

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

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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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First perspective. The direction in which the country goes. Placing Romania in the international context. The central category with which we work here is the national interest. Are we going to the West or to the East? Do we want to be like the West or do we want to be like the Asian area? If we choose the second direction, we should add a secondary question: Does it fit to the people's profile, to its traditions and economical mode of production, to his way of life? As far as the road of the civilization we want to attach to us, the Romanian society has opted after 1990: our values are similar to those of the European and generally Western (Anglo-American) ones.

When we are extremely critical of this option, we need to think about the alternative. Just because there are only two clear directions (Of course, if we exclude the grey area of the type, which is not recommended.) But such an alternative option would be totally inconsistent with the century and with its specificity which is globalization, even an increasingly criticized "trend". Nobody can live and progress alone: neither as an individual, nor as a society, as a country. As an individual, somebody needs first of all parents, family etc. As a society, there is necessary also to relate to other societies in all respects. So, there are two major directions of evolution and we have already opted. This is Romania's national interest, and not another one. Until recently, this way seemed to be irreversible, even if sinuous.

Second perspective. Placing Romania in a social, cultural and political context in accordance with the "spirit of time", as Hegel named the accordance with the times. In this framework, we speak about **social evolution** and **moral progress**. The ideal of mankind has always been to live in a better world and in a fairer, more just world. A world in which everyone has the necessities of living, to benefit from what is called freedom, in which the law is the one governing, so that relations between people are in order and the deviations from social life are sanctioned.

In such a world towards which societies tend, individuals must also be, ideally speaking, or tend to be, integrals, with firm convictions and behaviour driven by the spirit of justice, people not hateful and envious; attentive to those around them who deserve attention, who respect their given word and respect the close ones etc. Of course, the individual interest fills the collective interest, which is the general frame of insertion. Nobody can be "super moral" in a deeply immoral society, because in such a case he/she would be considered a loser, as we know very well.

The open society, illiberalism and the freedom of expression

The Romania's strategic option is for an open society, as Karl Popper called it [Popper, 1945]. Here comes the public interest and the individual interest. Open society is where the individual matters, not just the authority of society (state, but also other factors of influence or constraint, such as religion). The issue of freedom, civil and social, of the struggle between individual freedom and the authority of society is the issue that really matters. In contrast, „closed society” is a tribal or collectivist society, marked by the "emphasis placed on the tribal capital importance without which the individual is nothing" [Popper, 1945, apud. Petrescu, 2018], the primordial role of supernatural forces capable of producing miracles and an irrational attitude to the rigid habits of social life.

In an open society, there is the danger of "tyranny of the majority", with its more insidious form that is felt in many places in the world: the dictatorship of the majority generated by the political vote, resulting from elections held under all democratic rules. Such a majority acts within a so-called **illiberal democracy** and represents the interests of individuals and groups raised to power by an electorate whose existence depends on the promises of those whom they voted, promises often without factual coverage. In general, there are captive social categories, retirees, socially assisted persons, etc.

What happens? These authorities, so propelled/raised, are ruling by **dictates**, and **does not govern**. With this respect, they try to weaken the state institutions, which should become purely formal. This is done through legislative measures, but also by employing loyal, poorly trained or blackmailing people. The target of this way of ruling: justice and the fight against high-level corruption. There are affected the rule of law, but also the citizen, the freedom of expression, the right to information and other fundamental rights and freedoms of the individual. Included the freedom of the press.

An eloquent example of how illiberalism works: freedom of expression of the media refers only to the freedom to promote false news, lies, to manipulate with their help public opinion, either from obedience or to obtain privileges from the authority, either for both of the above reasons. If they are being drawn or penalized, those media institutions invoke freedom of expression. This is how an illiberal society (with a false, poor democracy) works. It is easy to see here a totalitarian tendency of this type of society:

the political decisions cannot be commented, and the opinion of the individuals does not matter. If they criticize their opinion in the public market or are critical of the media, they are annihilated / sanctioned, either through violence or through administrative, financial measures, etc. able to silence them.

Problems are complicated by the globalization, interconnection and integration into the planetary society of all states, otherwise they risk becoming marginalized, with all the resulting consequences.

Our interests as a country are related to this "collective" game with ideas / ideals, or illusions, about a better and more just society. A "game" that runs in the three spaces/ spheres: the **state sphere**, where the separation of the three powers in the state – legislative, executive and judicial [Montesquieu, "The Spirit of Laws", 1748] – must guarantee the freedom of the individual; **the public sphere** of the debate, including the media; and the **private sphere**. Where the community (population / masses / crowds, collectives, groups) and individuals interact and shape each other.

And in this extremely complex "game", the media are increasingly involved. We say that the media identify itself with the public space, with that sphere of ideas where public / very general interest issues are being discussed in order to solve them for the good of the public interest. What does it mean? The media shapes collective thinking, including, or above all, collective emotions. It promotes the "path" that the crowds / community follow, often without knowing it, without knowing its costs, or its damp. That is an extremely important role. And a huge responsibility for the media!

Free as free as you want to be. Diseases and remedies

It is said that the media in Romania is exactly as free as it wants to be. Or, in other words, it is free to the extent that it wants to be free. And this option is particularly noticeable in electoral cycles, when in the media, especially on the TV screens, the service fanatics of some schemes are to be imposed. Those who occupy the theoretical field of the "national interest", the media as an extension and support of politics, enter into the scene and "electrify" the masses around that scheme and the people who support it. And television still has the highest share of credibility!

When we talk about the media, we also think about diseases and remedies. We have, as a society, old, still unhealthy diseases that are related

to the "evils" of communism. And we have also new diseases, for which we need to seek remedies. A new illness, which is not present only in Romanian society (even it seems to be imported, we have already become experts in it!), is the gross manipulation of news and states of mind through the media.

Nobody doubts that the main danger to Romania's stability lies in the vulnerability of the minds of Romanians through the avalanche of news and comments received by all means, especially by media. "In the brains of the Romanians, poison drips and it shows wind!" [Voinescu, 2018]. It must also not to forget that Romania has become an important territory in the information war, the "hybrid war" as it is called, unleashed in recent years. Fighting anti-Western news fake, fighting against journalism of hatred, resentment and frustration is not easy. We find sadly that this type of journalism is already producing effects. From a great deal of trust in the West and its values, some of the Romanian public opinion is on the way or has come to doubt the pro-Western option: for the EU and for NATO. And the media is not at all alien to this change of perception and attitude!

Local reality is complicated and it is very difficult to see the truth. To "see" it requires a rethinking / resetting of human mentalities and behaviours, both at the level of individual and collective consciousness. A role in this process is played by the media, which has the advantage of (still) having a very high level of credibility. Not easy to play this role in the so-called "post-truth era", confronted with lies, bullshit, propaganda and conspiracy theories.

The non-sense named "post-truth"

The so-called "post-truth discourse" seems to be one of today's pressing problems. The rise of lies, propaganda, conspiracy theories do not indicate that they may soon disappear from public discourse, in ourselves, but also in the world, in what we call "civilized countries". I could say that the debate is more intense there. Rational and political discourses are increasingly threatened by this offensive of what are called "alternative facts."

What does characterize a "post-truth" society? Disinterest in evidence, lack of accountability, disdain for experts. How could the truth survive in this climate? It is a question to which are trying to answer many analysts, political science thinkers, journalists, intellectuals from the humanities field.

But is the truth really dead? How to navigate in a "post-truth" culture? What is "a fact" in the contemporary world? How do we need to be

informed? Can we say that the truth is dead? If so, what is said and is being circulated in public space would be a real threat to justice, democracy and progress. And a last question: Why is this happening and why is it happening now?

In fact, truth is more important now than ever: if we want to make good decisions, they should be based on reality rather than illusions, fantasies, and falsity. The weakening of the link between evidence / evidence and decisions affects not only the quality of political acts, but the whole approach of scientific research, the purpose of which is to find out the facts on which we can make informed decisions.

What exactly is the "post-truth" discourse? How and why does it occur? And what can we do to counter it? Beneath simple labels like "post-truth", "alternative facts" and "fake news", a complex set of issues can be hidden, which can be discussed based on some coordinates. This is what Professor Nick Enfield from the University of Sydney [2017] is proposing to investigate: to navigate the post-truth debate in order to find some common key co-ordinates. Following him there are seven key reference points.

1. When we talk about **facts**, we are talking about **statements**. Acts are something that can be communicated through an affirmation that happens to be true or false. Before discussing the philosophical problem of truth, we need to think about concrete situations that challenge our intuitions. The ice melts in the sun, I have two fingers, I live at number x are verifiable facts. But not every statement is verifiable. Example: x leader has access to nuclear weapons, only on planet Earth are intelligent beings - are hard to verify affirmations. Other statements are impossible to verify. Example: chocolate ice cream is better than vanilla. That is why, when we are talking about facts, we are talking about statements describing them or defining them, and not about the facts themselves, about the facts that statements can describe.

2. Affirmations are **socially constructed**. We have access to facts through statements, which are acts of communication. That's why facts are social constructs. What does this thing mean? That assertion is made in certain terms, which are chosen by the person making the statement. Intentional or not, that person will emphasize certain aspects and will leave others in the shadows. Beyond all this, language itself is a social construct, as we all know. Then the facts are described / presented in a social and political context and from the perspective of the interests of certain categories of people. Third, there are categories of facts that are true because

people think so, by virtue of established social rights, such as the right to property. This machine is mine. None of these meanings cast doubt on the reality behind the statements.

3. **Our beliefs are strong but unreliable.** We must distinguish between **statements** and **beliefs**. Our beliefs are strong, but often untrustworthy/unreliable. We rely on our beliefs, even if they are the result of one's own experience or result from the opinions of others. But sometimes our strongest beliefs do not correspond to reality. For example, memory can often deceive us, as demonstrated by psychology studies. (if someone suggests that an event has taken place, and we are inclined to believe that suggestion). Certain beliefs make us ignore the evidence that tells us that reality is different.

4. **Not all untruth are lies**, sustains professor Enfield [2017]. We often believe others. Example: there is water in this bottle, because it is the one who bottled the bottle and the one who sells it. If we believe it is not true and say that there is something else in the bottle, then our statement may be false, but that does not mean the same thing as lying or throwing balloons / balloons. We do not know exactly whether what we say is true or false, while the liar deliberately states something he knows is false. False allegations are made with intent and for several reasons: in good faith, to mislead or simply because we do not care.

5. **Just stating a fact won't make people believe it.** The simple affirmation of a fact does not imply that people must give it credence. For a claim to be believed by others is not enough to be true. Politicians and PR advisers know for a long time that we have to be good **storytellers**, there is a **narrative**, a sympathetic character, a dramatic tension. That's how persuasion works. The facts do not speak in themselves and have to be dressed in a story.

6. **Statements are reasons**, states professor Enfield [2017]. Whether intentional or not, a false statement is **dangerous**. That's because it can be the basis of other allegations or actions. Our statements motivate or justify decisions or actions. For example, when we say "It's late", we're pursuing a goal, we're aiming at an action: ending work and going home, or drawing attention to the fact that we're already too busy. In a political speech, when it states that the country x (Iraq, Bush Jr.) has weapons of mass destruction, this statement is also an exhortation to certain actions, as well as a justification for them, for military intervention, e.g. Even if the allegation proves to have been false, it has produced effects (in our example the invasion of Iraq). This shows that truth is only a possible criterion for

accepting an affirmation and its consequences. Another criterion, which tends to become more and more serious in this era called post-truth, is **the personal, cultural, cognitive preferences of a person, the appeal to emotions, and political identity**. These are the ways in which the public discourse of "alternative deeds" came to speak. If we refer to facts, then the question is what makes people accept a certain statement. That is why we need to seriously relate to the facts, to seriously analyse them, not necessarily because the truth must be defended in principle, but because we will bear the consequences of the statements we consider being true / valid. The discussion about changing the political climate, if it really happened, does not address the truth of every statement in the political discourse, it is the discussion of what can be done and whether something can be done.

7. **Interference of political power.** Political power can always interfere, says Nick Enfield [2017]. Providing reasons for an action can be a simple ritual, a formality, if those holding the political power exercise it as they please. For example, extreme forms of exercise of power do not waste their time by providing explanations for their decisions and actions. They resort to force, ignoring ideologies, beliefs, good intentions, etc. Political power can be used to suppress or overturn claims based on facts, remove them from the political discourse and undo their possible consequences in society. Political power can even act / operate with untrue facts. Certain social facts, such as those relating to property, are based on rights and duties and can be revoked by those exercising social control over the institutions. But there are limits to what political power can do.

The discussion stops at this point for the moment. If we want to make good decisions, those decisions had better be based on reality, and not on delusion, fantasy, or falsehood. Weakening the link between evidence and decisions not only threatens the quality of policymaking, it threatens the entire enterprise of scientific research, whose business is to find out the facts such that we may make well-informed decisions.

Truth and post-truth. Why does critical thinking really matter?

Can rational speech be saved and how? What is the role of the new type of public communication? Is the solution political or cultural? In a conference at the Romanian Athenaeum, on May 30, 2017, the British philosopher Timothy Williamson [See also Marin, 2017] tried to identify a

few possible answers to the questions that, in this period, disturb the public space: Is the truth relative? How much do the objective standards of morality matter? He also took into question the relationship between truth and populism, thus realizing a parallelism between epistemology and ethics.

Timothy Williamson stated: "Post-truth is not an alternative to truth (it does not mean falsity). It describes a kind of political and cultural climate in which there is little respect for truth, where politicians do not really care whether what they say is true. Or not the public does not really care if what the politicians say is true or false. The attitude that such a phrase summarizes is "Who cares?" So, that issue is about politics at first; it is the use of emotionality and the lack of respect for the truth and the objective reality.

Intellectual attitudes, possible cause: postmodernism, with its relativism. The distinction between truth and falsehood has been discredited over the last 50 years. Confusion between **truth** and **certainty**. But there is a difference between non-truth and lack of certainty, pointed out Professor Williamson. It does not really mean non-certainty. Example: we have no certainties about life on another planet. Starting from the confusion between truth and certainty, we face very important political repercussions. The attitude of postmodernism (cultural, supported by intellectuals) has led to relativism and uncertainty. The political attitude of today has led to post-truth in politics, exercised as a populist policy, sustained Timothy Williamson.

Professor Timothy Williamson brings into discussion his volume "*Tetralogue. I'm Wright, You're Wrong*", where he analyzes the theme of morality and moral arguments in relation to truth, knowledge and intolerance. In a tradition going back to Plato, Timothy Williamson uses a fictional conversation to explore questions about truth and falsity, and knowledge and belief. Four people with radically different outlooks on the world meet on a train and start talking about what they believe. Their conversation varies from cool logical reasoning to heated personal confrontation. Each starts off convinced that he or she is right, but then doubts creep in. Is truth always relative to a point of view? Is every opinion fallible? Such ideas have been used to combat dogmatism and intolerance, but are they compatible with taking each opposing point of view seriously?

This book supposes no prior acquaintance with philosophy, and introduces its concerns in an accessible and light-hearted way. Is one point of view really right and the other really wrong? That is for the reader to decide. Distinction between what you know and what you think. It is the

distinction between knowledge and believe. Knowledge is about the truth. But what justifies a faith? No part can convince the other that he is right. Other distinctions he analysed are: scientific relativism and moral relativism; evolutionism - creationism. Speaking about certainties and scepticism as a philosophical attitude, Professor Williamson stated: we can never know if it's moral to be a vegetarian or not, if it's good to beat your kids from time to time or not. There is no absolute answer as to who is right and who does not. This relativism is the philosophy of tolerance. But politically and morally, rejecting the possibility of having certainties has negative effects: it leads to absolute relativism.

As the erosion of experts' prestige in the “post-truth era” and how they are perceived, Professor Williamson supposed to audience attention a challenge: Who should make the decisions: experts or others? Politicians answer: We are tired of experts, and this statement has echoed in public, because it is a populist statement. Timothy Williamson spoke about the position of journalists, about their “obsession” for a balanced journalistic report. Let's have a balanced image / interpretation, find an opposite opinion (here is always an opposite opinion!) they have been taught in the newsroom and in schools of journalism. What are they doing? Do they give the opinion of an astronomer and the opinion of an astrologer?

But the evidence, the facts are important and must be relevant. People do not have time to make an assessment of the evidence: Which experts do they trust? From which university? How to judge their qualifications, expertise? People often do wrong value judgments. The audience can be easily convinced by empathic people, who simply explain and make it easy to understand. It's harder to understand those with professional qualities. Ultimately, it is difficult to decide who is an authentic expert are and who is not.

The conclusion is that telling the truth is the key to democracy. The truth is enjoyable or useful despite the fact that we have to make an effort.

The truth is worth it. European centres to combat disinformation

Fake news, or disinformation, is not a new phenomenon. But today, with the rise of digital media, it spreads easily and quickly. It is the task of responsible journalists and trusted news organizations to douse the flames of this dangerous wildfire and call fake news out for what it really is – lies.

In January 2018, the European Commission set up a high-level group of experts ("the HLEG") to advise on policy initiatives to counter *fake news* and disinformation spread online.

The main deliverable of the HLEG was a report designed to review best practices in the light of fundamental principles, and suitable responses stemming from such principles. The report was produced by 39 media activists, journalists, media supporters, academics and internet specialists, among them being the Dean of The College of Communication and Public Relations from the NUPSPA (SNSPA), Professor Alana Bârgăoanu.

The analysis presented in this report (50 pages), published in March 2018, starts from a shared understanding of disinformation as a phenomenon that goes well beyond the term "fake news". Disinformation as defined in this Report includes all forms of false, inaccurate, or misleading information designed, presented and promoted to intentionally cause public harm or for profit. It does not cover issues arising from the creation and dissemination online of illegal content (notably defamation, hate speech, incitement to violence), which are subject to regulatory remedies under EU or national laws, nor other forms of deliberate but not misleading distortions of facts such a satire and parody.

The HLEG advises the Commission against simplistic solutions. Any form of censorship either public or private should clearly be avoided. The HLEG's recommendations aim instead to provide short-term responses to the most pressing problems, longer-term responses to increase societal resilience to disinformation, and a framework for ensuring that the effectiveness of these responses is continuously evaluated, while new evidence-based responses are developed.

The multi-dimensional approach recommended by the HLEG is based on a number of interconnected and mutually reinforcing responses. These responses rest on five pillars designed to:

1. Enhance **transparency** of online news, involving an adequate and privacy-compliant sharing of data about the systems that enable their circulation online;
2. Promote **media and information literacy** to counter disinformation and help users navigate the digital media environment;
3. Develop tools for **empowering users and journalists** to tackle disinformation and foster a positive engagement with fast-evolving information technologies;

4. Safeguard **the diversity and sustainability of the European news media ecosystem**, and

5. Promote **continued research** on the impact of disinformation in Europe to evaluate the measures taken by different actors and constantly adjust the necessary responses.

The Report calls also for a code of practice to be introduced across Europe, with national centres established to fight disinformation, promote media literacy and, importantly, to find resources to pay for more investigative journalism.

Ethics in the news and public interest journalism

If 2017 was the year the world finally woke up to the threat of disinformation and the way internet technologies are secretly and subtly used to undermine democracy, then 2018 is becoming the year when ethical journalism, a human instinct beyond encoding and algorithmic definition, finally gets the recognition it deserves. “With growing evidence of interference in democratic processes around the world, the debate over how to expose and eliminate fake news is certain to intensify, states Aidan White [2017], founder of Ethical Journalism Network (EJN). But the discussion is already confused by misunderstanding about the phenomenon, its origins, and why it poses a threat in the first place. To try to illustrate the problem, the “Ethical Journalism Network” has developed a definition for fake news: ‘Information deliberately fabricated and published with the intention to deceive and mislead others into believing falsehoods or doubting verifiable facts.’ Using this definition, it is easier to separate propaganda, ‘alternative’ facts, and malicious lies from journalism.”

A recent book published in London by EJN, titled „*Trust in Ethical Journalism. The Key to Media Futures*” [White, Elliott, 2018] looks at how the communications revolution is continuing to pose more questions than answers over a public crisis of confidence, both in democracy and in sources of public information.

How do we build trust in journalism and news media? Must we sacrifice human rights and pluralism in return for free digital services? How do we stem the flow of hate speech, propaganda and malicious lies without endangering free speech? How do we pay for the journalism that democracy needs to survive? Around the world these debates rage, but in some countries and regions, the arguments are anything but theoretical. The rise

of populism accompanied by a discreet use of technology to target voters or promote hate speech is tearing into the fabric of democracy everywhere. In countries wracked by economic and social crisis or in the aftermath of war, these threats are a major obstacle to peace and development.

Under the issue of “Ethics in the News” the authors examine the technological, political and social realities of the information crisis: how algorithms and artificial intelligence are setting a new and potentially troubling agenda; how advertising platforms and the business of social media are undermining public trust; how democracy and political elections are open to undue interference

But it is not all bad news, they sustain. “From the Middle East and the Balkans there are inspiring stories of journalists and media working together, even across political divides, to develop new initiatives to challenge the hate-mongers. A new spirit of media solidarity is in the air” the authors sustain. (...) There are new approaches to reporting terrorism and conflict and a fresh debate about the protection of authors’ rights in the digital age.” [ibidem].

The messages are mixed, but they point in one direction: towards a communications landscape that people can trust. It won’t happen overnight, but such a vision will not be realized at all unless strategies for the future embrace public interest journalism, good governance in media, and a public information system rooted in ethics and transparency.

These final ideas could be an appropriate conclusion to the present study.

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