

ABOUT THE ROLE OF PUBLIC PRESS TODAY. CASE STUDY - AGERPRES

Maria CRĂCIUN, PhD Candidate
University of Craiova

Abstract

In this study we are discussing the current state of the agency public media. Financial and political control over this type of institution raises another issue of today's press, in addition to tabloidization - misinformation. As far as the case study is concerned, we stopped on an episode that took place in 2017 havingg as protagonists the current director of AGERPRES and Lucian Romaşcanu, president of the Senate Culture Commission. We notice that there the public press journalist does not depend primarily on the fluctuations of the subjectivity of the public, but on the needs of the Establishment.

Keywords: Credibility, social media, public press, press agency

Introduction

Given the fact that social media has become "a necessary evil", including for journalists, for quality media, credibility remains the most

valuable asset and the most important criterion for appreciating the style of news elaboration and presentation.

Studies show that confidence in traditional journalism is at the lowest level in history, and journalists need to master their skills to use new technologies, but they must not abandon classical standards, each editorial office having the duty to build credibility, sometimes in spite of trends on social networks, because "if it is to sink, at least to sink with pride" (journalist John Mastrini, Reuters Agency at the workshop *Journalism in the Age of Social Media*, Bucharest, October 3rd 2016).

In August 2014, US businessman Jimmy Wales, co-founder of Wikipedia, quoted by AFP, expressed satisfaction with a poll according to which the British have more confidence in the online encyclopedia written by volunteers than in the press¹.

Wales referred to a survey conducted on a sample of 2,000 people published by YouGov institute, according to which 64% of the respondents trust the truthfulness of those written by Wikipedia authors, given that the trust ratio was 61% regarding the BBC journalists, 45% for news newspapers such as *The Times* or *The Guardian* and 13% for tabloids such as *The Sun*. "Great Britain has a very diverse press and a strong tradition. The fact that we outrun a post like BBC, with an excellent reputation, is particularly interesting. It's even a little frightening. I will not rest until we have enjoyed from the public a trust greater than the one granted to Encyclopedia Britannica", said Jimmy Wales.

¹ <https://www.agerpres.ro/cultura/2014/08/11/britanicii-au-mai-multa-incredere-in-wikipedia-decat-in-mass-media-sondaj--12-46-47>

The YouGov poll in 2014 showed that Wikipedia is always outran in terms of reliability by Encyclopedia Britannica, in which 83% of Britons trust.

According to the *Digital News Report* study, coordinated by the Reuters Institute at Oxford University, which analyzes media consumption in 2017 and shows global trends, people have more confidence in news editions than in the online, which is due to the effect that the concept of "fake news" has. Financially supported by Google, the survey was conducted on the basis of an online survey of 70,000 people from 36 countries, 54% of the respondents saying they are using social networks as a source of information. Of those who claim to be informed from social networks, only 24% believe that they are doing their job in separating true and false information, and 40% say that media news agencies act correctly in this respect. In countries like USA (20%/38%) and Great Britain (18%/41%), people have twice as much confidence in news organizations, and in Greece, because of the low level of confidence in news organizations 28%/19%), there is a higher number of people who believe that social networks get along better.

With regard to the situation in Romania, where 2,029 people were interviewed, confidence in the Romanian press fell sharply due to corruption, to the insolvency of media companies, to fake news, to political prejudices, as well as to the fact that many owners and directors of the most powerful media have criminal files. The study shows that Romanians choose to get information from the Internet (88%) and television (84%), social networks (65%), radio (42%) and newspaper editions (22%). Also, 72% of respondents mentioned that they are accessing news on computer, 56% on mobile phones and 17% on tablets. In Romania, the social network Facebook is very used for information, and when major interest information appear, such as those during the winter protests, the world tends to check news from multiple sources.

Within the survey, the respondents were also asked about their thoughts on the financial support of editorial boards by accessing site ads, and 24% of those surveyed in the 36 countries responded that they use Adblock-type extensions to block advertising. On the other hand, the study also shows that in several countries in 2016, online news consumers have dropped the ad-blocking extension after being told that news editors are live from advertising and that it's good to access them, especially as the Internet users pay no extra money for this².

Methodology. Press, between public pressure and political pressure

Social media is a challenge for journalists because it has become a competition for traditional media content, especially in countries where media confidence is low, and most citizens read news on social networks. But social networks are not the cause of the decrease of trust in the media, but the media themselves. In the work *The Media and Morality*: Robert M. Baird, William E. Loges, Stuart E. Rosenbaum, the authors argue that the main reason for which the public has little confidence or respect in the media is that the press presents all kinds of irresponsible information on behalf of freedom of the press.

On the other hand, the concentration of information power in the hands of very powerful corporations, in the service of private financiers, also raises an ethical issue. Because these corporations that fund radio or television stations or some publications do not exist as public services (Leroch Martin et al., 2011). For example, not everyone can appear on a top-rated audience broadcast. Very often, the decision is dictated by certain interests. And then, the question arises:

² www.digitalnewsreport.org

Are TV or radio programs really dictated by the wishes of the public or by the interests of media trusts? In any case, freedom of expression is certainly unequally distributed (Golan, 2010). To whom does the media have obligations? What are the parameters that impose the assumption of a certain moral responsibility towards the public?

For a long time, the classical media has held the monopoly of information circulation and dictated alone in this area, and now has to keep in mind that other voices fighting for supremacy are now competing on this market. There are blogs / vlogs that have higher audiences than medium level newspapers and, after their daily rating, overtake classic newspapers. Which will be the role of the media in the next period: will choose to run for an increasing number of clicks, shares, likes as it used to run so far for audience, will assume the role of a corner street blogger, of troll, fake news generator or will choose to build credibility despite social networking trends?

There is a strong relationship between the role assumed by the media in a democratic society and the market ideology that dominates today's political and economic practices. According to this ideology, the media is not just a sales outlet, a subject that fluctuates between supply and demand, just like any other product, so it must come out of state control, according to the principle "quality is given by market". But the market is criticized not only for ignoring the quality of information, but especially for the failure of its attempt to establish a democratic press, above the interests of those who are owners and hold control. The conflict between the "guarantee of freedom of expression", the thesis promoted by enlightened liberalism, and the necessity to impose a responsibility in media practices could not and cannot be solved by a constraint exercised by the state authorities, by imposing a certain behavioral model (Spiro, 2001). Rather, the solution must come from an intimate conviction that elevates man

behind constraints, punishments, sanctions, or interests, because ultimately a democratic society depends on the sense of morality and responsibility that its members have, which is the beginning and end of any democracy.

If private press continues to produce only "what is required in the market", motivating that it should function as an efficient economic agent, public media, totally or partially financed from the state budget, should be aware that they have an increasingly important role in terms of growth or at least keeping of the level of public's credibility in the press.

Case study: Romanian public press agency, between sub-financing, restructuring and political pressure

The last year's situation of the National Press Agency AGERPRES, one of the three public press institutions in Romania alongside the Romanian Television and the Romanian Radio Society, represents a case of a relationship considered to be a force field between the political class and the press in general, and the one financed by public money, in particular.

At the beginning of 2017, the Agerpres staff budget, which is 100% provided by the state budget, was cut by the Parliament's Culture and Mass-Media Commission by 11.4% compared to December 2016, which has never happened since 2003, since the agency has run under Parliament. The situation was determined by the fact that the general manager of the institution, appointed four years ago by the then prime minister and voted by Parliament for a five-year mandate, according to the Agerpres operating law, fell into disfavor of the current political power who had no legal leverage to dismiss him before his term expired.

After the institution's employees expressed their dissatisfaction with the political decision to cut the staff budget that would have resulted in the

dismissal of several dozen of people, the Parliament returned to plenary and added funds, next completed them at the budget rectification.

Originating from the private press, the chairman of the Senate Culture Committee Lucian Romaşcanu has asked the director of Agerpres to think of a "restructuring" of the institution that would have involved the dismissal of about 70 employees, although he later admitted that he has nothing to reproach concerning the activity. In other words, Agerpres goes well, but the director had to dismiss about 70 people for "restructuring". In addition to restructuring, as chairman of the Senate Culture Committee, he also asked the director the commercial contracts, the customer lists. The director did not want or could not dismiss employees, there existing a collective labor contract signed with the union in the institution, and then Romaşcanu proposed an amendment to change the law by which the director be dismissed when the political majority disposes, although the mandate of the current director expires by law in about three months. The stake seems to have a greater importance, Romaşcanu being no stranger to the private press, and since the idea of privatization of the institution that could be taken over by private competition has been on the market, periodically, since 1997.

The Senate adopted in the plenary session dated October 30th 2017 the legislative initiative to complete Law 19/2003 on the organization and functioning of the National Agency AGERPRES, according to which the General Director will be dismissed in the event of Parliament's rejection of the annual activity report of the institution, just as it happens at the moment in the case of public television and radio, by political vote. Although at first glance it seems to be a purely technical, insignificant change, as the Director-General is politically appointed, this change, which seems to be a symmetry between appointment and dismissal, is of enormous importance for the agency's

operation. The amendment aims at changing the dismissal procedure of the General Director without taking into account objective criteria in the evaluation of the activity, and the voting on the activity report becomes practically exclusively political, just as with TVR and SRR. Any director who will come will be with Damocles' sword above his head and in an attempt to permanently thank those who control him and give him the stamp and to respond to political pressures, will make editorial pressures on journalists to write only what is in the likeness of from power. Thus, the agency will turn into a press office of any political power, losing its credibility and being a public press institution that provides fair and equidistant information.

Unlike the two other public press institutions in Romania, TVR and SRR, where the Presidents – General Directors were politically dismissed on the grounds that the activity report was rejected by the Parliament, and so very few of them could take their mandate to the end, AGERPRES has succeeded in the past years to become the main source of accurate information in Romania for both the general public and the national and international press. For this reason, the situation generated by the proposal to amend the operating law that was seen as having the primary objective of placing the agency under the political control of the current ruling coalition was presented by major international media institutions such as New York Times, Washington Post, Associated Press, EuroNews, Foxnews, RFI, etc., but it was also in the attention of international press organizations that took action. Thus, "Reporters without frontiers (Reporters sans frontières)", "European Center for Press and Media Freedom", "ActiveWatch (member of Reporters Without Borders and IFEX Networks)", "Romanian Journalists Union - MediaSind (member of the International Federation of Journalists)", "Center for Independent Journalism", "Convention of Media Organizations" sent to the Senators an open letter asking

them not to vote the proposal to amend the Agerpres Act, which was criticized by the OSCE, the European Federation of Journalists, UNI Europe Media, Entertainments & Arts, International Federation of Musicians and was an alert on the platform of the Council of Europe's freedom of expression, to which the Romanian authorities had to respond.

"Do not forget, dear senators that the political power is changing periodically. Keep public environments at the service of the citizen, because, serving the public interest, I am of your help too, more than I am being a politically subordinate. In conclusion, we believe that public media institutions are under political siege and we appeal to you, regardless of your political party, not to put your shoulder to the final destruction of these institutions. Begin by saying NO to this AGERPRES Law Amendment!"³, the organizations for the defense of press freedom transmitted to Romanian Senators specifically on the vote day, a request that PSD political majority did not take into account.

The decision-making chamber on the final vote for this legislative change is the Chamber of Deputies that could reject the amendment voted by the Senate. Under the conditions in which law will change,

Given the fact that the law will change, it is possible that the attributes of Agerpres conferred by the functioning law disappear, the primary objective of the institution being to inform the public without censoring news, without commenting or analyzing statements in an attempt to create trends and transmit to the public truncated information for manipulation purposes.

The hidden reason for this change is to place the public press agency under the political control of the current governing coalition, the symmetry

³ <http://epochtimes-romania.com/news/senatori-nu-votati-modificarea-legii-agerpres-senatorii-somati-sa-nu-puna-umarul-la-distrugerea-presei---267163>

regarding the appointment and dismissal of the director invoked by the political class being interpreted both by Romanian journalists and by the international press as representing a way of political pressure as long as the activity report can be rejected without any justification, and even though Agerpres has submitted this report every year, the Romanian Parliament has not discussed it for three years. Given that the Senate has tabled a series of amendments to the Agerpres Act, targeting that the General Director's mandate would cease if the Parliament rejected the annual activity report "for failure to meet the quantifiable targets foreseen in the AGERPRES Development Strategy" and were rejected by the political majority, it is deduced that it is not interested in how the agency is functioning, agency that is the fifth agency in the world in terms of seniority.

The public press is meant to inform promptly and correctly, unlike the private press that has its own importance and rules to be profitable, this being its main objective. If it were to follow the trend where is for more than six years, Agerpres could still maintain its status as the main source of correct, reliable information in Romania. If the same trend is not maintained, it is possible that Agerpres disappear because the loss of credibility means for a news agency its disappearance.

Another idea that is being launched on a regular basis is the unification of the three public press institutions - TVR, SRR and Agerpres - following the pattern in Hungary, situation that led to the restructuring of the MTI press agency that gave up some of its employees and lost a large part of its subscribers.

Romanian Press Agency was set up in 1889, January 24th / February 5th, when Romanian Foreign Minister PP Carp asked the General Telegraph and Post Office Directorate to offer the Romanian Telegraph Agency, which is

being organized in Bucharest, a "large room in the houses they occupy". During the First World War, interrupted its activity for a period, and from 1921, transmits without interruption.

Given the fact that the press in Romania is currently undergoing a general tabloidization process, and journalists have moved from the information mission to the scandal production mission, will the political class have the maturity needed to not subordinate in total the public press agency so that it can function as an independent and equidistant institution?

"Now we are facing a general tabloidization: all journalists think their mission is to produce scandal, not to find where the scandal is. Including when a leaf falls from the tree, it must be a scandal for them - it killed an ant. This cynical mentality, associated with the idea that they have to scandalize, renders vulnerable any institution and any person who has become a subject of the press, because we do not have any journalistic investigations anymore, we have journalistic defamation campaigns. Romania used to face this situation before, in the '50s, during the Stalinist period, where the targets were fixed and then destroyed by 'Scânteia' through a campaign"⁴, says Professor Mihai Coman, founder of the Faculty of Journalism at the University of Bucharest.

Conclusions

By law, public press services in Romania are autonomous, of national interest, editorial independence and operate under the control of the Parliament. They have a legal obligation to ensure, through their entire activity, pluralism, free expression of ideas and opinions, free communication of information, as well as correct public opinion. Also, their programs should have information,

⁴ <http://www.reporterntv.ro/stire/mesaj-catre-preoti-atentie-trec-jurnalisti>

education, entertainment functions and they are obliged to objectively and impartially present the realities of domestic and international social and political life, to ensure that citizens are properly informed about public affairs, to promote, with competence and exigency, the values of the Romanian language, of the authentic cultural, scientific, national and universal creation, of the national minorities, as well as the democratic, civic, moral and sports values, to militate for the national unity and for the independence of the country for the cultivation of human dignity, of truth and justice and to respect the principles of the constitutional order in Romania⁵.

References

Baird, Robert M., Loges, William E. Stuart, Rosenbaum E. 1999. *The Media and Morality*; Prometheus Books: New York

Golan, Guy J. 2010. New Perspectives on Media Credibility Research, *American Behavioral Scientist*, 54: 3

Leroch Martin A., Wellbrock Christian M. 2011. Saving newspapers with public grants – The effects of press subsidies on the provision of journalistic quality, *Information Economics and Policy*, 23 (2011) 281–286.

Spiro Kiouisis. 2001. Public Trust or Mistrust? Perceptions of Media Credibility in the Information Age, *Mass Communication and Society*, 4:4, 381-403

Web sources

http://media.tvrinfo.ro/media-tvr/other/201702/vlege-41-1-februarie-2017_06095600.pdf (11.11.2017)

⁵ http://media.tvrinfo.ro/media-tvr/other/201702/vlege-41-1-februarie-2017_06095600.pdf

<https://www.agerpres.ro/cultura/2014/08/11/britanicii-au-mai-multa-incredere-in-wikipedia-decat-in-mass-media-sondaj--12-46-47> (13.11.2017)

www.digitalnewsreport.org (15.11.2017)

<http://epochtimes-romania.com/news/senatori-nu-votati-modificarea-legii-agerpres-senatorii-somati-sa-nu-puna-umarul-la-distrugerea-presei---267163> (24.11.2017)

<http://www.reporterntv.ro/stire/mesaj-catre-preoti-atentie-trec-jurnalisti>
(15.11.2017)