

THE MEDIA RHETORIC AND PERCEPTION OF MARIAN MUNTEANU'S CANDIDACY FOR BUCHAREST GENERAL CITY HALL

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Abstract: This paper uncovers some key media features within a distinct and very small period of time in which especially the Romanian central contemporary press has treated the candidacy of a prominent public figure to the posture of general mayor in Bucharest city.

The article does not propose an extensive theoretical frame for the type of media approach about which we speak here but is disclosing, however, a set of general elements through which this type of journalism could be recognized.

In addition to the general description of this very particular journalistic way of dealing with a political phenomenon like was the Marian Munteanu's Candidacy for Bucharest General City Hall the paper tries also to disclose a wider picture of this type of media undertaking. Key aspects such as the impact of this type of media approach at different levels of society are being also scrutinized. Further elements will be also analyzed: the way in which was built the public perception through media message about this political candidacy and the way in which were possible some manipulations, with different causes, of the entire public episode.

In the end we draw a brief set of conclusions by showing the fact that this type of journalism could bring serious damage to the credibility of the press in general but also to the political structures which made available for the public the phenomenon which is the subject of our paper. Also the aspect of social responsibility of the media will be taken into a brief but substantial discussion.

Keywords: Media Rhetoric, Public Perception, Manipulation and Public Discourse, Journalism and Social Responsibility

This paper does not have and does not claim any definitive truth about the subject which is approached. We just want to disclose a very specific form of media distortion, a one which does not necessary have a direct link with any sort of unprofessional or unethical perspective in doing journalism. However, and this will be visible later, this link could be made but in our opinion yet it is not about unprofessional media approach rather than lack of culture for the media. But let us see in the beginning which are the facts about which we want to talk about.

As it is known before the start of the electoral campaign for the local elections in Romania the National Liberal Party has proposed to the public from Bucharest City few names which, until a definitive candidacy was accepted by this party, were changed very quickly in a very short period of time. Here it does not matter for us which were the reasons for which the Romanian actual National Liberal Party did this. The political reasons or any other possible causes for this real crisis are less important. What is interesting for us is the fact that during this crisis of establishing the final candidate for Bucharest City the Romanian National Liberal Party has proposed the candidacy of Marian Munteanu, a prominent public figure well known to the Romanian public since 1990. Starting from this political proposal, in the very short period of time which followed, a part of the Romanian media and also some public figures other than journalists, had expressed concerns and a general negative position about Marian Munteanu's candidacy for Bucharest City Hall.

Media Responsibility and Public Perception

It is, from many points of view, an obvious thing to appreciate and to encourage the professionalism among the journalists regardless of who is claiming these two goals. Already in contemporary Romania, for a significant period of time, the necessity of having good professionals in the media is not only a general theoretical desiderate in the public space but also a distinct topic of discussions and debates, a theme which in our view should be even more approached at the level of public space. However, this ultimate goal of having good professionals in the media seems to be more and more contradicted by the facts. Things are, for the Romanian media, like they got blocked on a very wrong track for a long time and there are no serious signs that this situation will change for the better very soon.

What is interesting for us within the context of this observation is the fact that not only that there is no improvement in terms of rising the professional standards in doing journalism in contemporary Romania but by the contrary the lack of professionals seems to take new and various practical forms. Before we go any closer in this issue is important to mention once again, even if we could be accused of saying obvious things, that in a free society, and especially in a society like is today the Romanian society, a one which is even today fragile and insufficiently articulated in terms of civic responsibility, the role played by the media is decisive in building the public perception and manipulating, in a positive or negative manner, the taste and judgement of the public. This is a supplementary reason for which it must be emphasized the crucial role of the media and the vital necessity of having not only high level professionals in doing and making journalism but also of having *responsible* individuals in the media system able to be fully aware about the weight of their responsibility in the social field.

In general terms, how it was stated, the media has a deeper impact than simply forming or changing the public perception about various social facts. Media has a deep impact on a community's *communicative competences* and by this upon the entire set of inner mechanisms which are responsible for the process of forming perception and judgements at the level of public space (Habermas, 1989). Of course, this theory is only one among those which were elaborated during the 20th century in order to explain the profound relations and nonlinear causality between the media and some sets of social behaviors. Beyond these theories, regardless of their complexity or social testability, remains the idea of social responsibility, a responsibility which must be assumed by the media, by the journalists in general. And one of the forms in which this social responsibility of the media exists is the level of professionalism among the journalists.

But which are those different forms in which the lack of professionalism can be observed at the level of journalists' behavior? With this question, and this is very important to be mentioned here, we do not have in mind only the lack of professional expertise in making journalism but also some inertial and local, restricted especially to the Romanian public space, behavior which unfortunately is so present today in Romanian media.

About a Distinct Form of Unprofessional Behavior among Journalists

One widely form in which in our view is present an unprofessional behavior among the Romanian contemporary journalists could be seen, in fact it is so strident visible, in their habit of taking the role of

educating the public from the position of someone which not only that is used to give the impression that he or she really knows about what is talking but also from an obvious *superior position* related to the public. This situation, of course, it is not always explicitly assumed by some of the contemporary Romanian journalists but, however, it is widely spread among all types and forms of media today in Romania. Formally speaking there should be nothing wrong with this situation if those which are used to perform it would be indeed professional in their domains. But unfortunately in the vast majority of the cases they are not.

The phenomenon described by us until this point was visible in some limits and with small corrections in its described essence in the case of Marian Munteanu's short candidacy for the Bucharest City Hall. Thus, there were some journalists which had the tendency to exaggerate or even to distort some things from the candidate's past. This situation could be in our view a useful example not only for the issue of manipulation in the media but also for those situations in which the process of manipulation could be a direct result of lack of knowledge at the level of journalists. To be more precise in our description we want to underline the fact that it is not the aim of this paper to draw some conclusions from a political point of view or anything like this. The problems which appeared for the Romanian National Liberal Party after this episode is a strict and distinct individual political issue in which we do not have any interest. What we try to underline is the fact that in this short and peculiar media event some malfunctions, so to speak, at the level of the press, were so obvious.

There were two major lines of attack in the media, if it is possible to speak here in these terms, upon the Marian Munteanu's candidacy. In one it was accused of his murky political past in terms of his deep political options (Tapalagă, 2016). In other one it was simply accused of not being an authentic liberal. These lines of criticism had different levels of intensity in the media from those positions which can be easily seen as radical to those moderate and equilibrate like was the synthesis made by Stelian Tănase on his blog (Tănase, 2016). Both of them are of course strongly linked together. We do not question here neither of these two attack lines just how we did by avoiding judging the political issue of this problematic candidacy at the level of the contemporary Romanian National Liberal Party. The only thing which we want to illustrate is the fact that in situations like this it seems to be very easy for the media, especially for some particular journalists to *distort* the public perception upon one theme by using intentionally or not an unprofessional media behavior in the general sense described by us earlier.

Social Responsibility and Media Implication in Civic Action

The whole event of Marian Munteanu's candidacy for Bucharest City Hall, beyond its political or media implications has a distinct new dimension, at least in our view, for the contemporary media from Romania. It is about the power of the media, *the increased power of the journalists on the political establishment* but also upon the general public. This does not mean necessary that this phenomenon is associated with the healthy growth of a mature civil society and this is quite something. In other terms the power of media, which was so obvious in the described event, does not imply necessarily the social responsibility of the media. We think that this is true because in our view the whole message about Marian Munteanu's candidacy was built through exaggerations, misinterpretations and media pressure.

Another aspect which can be disclosed from this event is the fact that in recent times in many occasions the Romanian media shows an obvious tendency to see itself as a sort of *civil guardian* but not in the traditional and very positive sense assumed by those political theories which are promoting the role of press in a free society. Rather than being an authentic civil guardian, in the wide sense of this expression, the Romanian contemporary media looks like, and this is surely true for a significant majority of the public, has a sort of a *superior institutional being*, something which has all the answers, the good and the proper ones of course, for everything. It should be obvious that this is a very wrong way to follow as a media system if you want to obtain an authentic media implication in society. In the case of Marian Munteanu's candidacy this aspect was visible through the way in which some journalists had also the tendency to show to the public that they and only they had the real answer to this so called "issue".

However, there were some remarkable exceptions in the media regarding this case and it worth mentioning here, for example, a proper approach by one of the actual Romanian press agencies. Thus, we mention here the interview made by the Romanian Mediafax Press Agency, an interview made and published by this press agency during the short period of Marian Munteanu's candidacy (Mediafax, 2016). Within this interview the journalist adopts a frontal but objective manner asking those sensitive questions to Marian Munteanu himself.

Of course, many other things could be said about the topic of our paper. What is sure is the fact that the described type of making journalism, a one which by the very beginning has the tendency to offer a final and definitive answer to the public about one subject or another has nothing to do with the professional journalism. In this category we do not include those moderate positions or viable and objective journalistic comments like was, for example, the one made by Stelian Tănase.

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