technology and journalistic platform is not under our control. For this reason, the press' old business model is not working out at the moment. The new business model based on the internet has yet to be fully established. In sociopolitical terms, what the internet is doing is dividing the public even more, without the possibility of offering a certain segment of its audience the chance of using economic and political information in their day-to-day decisions.

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national editor and new media editor before being named the magazine's 14th editor-in-chief in 1996. In 2001 he became the chairman and CEO of CNN, a position he left to serve as president of the Aspen Institute. He has published various non-fiction books, including: "Einstein: His Life and Universe" (2007), "Benjamin Franklin: An American Life" (2003), "Kissinger: A Biography" (1992), in addition to co-authoring with journalist and historian Evan Thomas "The Wise Men: Six Friends and the World They Made" (1986).

<sup>1</sup> <https://adevarul.ro/articole/walter-isaacson-nu-e-usor-sa-fii-si-patriot-si-jurnalist.html>

<sup>2</sup> Peter Gross was born in Timișoara in 1949. During his childhood, he moved with his family to the United States. Between 2006 and 2016, he served as director of the UT School of Journalism and Electronic Media. He had also led the Gaylord Family Endowed Chair (for international communication) for the Gaylord College of Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of Oklahoma. His research, particularly that concerning mass communication in Eastern Europe, has been acknowledged in the field of international communication. After the end of the Cold War, he became involved in organizing journalistic education in Central and Eastern European countries, remaining close to the College of Journalism and Communication Science in Bucharest (*Facultatea de Jurnalism și Științele Comunicării* - FJSC) ever since its founding. In 1992, he also helped set up the College of Journalism in Timișoara. Gross has organized training programs for Romanian journalists as well as Balkan ones. He has published numerous books, research papers and studies regarding the evolution and dynamics of journalism in young democracies.

Furthermore, the internet is not like the old media, which has clear standards regarding content – it is a free platform. Everybody can make a blog, write whatever it is they want, and the readers have no way of knowing whether it is true or not. So it becomes their duty to find out what is true or correct, whereas with the traditional press, there is always the guarantee that published information is fact-checked and edited. There are no ‘gate-keepers’ on the internet, and because there are no such ‘keepers’, there are no standards either. I know that print journalists are jealous of their online brethren, but there is no reason for it. The digital platform and the traditional newspaper of an organization contribute to the same branch of the institution. And the workflow should be shared along during the day, especially considering that the traditional newspaper is limited in regards to time and space, while the online version moves faster when it comes to news. In terms of content, I think traditional media should offer more analysis and leave the dissemination of breaking news to the online market. One of the best things about the internet is that the information can be updated as soon as something new comes up, an option which traditional newspapers do not have. Thus, the role of the latter will change, newspapers being required to offer more complex articles of the analytical variety because they are unable to keep up with the speed of online publishing, where information changes very often and very fast. In spite of the negative speculation, traditional newspapers will not vanish. Nothing does: things simply change, as is their nature.”<sup>1</sup>

Mario Garcia,<sup>2</sup> widely considered a “guru” in journalistic circles, speaks of publishing as an eternal alternative to other means of information: there will always be a category of people eager to hold books and newspapers in their hands. On the other hand, there will come a time when those who opt for going online will be willing to pay for certain access to information, especially experts.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://evz.ro/prima-facultate-de-jurnalism-implineste-20-de-ani-876560.html>

<sup>2</sup> Mario Garcia began his career as a professor of Journalism and consultant for various publications at the Miami Dade College. He later became a Graphic Arts Professor at Syracuse University’s Newhouse School of Public Communications, and between 1985 and 1991 he taught at the University of South Florida. He has also taught classes at 14 universities in Europe and Latin America, and has held seminars for the American Press Institute. In his over 30 years working in the media, he has collaborated with about 450 organizations from the field. He has been involved in redesigning prestigious publications such as “The Wall Street Journal,” “Miami Herald,” “The Philadelphia Inquirer,” “Handelsblatt” and “Die Zeit.” He is the founder of Garcia Media and is in charge of supervising all projects.

At the end of the day, information might need to be treated as any other product. He believes that, “Cititorii sunt inteligenți, știu că jurnalismul standard e mai obiectiv, în timp ce blogurile - în funcție de autorii citați - tind să fie mai orientate către opinie și includ publicul ca participant la crearea conținutului. [...] Să nu fim pesimiști. Lumea are nevoie de informație, noul public tânjește la ea, și vor asta la un anumit moment, într-un anume loc. Noi, ca oameni care spun „povești”, n-am avut vreodată mijloace mai bune de comunicare. Asta e vestea bună. Democrațiile se îmbogățesc prin dialog, iar blogurile - de exemplu - deschid acest dialog. [...] Așa că să nu fim pesimiști. **Va duce apariția jurnalismului cetățenesc la „moartea” informării clasice?** Nu. Va ajuta informarea clasică. O va intensifica. Mai multă informație înseamnă un mai bun flux de idei, care va cere mai mulți ziașiști buni pentru a o descifra.” (Mario Garcia translated by *Evenimentul Zilei*)<sup>1</sup>

The presence of the internet in the social arena continues to grow. In Romania, present data points to the existence of many necessary premises for creating a public virtual sphere. Some websites even enjoy more credibility than traditional media.<sup>2</sup> Certain authors<sup>3</sup> concluded that it might benefit bloggers when traditional media simply carry out the task of surveilling the medium (in particular the written press), in addition to assuming the role of cultural broadcaster (taking responsibility for proper representation, legitimizing values, etc.). Using studies that have come to

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<sup>1</sup> <https://evz.ro/garcia-media-trece-printr-o-schimbare-istorica-845755.html>  
“readers are intelligent, they know that standard journalism is more objective, while blogs - depending on the authors one chooses to read - tend to focus on opinion and include the public as a participant in the process of creating content. [...] We should not be pessimistic. People need information, the new public is yearning for it, and they want it at a certain time, at a certain place. We, as people that tell stories, have never had better means of communicating. That is the good news. Democracies are enriched by dialogue, and blogs, for example, open up this dialogue. [...] So we should not be pessimistic. ‘Will citizen journalism bring about the death of classical information?’ No, it will not. It will help it. It will intensify it. More information means a better flow of ideas, which will call for more good journalists able to decipher it (my translation).”

<sup>2</sup> In a 2007 report published by Carmen Halotescu and Cristian Manafu, entitled: “O analiză a blogosferei românești bazată pe RoBloggersSurvey2007” (“An Analysis of the Romanian Blogosphere”), the authors observed the main difference between blogs and offline media, including the authority readers bestow upon established bloggers, reducing the possibility of manipulation in the online medium. The report is available here: [http://www.timsoft.ro/ejournal/analiza\\_ro\\_blogosfera2007.html](http://www.timsoft.ro/ejournal/analiza_ro_blogosfera2007.html)

<sup>3</sup> Diana Cismaru, in Ioan Drăgan, Diana Cismaru (ed.), *Teleromânia în 10 zile*, Tritonic, Bucharest, 2009, pp. 267 – 281.

similar conclusions as a starting point,<sup>1</sup> one could argue that the internet has the possibility of accommodating a new form of civic life, inaccessible to the audience or readership of traditional media sources. It is important to state that, in the case of the online world, the concept of “public” needs to be replaced by “online community” (individuals who use a digital resource in order to share various experiences pertaining to the quotidian).<sup>2</sup> The sociology of the internet distinguishes between the virtual community (based on sharing one or more personal interests), and the network community (based on the interests of fellow citizens), which seeks by its nature to develop local democracies.<sup>3</sup>

All new forms of media, be it the website, blog, forums or social media platforms, give participants the option to react and engage in conversations. This is why Japanese author Joichi Ito affirms that instruments such as blogs constitute a new form of democracy, in which consensus is no longer achieved through radio or TV broadcasts, but through conversations. The practice of catching up during a coffee break belongs to yesteryear - it is being effectively replaced by the multilateral and easily accessible discourse of the new media.

In conclusion, I can affirm that the new media offer journalism a new chance, the possibility to survive in conditions adverse to traditional media, which have been seized by political and economic interests that have led to the distortion of the press’ tasks and objectives. Nevertheless, to prove a success in the current transforming landscape, journalism needs to reinvent itself every day, rising up to the challenges it is being faced with. Proper training for publishers, writers and journalists alike, expression, ethics and professional morals - each and every one is a prerequisite to protecting one of the noblest professions in the history of human civilization.

Quality press will not disappear. It will not cease to exist, for honorable people will always protect it. It will evolve, assimilating new means of communication in service of fact-checked information and balanced, competent analysis. These are society’s vital requirements, and tomorrow’s journalism will fulfill the demands by in turn evolving and transforming - for as long as the sun continues to rise.

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<sup>1</sup> Mădălina Boțan, „Blogosfera ca discurs de vizibilitate publică”, *Sfera politicii*, nr. 135, <http://www.sferapoliticii.ro/sfera/135/art03-botan.html>

<sup>2</sup> Camelia Beciu, „Comunicare și discurs mediatic”, *comunicare.ro*, Bucharest, 2009, p.79.

<sup>3</sup> Serge Proulx, „L’explosion de la communication. Introduction aux theories et aux pratiques de la communication”, Paris: La Découverte, 2006, *apud*. Camelia Beciu, *op. cit.*, p. 79.

# Media Discourse and Romania's Strategic Options in the "Post-truth" Era

Liana IONESCU<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** *The present study is focused on the strategic options of Romania and how they are reflected in the informative media discourse.*

*The second part of the study is a brief analysis of post-truth problems in public discourse, starting from the avalanche of lies, fake news and propaganda that threatens rational discourse and rational politics.*

*In the third part there are presented some new initiatives concerning the fight against fake news and disinformation and the necessity to create an international coalition for protecting a fair and objective information by media and digital platforms. The messages of these initiatives are mixed, but they point in one direction: towards a communications landscape that people can trust.*

**Keywords:** *public interest, national interest, illiberalism, media, disinformation, post-truth, fake news.*

## Public interest and national interest

Public interest is the general interest of all citizens. The collective interest is the expression of the individual interests. Public interest is directly related to the national interest. Both are focused on the strategic direction of the country, seen in an international context, and in social, cultural, political and economic ones. Regarding to this subject, there two main perspectives of analysis.

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<sup>1</sup> <sup>1</sup> Hyperion University, Faculty of Journalism