

***MEDIA, SOCIETY AND VALUES – A BRIEF ANATOMY OF THE FAILURE OF
ROMANIAN CONTEMPORARY MEDIA***

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Abstract: This theoretical endeavor is about Romanian media and its failure within contemporary Romania in achieving its general purpose of promoting and consolidating a democratic and liberal society. In brief we tried to disclose a structural and general model in order to find out the main set of causes because of which, at least in our opinion, the Romanian contemporary media has failed to promote at the level of contemporary Romanian society the model of a democratic and responsible civil society. It is important to mention that our study is centered on some theoretical perspectives and it is not build upon an empirical methodological survey.

The theoretical approach of the study has a doubled sided construction. Firstly we try to uncover the causes for the failure. Within this context we indicate two main origins for the present deplorable status of the Romanian contemporary media. The first one consists in some historical inheritances from the communist era from different points of view. The second one comes from the so called Romanian transition and it also covers different perspectives such are the sociological or the economical one.

Secondly the theoretical frame of this study tries systematically to uncover the profound negative effects of the actual Romanian media at the level of the ordinary Romanian contemporary citizen. These effects can be identified from various perspectives. We focused mainly upon the psychological and cultural ones. In the end we made some general observations and recommendations which in our view could change for the better in the future the actual very negative status of Romanian media.

Keywords: Media, Civil society, Democracy, Public opinion, Public space.

Introduction. First of all we want to underline from the very beginning that this very short study does not claim to be a systematic and complete approach of the Romanian contemporary media phenomenon¹. Our intentions are reduced to the goal of drawing a general picture about what we consider to be a relatively very visible situation. Regarding about what we call "The failure of the Romanian contemporary media" within the conceptual content of this study we consider that a further and deeper approach, a one cultural but also a sociological one are needed. The study is thus limited to a theoretical general frame elaborated upon an obvious and palpable situation. *We just do not go beyond what everybody can see today about the Romanian press.* This does not mean that empirical studies upon the Romanian media phenomenon are not necessary but only that these studies *are not enough in order to proper understand why the failure is so dramatic.* Thus, our paper *opens a door* by indicating the fact that the studies upon the press are not sufficient in order to understand why the media in post-communist Romania has failed to play its role and to disseminate into the population, by various means which it has on its disposal, the values of democratic societies. Now we can proceed further.

¹ As it has already been indicated by some authors it is difficult to find serious and empirical studies about the evolution of the post-communist press in Romania. This was also true about us in finding these *relevant* studies. This situation is only one of the reasons because of which the study has a pregnant theoretical dimension, based upon general facts, but also a reason for the very limited set of references that we used.

In the present in Romania is almost a trend to speak about how much harm the press from this country had done to its own people in the last two and a half historical decades. By doing so is it like you receive a certificate of good quality in terms of your intellectual standing, and like you get a sort of a medal, a symbolic distinction to talk about the very low level of making journalism in this geographic space from Eastern Europe. From some points of views this type of distinct cultural and even social phenomenon could be part of a very consistent study in itself but this is not the purpose of our theoretical endeavor². However, there are indeed consistent lines of debates within contemporary Romanian public space which consider that the press from this country did not succeed to fulfill its main role has a free and responsible voice of the civil society, a role which primarily has to promote and to develop the social responsibility and the growth of a solid democratic consciousness, in its general dimensions, at the level of general public and at the level of the ordinary citizen in particular.

The above observations are, with no doubt, true and consistent. But, in terms of systematic and conceptual approach for this topic we have to admit that until today it is difficult to obtain reliable scientific sources and approaches about the media phenomenon in Romania after 1989³. Our short intervention is only designed to draw a preliminary conceptual filter in order to further develop consistent and empirical studies.

A Short History of a Structural Failure. The Contemporary Romanian Press – a Brief Anatomy of a Fading Hope

History, regardless of what some might think about it, is not a simple thing. In any given moment the “thing” which we call “history” is in reality a set of complex causal factors which can change without warning what until then was considered continuous and predictable in its evolution. In these terms we can presume that after the collapse of communism in 1989 in Romania the press had all the opportunities not only to improve its deplorable status from the near historical past of the country but to change it in a radical and positive manner. Yet, this was not the case. It turns out that a historical change, at least in the formal sense of this expression, was not enough to destroy a very toxic structural frame, in all its perspectives, in which the Romanian media was immersed until the end of 1989. Thus, a simple logical expectation and even, we can say, a historical prediction and direction, were both proved to be ultimately unrealistic. It seems indeed that for the Romanian press after 1989 the flow of history did not fulfill something which was expected and desirable. Even more, the things, as we will show them, had become worse. But what exactly did happen that was so toxic and capable to block any hope of getting better not only for the press or for the Romanian public

² Today in Romania there are several sites in which a relatively significant number of authors are expressing their points of view regarding a large area of topics which are, or at least it should be, important for the general public. But, regardless of how you decide to analyse this phenomenon what is certain is that this type of commitment to the public interest does not have a serious and palpable impact. Neither the public neither the authorities are the beneficiaries of this type of involvement from the public intellectuals of contemporary Romania. And this situation, to say the least, is a certain sign of immaturity and lack of responsibility from the civil society in general.

³ Coman, M. – *Mass media in Romania post –comunista (Mass Media in Postcommunist Romania)*, Polirom, Iasi, 2003, p. 26.

space but to block an expected and desired historical direction? Because it was obvious that if you make a so called “revolution” than you expect to get yourself better and not to get worse. In short, the concrete evolution, a negative one if it is to be compared with the set of expectations, was a complete opposed to a line of evolution which it could be expected after you a make a “revolution” and after you hope that in this way you will succeed to build a free and authentic democracy and a genuine responsible civil society. And this should be enough, with all its simplistic scheme, to shed a light of doubt upon all those conceptions which considers history, in terms of the future, as something which can be predict, even in this case the example elected in order to destroy the belief in historical predictability is a negative one⁴.

However, beyond this simplistic epistemological thinking about history in general and speaking now strictly about the concrete evolution of the Romanian press after 1989 some general lines of progress and directions of approach could be relatively easy disclosed and analyzed. Because even if the direction which was followed by the Romanian press after December 1989 was not a one which you expect after you make a “revolution” designed to wipe out the effects of the communism from the society, it had, anyway, its own shape and its own consistence.

In what will follow, at the beginning of our endeavor, we will try just to uncover the fundamental set of coordinates in which the historical development of the Romanian press after the collapse of the communism in 1989 was possible.

In the Vicinity of the Origins: To be a Journalist in Romania after the Collapse of Communism in 1989 and beyond

To ask yourself about who was making journalism in Romania immediately after December 1989, but also in the next period, is a vital necessity in any serious enterprise of studying the media phenomenon in Romania from the end of 1989 until today. In order to be brief we will not insist here about the set of historical conditions and structural causes which directly determined the content of human resources, which was working in the Romanian press at the time which communism collapsed in December 1989. All that it counts is the fact that in vast majority of the cases the press was strictly controlled by the communist regime through its repressive tools. And, this is the main point in our opinion, those who worked in the communist press did not have a proper understanding and training about how a free and responsible press, from an authentic democratic society, must fulfil its duty.

So, those who worked before December 1989 in the press continued to work after the collapse of the communism within the historical frame and concrete conditions of their background about which we already talked about.

The second category were the newcomers into the media system. But their enthusiasm was not at the level of their real press performances. They did not have even the minimum training of those which already worked within the communist media but they did not feel that this could be a disadvantage.

These two category were the main actors, so to speak, which made press in Romania after December 1989. Almost needless to say, none of these two categories had the required

⁴ Popper, K. R. – *Mizeria istoricismului (The Poverty of Historicism)*, Bucuresti, Editura ALL, 1996, pp. 103 – 106.

skills to make a western type responsible media. This is a simple truth but with tremendous implications if you want to really understand the proportions of the disaster of the Romanian *contemporary* media.

One more thing about this topic here. In our view it is completely useless to develop any elaborate and systematic sociological and empirical study about the human resources from Romanian press after December 1989 because we have at our disposal a simple fact: there was no institution, an academic one or whatever, capable to properly train, in terms of an authentic democracy and genuine civil society needs, those individuals which wanted to work in the media system. Thus, the conclusion is a very clear one: on the one hand we had in the media system all types of propaganda activists, from the communist regime, which continued to work in the press in Romania after December 1989 and which did not have any experience within a press from a democratic society and, on the other hand, we had all sorts of individuals, more or less aware of what they were doing as “journalists” which entered into media also without any consistent training.⁵ Regarding this topic maybe the discussion could be a one more extended but we do not insist. The only thing, the essential element is the fact that after the collapse of the communist regime in December 1989, Romania did not had trained journalists. This lack of professionalism could not be replaced by the enthusiasm or a presumably good will.

Transition. Where to go if you came from nowhere?

This general situation was perpetuated during the time of the so called “transition”, a period which supposedly had to get Romanian people, at least in terms of mentality, at the point from which a western democratic mentality, will all its consequences for the media, should be available. Unfortunately this was not the case.

Regarding the media system that those two general categories of so called “journalists” did not managed to improve the way in which journalism was made and they were not capable to set the seeds for some better future generations. From this perspective a dramatic phenomenon was developed when peoples from these two categories tried to establish and to institutionally build a frame in order to offer professional training to those who wanted to be journalists. But they failed dramatically and this is obvious if we look at the professional level of the graduates from these academic institutions. Even some prominent figures from contemporary Romanian media had complained about this⁶.

In short, the period of transition, from many points of views, was indeed a very peculiar one and this we think is especially true about the evolution of Romanian media. This because it had to start from a sort to point zero with no effective human resources capable to build an authentic democratic and responsible media and ended today also in a point zero of the absence of professionalism and the process of promoting false values within society.

⁵ In our opinion the status of intellectuals or of those which came from the diaspora was at least a debatable one because they also were not prepared to properly fit into the mentality frame of a so distorted society has was the Romanian society after it escaped from the communist period. In a way they were like ghosts and they are still ghosts in the public space because their public discourse, a one which is disseminated by the media system, had never the power to significantly influence the authorities or to essentially change a negative mentality about democracy and the role of the press within it.

⁶ Some respected contemporary journalists did repeatedly spoken in public about the danger that these faculties of journalists pose to the public space from Romania in general and only for the media system.

The Mentalities and the Toxic Symbiosis between Media and Political and Economic System

This general situation, which already was a very toxic one, has mixed with the general mentality of the Romanian people, with some cultural elements present within Romanian society which are not properly fit to receive and to promote western democratic values⁷. This a truism, we know this, but even so it should be always remembered in any attempt to realistically understand what is happening now with the media system from Romania.

And on the top of this general situation another one has come to further vitiate the functioning of press. As the previous conditions were not enough to destroy almost all of the Romanian press credibility another condition was added in time. We refer here to a gradually symbiotic relation between the press and economic and political circles of interests. This had indeed a much more profound negative effect in the functioning of the Romanian press because now we are not speaking anymore only about the lack of professionalism but of using this status in order to make “journalism” completely under the control of the interests of these two circles. Media trusts had now become weapons in the hands of those which control them and started to intensively use blackmailing and manipulation. From now on the professionalism in the Romanian press had become objectively speaking a preposterous task.

Maybe about the evolution of the Romanian press after December 1989 in the direction described above it should be interesting to empirically see exactly from which point in time the media system had been transformed into weapons, more or less, controlled by those who have the political power or the financial resources. But from the perspective of the needs of our approach this is almost irrelevant, it could have, in the best version, only a historical value. After all, what it is indeed certain is the fact that this situation has a profound negative effect upon contemporary Romanian public space and upon the fragile civil society of this country in general. As it has been said, the contemporary Romanian public space, and media is a key actor within it, is a place in which a sort of public obscenity is systematically promoted through the press.⁸

As an exotic element we can add here, has an element within the arsenal of those media institutions which manipulate the public, the process of systematic dissemination of lies, through media tools, into the public sphere. With the observation that this process is not an elaborate one has it was in the Western media during the second half of the 20th century⁹. By the contrary, here is a rudimentary one, perfectly adapted, if it is be malicious, to the level of the Romanian public.

The Effects – False Values and the Absence of Responsibility

It is very easy to see now the effects of the contemporary Romanian media upon the public. These can be briefly summarized as it follows.

⁷ An interesting analysis was made about this topic and, among other aspects, it was underlined *the structural delay* of Romanian society in relation with Western country. See Boia, L. – *De ce este Romania altfel, (Why Romania is Different?)*, Bucuresti, Humanitas, 2002, pp. 7 – 11.

⁸ Pleșu, A. – *Obscenitatea publica, (The Public Obscenity)*, Bucuresti, Humanitas, 2005, p.

⁹ Revel, J.F. – *Cunoasterea inutila, (The Useless Knowledge)*, Bucuresti, Humanitas, 1992, pp. 22 – 31.

Firstly, false values are now promoted by the Romanian press to the general public. Instead of disseminating key cultural symbols of an authentic democracy and free market mentality the press are now completely adapted in Romania to the unfortunately very low level of the public. Rapid enrichment, getting money without working and without effort, promotion of dubious individuals and so on are the main ingredients of these disastrous phenomenon.

One of the main result consists in the fact that population does not correctly perceive the real role of the press in a free and democratic society. Of course, this distinct and very dangerous effect it is in fact the *combined result* of the absence of professionalism among the Romanian contemporary journalists and the very low level, in different and general senses of this expression, of the Romanian public¹⁰.

But the most poisoned effect is the perpetuation of the absence of a solid, systematic and authentic general and social responsibility. We do not deny the fact that in the last period significant steps were made in order to improve this negative situation from the Romanian society. But we do not consider that the press have done this. These positive results are in fact the fruits of different private organizations. Anyway, the Romanian press has done almost nothing to change this poor status of the society, even more, it continued to deliver the same low level messages which are so toxic for the masses. In short, due to its lack of professionalism, its dependence of various circles of interests and also due the general very low level of the Romanian public the contemporary press from this country continues even no to promote and to distribute *the evil* in the society. Of course, we know that the term “evil” is not a scientific one. But it encompasses the whole variety of effects which contemporary Romanian media is delivering to the Romanian public. And, as we said at the beginning, something larger is needed in order to build a scientific perspective of analysis, anthropological, cultural and psychological, which later to be able to give us and answer, or at least a beginning of an answer, to the question regarding the proportions of the Romanian contemporary failure in its general social responsibilities.

Press can do nothing

And, as a final consideration here, maybe if we will ever ask ourselves what should be done to change in better this dramatic situation of contemporary Romanian press the answer will not be a one which put the press in its center. Here we think that the issue is more profound and it is strongly linked with the deepest mentality level, in various senses, at which the Romanian society is structurally functioning for centuries.

References

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¹⁰ Even if for somebody from a Western contemporary media institution will be hard to believe there are in contemporary Romania a large number of TV shows which do not respect even the lowest professional journalistic standards.

Boia, L., (2002). *De ce este România altfel? (Why is Romania different?)*. București: Editura Humanitas

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