

JOURNALISM IN THE PARADIGM OF MEDIA PLURALISM: ROLE, MISSION, VALUES

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Title: “Journalism in the Paradigm of Media Pluralism: Role, Mission, Values”

Abstract: Rediscovering the role, purpose and meaning of journalism under the circumstances of a radically changed communication paradigm has become a necessity, not only in universities, but also in the public sphere. Today, billions of people, new technology users, who consume and produce media content (text, photo, audio-visual), form different audiences for journalistic bodies, be it mainstream or alternative media outlets. The social media era, the era of participatory web and post-truth relativizes and greatly dilutes the perception about conventional journalism, because of multiple forms and emerging modalities of producing and sharing content: from relevant niche blogs to ad hoc created ones, that serve electoral purposes; from collaborative civic platforms, containing relevant information, to biased websites that aim to influence and manipulate the decisions of the electorate. Therefore, it becomes more and more difficult for regular media users to distinguish between digital content that targets common good and public interest, on one hand and content with tremendous political or economic interest, on the other hand.

Keywords: *journalism; role; mission; values; quality; mainstream; alternative; ethics; new(s)media; social media; challenges; Covid 19;*

A few old benchmarks in a changing world. Forms change, how about values?

In an international statement, drafted, adopted and published 2018 on the website Reporters Without Borders, by an international commission of 25 members from 18 countries, among which public personas, Nobel prize winners, journalists, new technology experts, lawyers and organization leaders, regarding “Media and Journalism”, the argument remains in favor of the classical values of quality journalism, based on the following deontological standards: independence, trustworthiness and credibility.

“Journalism’s social function is that of a *trusted third party* for societies. The task of journalists is to give an account of reality, revealing it in the broadest, deepest and most relevant manner possible, not only portraying events but also explaining complex situations and changes, reflecting both the positive and negative aspects of human activities and allowing the public to distinguish the important from the trivial. The freedom and safety of journalists, the independence of news and information and respect for journalistic ethics are all essential conditions for the practice of journalism, regardless of the status of those who practise it.”¹

¹ <https://rsf.org/en/news/international-declaration-information-and-democracy-principles->

Another important media organization, America Press Institute, has simply formulated an axiological paradigm of journalism, based on the same timeless principles: “Journalism’s first obligation is to the truth”, and “Its first loyalty is to citizens.”² In an age characterized by information overload, an extreme fragmentation and heterogeneity of online groups and communities, a multitude of views that support various causes or face the amplification of emotions in times of events with powerful social impact, it is difficult, if not impossible, to speak about a singular “truth”. However, present professional journalism functions in the Western world, namely Western Europe and the U.S.A., in a paradigm revolving around the same values, some inherited from older liberal traditions, others gained over time, as the outlook on human rights and severe issues (economic, social, environmental) from certain parts of the world, have become more nuanced. For example, by identifying and conceptualizing these problems inside the UN, there is an initiative to achieve 17 global objectives³, for which media and independent journalism play an essential role⁴.

Recent research shows that, the traditional and dominant press model, exported from solid democracies to countries in Eastern Europe, Africa or Far East Asia, shouldn’t be regarded as the only way of journalism. Such a dense and complex perspective is presented by the recent volume *Worlds of Journalism. Journalistic cultures around the globe*. By means of a comparative study performed in 67 countries, the editors and authors of each chapter present an international perspective on the various concepts and perceptions of today’s journalism (role, cultural models, social roles etc.) Moreover, in order to understand media diversity, they provide a pluralist perspective, insisting on difficult conditions for the practice of journalism in some areas of the world, like “journalists’ safety and issues of impunity, heavy censorship, and media bans, as well as power rent-seeking, clientelism, and an instrumental use of the media mainly by politicians. Other issues are more broadly related to the societal conditions of journalism, such as pervasive corruption, low human development, and strong socioeconomic inequalities.”⁵ However, what some media experts call “the Western hegemonic model of journalism”, represents a baseline pattern regarding professional standards and customs, derived essentially from understanding the journalist stance as permanently independent from political power, towards which it stands in an antagonist position, while representing the public.⁶

One of the goals of this study is to demonstrate that “the universe of news

global-information-and-communication

² <https://www.americanpressinstitute.org/journalism-essentials/what-is-journalism/elements-journalism/>

³ <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/sustainable-development-goals/>

⁴ <https://en.unesco.org/news/why-independent-media-matter-sdgs>

⁵ Thomas Hanitzsch, Folker Hanusch, Jyotika Ramaprasad, and Arnold S. de Beer (Editors), 2019, *Worlds of Journalism. Journalistic cultures around the globe*, Columbia University Press, New York, p.19.

⁶ *Ibidem*.

making is populated with different life forms of journalism that produce a fascinating multiplicity of journalistic cultures articulated in many different ways across national borders, geographic regions, political systems, levels of socioeconomic development, and cultural value systems.”⁷ Distancing itself from the vast majority of journalism research, mostly stemming from the Western academic (English speaking) world, the afore mentioned study offers a transnational perspective, beyond any binary interpretation of good or bad, correct or incorrect, valid or invalid journalism models, precisely in order to not enforce an unique blueprint of journalism. The benefit of this perspective is the fact that it enables a neutral investigation of different socio-cultural models, widening the understanding towards diversity and avoiding propelling dominant concepts. The downside and also a possible risk of this approach, can be the serious attenuation of a relevant theoretical approach (granted, of Western European liberal descent) and the relativization of the concepts derived from it.

Romanian professional journalism is based on the epistemological and axiological paradigm of the Western countries, be it an English-American or a French influence, that has shaped the evolution of Romanian press since the 19th century.

For this purpose, let us mention three recent and conclusive examples, albeit that international media institutions and organizations share the framework regarding professional journalism, based on ethical principles, and, although, journalism differs, even in the Western world, from country to country, but mostly in matters of style and form and not in its essence. In its core, this dominant vision refers to the independence of journalists and newsrooms, the search for truth, starting from facts, dates and the respect for the interest of the public, thus, the respect for people and groups with rights that need to be protected.

For example, the Federation for Journalists (EFJ), reenforces in a declaration signed by its Romanian partner in 2017, that, despite of the unprecedented changes brought about by digitalization and technological progress in media, “what has not changed is the core role of journalists to search for information, check it and put into context.”⁸ The declaration also pleads for an international solidarity with journalists whose profession is being affected by the politics of big financial groups involved in media, as well as for an increase in the quality of journalism, that should stand, primarily, for the common interest of the public.

Similarly, BBC, one of the most relevant public media companies in the world, diachronically and synchronically speaking, not only because of its tradition with journalism ethics but also in regard to its high quality standards, resilience and adaptation to the post-war changes of today’s world: understanding of diversity, the promotion of human rights and of media projects that cover sustainability etc. BBC’s declared values are independence, nonpartisanship, honesty, creativity. All of these values act in the service of the people; the mission of this media company is described on its website under *Mission, values and public purposes* “to act in

⁷ *Ibidem*, 29

⁸ <https://europeanjournalists.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/Declaration-statement.pdf>

the public interest, serving all audiences through the provision of impartial, high-quality and distinctive output and services which inform, educate and entertain".⁹

The so-called quality journalism from the Western world, produced by public or commercial media companies (with their specific differences), stem - at least in theory - from the same principles, even though their practicality in media is less than perfect.

Citing the book, *The Elements of Journalism*¹⁰, the American Press Institute, mentions ten elements that stand for "good journalism", among which: to search, verify and tell the truth as a first obligation and first loyalty towards the people. The API organization regards high quality journalism, according to the ethical media standards it promotes, as an endeavor through which information (from evidence to the relevance of its claims, the explanation of ambiguous situations and providing context) becomes relevant and valuable for the public, but also for those in power.

We have discovered plenty other examples, either in trustworthy media outlets and their ethic codes or within media organizations that promote independent journalism as the essential requirement for democracy and an open society. We can, thus, conclude that there are two valid conceptualizations from which the rich variety of nuances in the definition of today's journalism derives : 1) The *largo sensu* one, referring to an extremely generous and inclusive form of journalism, characterized by media pluralism and a multitude of forms and descriptions of the term journalism in the digital era, from mainstream journalism to the most questionable forms of producing and publishing content in the public sphere, especially online, like citizen journalism with all its avatars and 2) the *stricto sensu* one, an (neutrally speaking) exclusivist and limitative form of journalism, that focusses on professional informational journalism, on the production of news and press materials (articles, interviews, news stories) about politics, socio-economic and cultural topics and everything in between.

Both these conceptualizations are complementary and equally crucial for the understanding of the present journalistic phenomenon, its importance and various connections to other areas, like science - a connection that can be very well observed during the health and humanitarian crisis generated by the Covid 19 pandemic. Theoreticians and journalism observers are preoccupied with redefining the role and mission of this profession, as well as its social function, in the circumstances of a de-monopolization and democratization that allow access, production and sharing of relevant information, while questioning the truth behind established formulas characterizing the press in the 20th century, like "watchdog of the democracy", "the fourth estate", "the representant of the people". This legitimate reevaluation of the role and the mission of the press is based on the emergence and

⁹ <https://www.bbc.com/aboutthebbc/governance/mission>

¹⁰ Bill Kovach, Tom Rosenstiel. 2014. "The Elements of Journalism: What Newspeople Should Know and the Public Should Expect, Completely Updated and Revised", Three Rivers Press, New York, apud. <https://www.americanpressinstitute.org/journalism-essentials/what-is-journalism/elements-journalism/>

evolution of new models of mass communication.

“For instance, the investigative watchdog function sounds hard to replace, but whistleblowers and auditors are not in short supply and perform many similar societal roles. Similarly, public, commercial and non-governmental organizations as well as citizens’ groups continue to find meaningful ways to circumvent journalism to distribute their message, meaning that the mediating, informational and representational functions served by news, while still useful, are no longer exclusive.”¹¹

Facts vs Emotions. Romanian journalism in the global trend, from mainstream to alternative

In the era of *new media* and *social media*, the biggest challenge journalism faces, isn’t digitalization per se, even though it was, at first, perceived as a distressing technological phase by media practitioners. The two last decades brought about a restructuring and redefining of the mass communication paradigm, while innovations in computer science continue to make media highly dynamic. Emerging forms and methods of access, collecting, processing and publishing information, but also the immediate option available to every smart phone user with an internet connection, to produce and share audio-visual content, have generated, in the last two decades, alternative forms of media, that are difficult to define under one generic term (“alternative”), because of their heterogeneity. For example, citizen journalism, a phenomenon that has grown and has diversified its practice along with the development of mobile internet and web 2.0 and 3.0, shows the democratic-participatory nature of social media, pointing out the undisputed opportunities it creates, but also the inherent risks of disinformation and misinformation that come with it. Media theoreticians often distinguish between *oppositional* alternative media and *advocacy* alternative media (...) While advocacy alternative media often function as the mouthpieces of organized social movements, oppositional alternative media are usually not wedded to any definite political cause or social movement.”¹²

Journalists from classic newsrooms everywhere, however, have quickly understood that online media provides them with huge and creative opportunities, but also that they are in danger of losing not only the monopoly on information, but also the validity and legitimacy of their profession. “Losing the exclusivity and control of news is something that professional media can adapt to, but losing influence and relevance is something that most journalists would not dare to contemplate.”¹³ In Romania, like in other parts of the world, the resistance of old

¹¹ M. Broersma, C. Peters. 2016. *Rethinking Journalism. Trust and Participation in a Transformed News Landscape*, Introduction: “Towards a functional perspective on journalism’s role and relevance”, Routledge, London&New York, p.6

¹² Farooq Kperogi. 2013. “News with Views: Postobjectivism and Emergent Alternative Journalistic Practices in America’s Corporate News Media”, *Review of Communication*, vol. 13, Issue 1, p.53.

¹³ Lia-Paschalia Spyridou, Maria Matsiola, Andreas Veglis, George Kalliris, Charalambos Dimoulas. 2013. “Journalism in a state of flux: Journalists as agents of technology innovation

school journalists against technological changes, keeping old routines, norms and conventions and regarding interaction and networks with skepticism, has led to an opaque regard to technology (“software, Web 2.0 tools, etc.”) in the journalistic process.¹⁴ While most journalists are now familiar with new media, the challenges of the new paradigm are mostly connected to the ethical aspects that surround it. Some media practitioners have left mainstream media for the alternative media, in order to obtain more editorial freedom; others, belonging to the generations that grew up with digital technologies, have started new journalistic projects, while creating new trends.

Therefore, by strongly interfering with online and new communicational technologies, present journalistic practices are adapting their creative and appropriate means of expression as they go. They also formulate interactive strategies for connecting to the public (understood today as a potential active participant in journalism), while adjusting and diversifying discourses, texts and especially visual-iconic forms, that are instrumental in presenting information and opinions favorably. Moreover, the collaborative web has stimulated the emergence of new evaluative bodies, factchecking instruments or portals, like Media Doctor (from 2004), where volunteer experts can verify journalistic materials concerning health care, using strict criteria regarding their truthfulness, accuracy, the quality of sources: “For each news article, the ten criteria are scored as 'satisfactory', 'not satisfactory' or 'not applicable'. Total scores (expressed as proportion of items rated 'satisfactory') are posted for articles that have seven or more 'evaluable' items (...) To ensure objectivity, all reviews are screened by a researcher who checks the scores and edits comments. Both reviewers contribute to the comment section, which is used to highlight the strengths of the story, or aspects that could have been improved, including areas not covered in the rating instrument, such as sensationalist language or inappropriate headlines.”¹⁵

In the present context of the Covid 19 pandemic, such evaluative and filtering instruments become extremely useful in guiding users and for the valorization of quality content through peer-review and the endorsement granted by independent experts.

Confronted with numerous possibilities of generating informational content, one of the assumed roles of professional journalism in the digital era is acting as filter for relevant information, useful for the public. Similarly, its other roles are providing information with the appropriate context, adapting information to the used outlet and, obviously, ensuring a swift transmission. Along with ensuring transparency (regarding the editorial team, funding sources etc., information that can be found on the website of respectable media entities), these are the essential differences between trustworthy journalism and all its avatars.

In the never-ending dispute between objectivity and subjectivity in journa-

and emerging news practices”, in *International Communication Gazette*, p.94.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 92.

¹⁵ <https://www.newcastle.edu.au/research-and-innovation/centre/chb/research/media-doctor>

lism, which has been again brought forward in theoretical debates concerning the role of the press, those who argue that objectivity should remain the core characteristic of journalism, are met with critical voices, claiming that the new generations of media consumers, raised „in a climate of instant confrontation, dissent, and permissiveness”¹⁶ need “the embrace of our lived subjectivities through alternative models of journalistic practice.”¹⁷

In Romania, we notice, on the one hand, that subjectivity, opinions and the exploitation of emotions are present in the (new) narrative journalism, in digital storytelling, in immersive journalistic practices, that revitalize confessional discourse and favor personal experience and emotions. On the other hand, realizing that objectivity is a utopian goal, an unrealistic aspiration, “a unicorn”, as it is called by some practitioners, there are voices who imperatively demand the return to factual evidence and dates in today’s journalism.

Today, what we call evidence-based Journalism requires a focus on facts, dates and certain evidence, detrimental to a journalism based on opinions and emotions; journalists who intend to handle factual information need to develop certain abilities like the selection, corroboration, comparison, correlation, interpretation and the capacity to contextualize information, so that the output of their work can be relevant to the public. During the present pandemic, a part of the press is leaning towards a scientific approach to newswriting and a journalism based on science.

From the beginning of the pandemic, Libertatea, a publication that has covered the subject with a large number of materials¹⁸, has constantly made references to scientific articles and studies, health experts’ opinions and precise numbers and data provided by legitimate national and international organizations. The website uses user friendly digital tools like maps, animations or infographics. The relationship between facts, data vs. opinions, emotions is more balanced than with other mainstream media outlets. However, a detailed surveillance and analysis of the Covid 19 section on this website, reveals also practices that are questionable, from an ethical standpoint: insufficient research, sharing mediocre articles with attractive titles from the international press, clickbaits, employing an alarmist approach, biased interpretation of numbers (predominantly negative), reflected in the titles of articles, citing irrelevant scientific articles without peer-review, or not providing links.

Regarding data journalism, there are major differences between the use and access to data in countries that are well developed technologically and countries with a lower standard of living. However, regardless of the fact that Western democracies have embraced data journalism, some theoreticians claim that there is a constant struggle „to allocate sufficient resources to develop the expertise needed to carry out data journalism. Furthermore, access to relevant quality data is still

¹⁶ Merrill and Lowenstein, apud Farooq Kperogi, Op cit., p.52.

¹⁷ Farooq Kperogi, *Ibidem*.

¹⁸ <https://www.libertatea.ro/subiect/coronavirus>

one of the core challenges for data journalists, with Freedom of Information Acts serving as important tools for journalists.”¹⁹ In countries with a lower standard of living, practicing data journalism is even more problematic, if not almost impossible, claim the authors of the aforementioned study.

Romanian journalism can’t boast with major acquisitions in this respect. It hasn’t managed to provide openness to newsrooms and to educate working in-service journalists, having also failed to upgrade journalistic education in universities, where, with very few exceptions, relevant concepts and exercised data journalism are not being taught.

The last decade has seen the emergence of a few autonomous journalistic centers in Romanian media, like Casa Jurnalistului, Recorder, Dela0, DoR, PressOne, Să fie lumină, Inclusiv etc., that regard themselves as a professional qualitative and trustworthy alternative (for informing, investigating, analyzing and expressing opinions) to mainstream journalism. This shows a preoccupation with reestablishing the public’s trust in the press; journalism for the benefit of the public remains, thus, a preoccupation with human rights, with supervising political decisions or raising awareness of social dysfunctionalities. We can observe an openness towards innovation, creativity and new digital formats in media. However, these journalistic projects are not infallible, as they have also, sometimes, presented half-truths or biased facts, either by documenting articles superficially, by promoting biased information, or by questionable approaches. In spite of these flaws, we have to observe that their existence is crucial for professional journalism in Romania.

For this purpose, let us quote a plea for non-partisan, factual journalism, eloquent for the manner in which Romanian journalists from the alternative side of media view their profession, published by the newsroom of Dela0.ro, when journalist Diana Oncioiu was criticized for an article about the compromising communist past of an important Romanian public figure. „Journalism for us is not a means to obtain popularity, but an accumulation of steps towards factual research, by consulting parties and studying contexts.” The idea behind it is, that journalistic articles aim not at satisfying the public’s expectations, because “press is not a popularity contest” and “journalism has to be a profession governed by rule and method”.

The most recent CJI report²⁰, referring to the Romanian press, notices the danger of “bubbles”, of the public polarization and the radicalization of media consumers, who tend to no longer endorse (financially, as well) alternative projects of independent journalism, when these entities present articles that contradict their political expectations.

The CJI report also underlines the issues local and central Romanian journalists face: political and patronal pressure, lack of funding for quality journalism,

¹⁹ Bruce Mutsavairo, Saba Bebawi, Eddy Borges-Rey (Editors). 2019. *Data Journalism in the Global South*, Palgrave Macmillan, Switzerland, p.22.

²⁰ Centrul pentru Jurnalism Independent, *Starea mass-media în România, 2020*, disponibil la: https://cji.ro/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/STUDIU-PRESA-2020_roBT-rev-01.pdf

low wages, the depopulation of newsrooms. Notwithstanding these facts, Romanian journalists have, more or less explicitly, mentioned “the need to build a conversation with the public regarding the role of journalism in a democracy, public interest and the need to be informed (...).”²¹

Without passing radical judgement, we consider that investing in and for the support of quality journalism has become even more crucial, as the digital disinformation has spread into a phenomenon with deep-rooted social repercussions, like the polarization of opinions, the amplification of negative emotions and hate speech, media overexposure to potentially manipulative content and consuming a junk news type of media. Moreover, a reposition of the Romanian academic environment (known to often rely on old concepts, understood as fundamental, immutable references) towards the study of contemporary journalism, based on thorough questioning, on the acceptance of media pluralism, critical thinking and evaluation, while understanding the journalist as “one of many knowledge producers in a broader informational ecology”²², is required.

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²¹ Ibidem, 45.

²² M. Broersma, C. Peters. *Op. cit.*, p.7.

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Webography (news sites & (media) organizations)

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BBC, www.bbc.com

CJI, www.cji.ro

Dela0.ro, <https://beta.dela0.ro>

Libertatea, www.libertatea.ro

Reporters Without Borders, <https://rsf.org>

United Nations, www.un.org

UNESCO, <https://en.unesco.org>

The University of Newcastle, www.newcastle.edu.au