

"FLOW EFFECT" ABSENCE AND POOR MEDIA AUDIENCE OF THE TRAGIC ACCIDENT IN MONTENEGRO

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Abstract: The present study is based on a type of event that holds a huge dramatic potential (death of Romanian tourists in Montenegro), an event that has not generated a wide audience. If we analyze Montenegro tragedy as a reflection of another episode (detention of the picturesque Romanian businessman Gigi Becali), the conclusion might be getting clear: media discourse of that period lacked, on the one hand, the sharp narrativization of the news, and on the other hand, the absence of a "feuilletonistic" format, of a "information flow", characterized by the avalanche of consequences, comments, recontextualization, clarification of certain points of view, interviews etc. Similar to media campaign technique "flow" technique is revealing itself as a method of creating and maintaining suspense, as sociologist J. Gritti (1992) stipulates. Thus, we can observe a growth of the quality of being "spectacular" with the journalistic discourse in order to ensure a significant share of the audience, with any costs (deviations from journalistic and information objectivity, professionalism).

Keywords: manipulation, narrativization of information, information flow, suspense technique, journalistic discourse, vulgarisation.

Our study deals with the tragic event occurred in Montenegro (Romanian tourists bus crush) and from the judgment, which subsequently has been confirmed by valid sociological measurement, that despite the large number of dead, the event did not generate enough audience among media consumers. Although we have had several hypotheses and possible explanations, we finally stopped at a crucial statement of J. Gritti (1992: 153), which showed that the main thing what differentiates media from other artistic forms of communication (film, theater, visual arts) is not misfortune of/in the reporting or the fictional deformation or primacy of figurative language, but the "flow" or "tides", the avalanche of consequences (comments, re-contextualizations, clarification of certain points of view, interviews etc). "The media we deal with communication stages, as things evolves... It's a suspense technique here". This "waves"-like communication requires several prerequisites. It involves craft, professional skill, knowledge, appropriate strategy, textual means and especially suitable journalism technology. The defining element of communication in "flow" remains, as we stipulated, the "suspense" or "to be continued..." technique that we find either as it is or disguised in some informative collages that possess the technique to postpone the denouement.

Suspense - technique or strategy? Sociologist G. Auclair (1982) discusses an example of informative "flow" speech, emphasizing the last days of the life of Pope John XXIII, whose death came as a shock because his diagnosis with stomach cancer was kept from the public. On this occasion, the French theorist notes that the multitude of articles, news and issues related to the health of Pope ought to create, through accumulation, a certain sense of excess and eventually of boredom. As this has not happened, the question is how this type of subject has managed to gather such a high degree of importance from the public. The

answer is simple and not at all surprising – the tension of waiting comes from the journalists’ ability to induce to the news feed a sort of tension of expectation, able to initiate and maintain the curiosity of readers. In other words, it is enough to impose a criterion of waiting and moreover, a conflict or an imminence (dying or not; will God save him or not etc.). Immediately, the impression of informative chaos disappears. Using an overall theme of reading with Pope’s health story, an epic structure is already constructed. We outlined a character (the Pope). We imagined supporting characters and a plot. We have introduced a conflict and a certain space for the climax, an unexpected evolution of an outcome (Pope survived an assassination attempt using a gun). We have introduced elements of pathos and addictive tenderness (recollecting the image of a dove landing Pope’s shoulder) etc. In other words, the most effective dramatic and narrative organization of the text is not made within a single informative structure, but for the entire flow during one or several days, as long as the state of crisis lasts. The factual indecision it is also a matter of utmost importance as well: whether it’s a case of kidnapping, a war, a natural disaster or a critical episode in the life of a personality. From this point to the “to be continued...” technique or the open-ended nature of the narrative that is typical to soap operas (the final outcome is undecided and postponed every time, over and over again, every episode) is only one step. This technique does not represent an absolute novelty and therefore should not surprise us. The newspaper itself is an endless serial that opens and closes with the same promise of information (“Have you heard the news? ... Tomorrow we will be back with more details”). The same technique is used by televisions, online programs or some advertising messages (“You cannot imagine what you miss”). By its very nature, the every day event is slightly narrativised, which explains the growing preference of the press for sensational (deviation from normal) and, generally, for any conflict story. Narrative might be the keystone of tabloid press. Jules Gritti (1992) goes further and states that all media, despite all its disparate elements, “always tends to turn itself into a story”. All news agencies – pragmatic and lucrative –, deduce this truth and, not infrequently, offers customers news or different folders, combined in a strong narrativised way around a character or a certain event. The story (says J. Gritti) is that particular sequence that starts to rank in a special sequence waiting an outcome. This sequence, in turn, will enter into a relationship of contrast (opposition) with another sequence, which will force a resolution later on and, eventually, the final surprise. A state of fact more and more present with the Romanian media (print or TV) is that the value of information is less important than the “soap opera” – epic type of insistence in which the story presents itself (see the case of PDL politician I. B. – a dull case otherwise, devoided of any dramatically or other emotional virtues) . Even if journalism schools avoid recognizing this general truth, it is clear that, amid great media support changes and mutations that occur in the press act, the news begins to lose its great informative strength and, therefore, its importance in the structure of the newspaper. Day after day, the news themselves are getting more and more epic and they are changing its rigors of style. The change reaches such a high degree, that the very fundamental mission (to inform and to put people in touch with the latest news) of the press is questioned. It seems that today, to arouse attention and generate as many angles polemical reading a story actually matters more than the fact itself.

Directed reality or real “(fairy)news” (the Romanian word is a mixture of *fairy tale* <poveste> and *news* <stire>; **pove-știri**). Shaping the news (information) into a story starts to feel like a wide spread phenomenon, not just a theoretical construct, invented as a marketing scheme by Romanian “Acasa TV” network. The Romanian new noun *povestire*, a mixture of *fairy tale* <poveste> and *news* <stire>, shows the fusion of these two notions seen as the facets of the same media construct: “real fairytales” or “fairytales that happens in the real life”. Released from the live latest news obsession, the written press is rediscovering the virtues of a evocative description and thriller type of literature (*policier story*). This does not come as a coincidence. The news entries concerned with common facts of daily life are “overbreeding” nowadays; the virtues of the serial are rediscovered. The famous French magazine “Paris Match” even proposed a seemingly unusual field of investigation reports: “Return to the scene”. Any event can be presented as a detective plot in the form of successive episodes, such as those “Chain Summer” promoted in the French press of the '90s. Apart from the many advantages that it offers feature story (*fait divers*), the question that arises in this case is whether the chosen narrative structure (detective type) modifies the informative accuracy of the article. We must ask ourselves whether it occurs, as Dubied (1999: 111) says, “a fictional contamination able to fundamentally change the treatment of information”. This hybrid model of journalism (news treated as *fait divers*) tends to conquer all media worldwide and several weekly newspapers (“Globe Hebdo” newspaper is a great example) did not hesitate to build that tragic *fait divers* as a thriller, mixing photos, narrative techniques and delays designed to create and maintain the suspense as much as possible.

Accelerated feuilletonisation with journalistic discourse. For some time the information seems to be adrift (see Cohen and Levy, 2008). The press willingly maintains this confusion between reality and fiction, by multiplying its points of view through conceiving a story and feuilletonisation, driven by its desire to seduce audiences and compete with broadcasting. Therefore, we should not be outraged that the press treats the death of a man together with other deaths, as in the case of any crash. People love not only the conflicts and sorrows of others, people also love and long series of events. This guilty addiction comes from a feeling of sadness mixed with a masochistic pleasure, about the inconveniences of an unfortunate destiny in front of which man is helpless. When McLuhan said that media is “a huge symbolic goods factory”, forgot to add that these goods come off the production of the “serial” factory, in flow, in *feuilleton* etc. more or less declared as such. Apparently, the “flow” effect seems harmful to a press that wants to be objective and serious, but this effect is unveiling the media discourse hypocrisy (neutrality and respect for truth) – hypocrisy already denounced by McLuhan or Kientz in the 70s. Today the media (much less the television) can not live without the “flow effect”. It is proven by the way some reality TV shows (some clearly truncate) are staging and presenting themselves; the way some celebrities willingly maintain the suspense: Bianca Drăgușanu and Victor Slav divorce, Iulia Vântur’s successive breakups and reconciliation with a famous Indian actor and so on.

The absence of information flow – a possible explanation for the modest media impact made by traffic accident in Montenegro. As we stipulated above, our study begun from a subjective judgment – which is that, despite the obvious media insistence upon the

death of Romanian tourists in Montenegro has not achieved the highest audience share. Gigi Becali, on the other hand, as shown in the rolling hotnews.ro portal (the most important publication of its kind in Romanian online media) published rating report, got the highest rank. For example, if Monday, June 22, 2013 (the day of the accident), Antena 1 recorded 218,000 viewers per minute and Realitatea TV, only 110,000 viewers, just one month ago (Tuesday, May 20, 2013) the same TV networks were surpassing the record after record – 461.000 viewers per minute at Antena 1, and Realitatea TV: 220,000 viewers per minute. Even if we can find more explanations, it is clear that the doubling the number of the viewers had to do with the “topic of the day” - Gigi Becali 's arrest and the “flow” of reactions to the event. We do not wish to insist on the situational context, the reputation of those involved or journalistic treatment differences imposed by the law of proximity (the arrest of a local picturesque politician is closer in space than an unfortunate crash occurred far away, in Montenegro). We are going to identify as a cause, a different, even less visible event to the average reader – the ability of each event to generate excitement, amazement and, furthermore, strong narrative tensions through successive revival of the outcome. Let us compare some narrative processes with these two stories (Becali vs Montenegro) : **a) Creating strong characters.** With the arrest event, we were given an unpredictable, picturesque, always capable to surprise us type of Gigi (including spontaneous self accusing sincerity). In the case of Montenegro, tourists were ordinary people known in the Arges county, from where most of the tourists come. Media strive to create heroic figures has proven inconclusive. The real heroes (Montenegro mountaineers) remained in the shadow of secrecy, hard to use in the media discourse. **b)**

Creating twists or unforeseen circumstances. Despite all efforts, the press failed in the accident in Montenegro to exploit from a narrative point of view the some interesting cases: Mother dies, daughter lives, someone renounces the last minute travel offers gift to another friend the “killer” ticket etc. Journalistically speaking, the cause of this inefficiency is the inability of journalists to capitalize on quickly and efficiently, advancing small, dramatic biographical reports. The only truly remarkable affective element was the solidarity of Montenegro citizens, but this solidarity was shown ascertaining, in general and as an overview (a small monument, a sea of flowers at the bus crush). All these images were not able to convince too many viewers. Clearly, the accident in Montenegro lacked a flesh and bone hero to make the testimony credible and compassionate to those who died. Conversely, Gigi Becali episode had a lot of elements designed to arouse discreet sympathy: the presence of the mother, wife and children as fugitive images (sign of common sense and decency), the regret from the eyes of the priest who leads the “landowner from Pipera” out the church gate etc. There was though, a sort of intention in using emotions, perceived as an effort of tabloids and commercial TV stations, which tried through some adjectival regime to drive the readers attention towards a state of conflict and rebellion (see libertatea.ro of 29 June 2013) : *The Coach of Death.... The Coach is Still Lying in the Abyss ... The Tragedy of Two Women from Curtea de Arges County. They Have not Learned yet That Their Husbands Have Died etc.* At the opposite side (Gigi Becali’s case), we have a plain human case, a drama in progress, marked by suspense (*What will be the outcome of the appeal ? Basescu will intervene or not approving the prisoner amnesty?*). The viewers’ range of feelings caused by this incident is

incomparably greater with Becali: compassion, contempt, revenge, anti-system rebellion etc.). Rightly, hotnews.ro (August 29, 2013) notes : “the political scandals in June were fuel to television news audience. Nastase 's conviction to imprisonment, his attempted suicide, Victor Ponta’s plagiarism scandal, misunderstandings between the Premier and the President regarding the presence at the European Council etc. held news stations hectic. Instead, mainstream stations have serious declines following the summer trend . “The recipe for success seems to be in at least two major requirements : perpetual conflict (skillfully placed in affective reactions) and localism. Not coincidentally perhaps, a general and non-political network, ProTV, during the above-mentioned record a significant decrease of the audience (May : Rtg 7.7 % as opposed to 5.5 Rtg % (June) , while Kanal D, a network more and more interested in tabloid genre, growing from 283 Rtg % (May), 303 Rtg % in June).

Introducing the accident from Montenegro. Returning to the accident in Montenegro, we note once again that the absence of a significant emotional impact on the one hand, is due to proximity, and on the other to the absence of “information flow” effect. Otherwise, the media struggled to keep those days more and more interest in the event, as observed laconically www.paginademedia.ro (27/06/2013) : “Yet four days after the terrible accident in Montenegro, newspapers continue to activate the subject. *Adevarul* newspaper prints on the first page a title thanking Montenegros citizens using their language < Respect , Montenegro ! Poštovanje, Crna Goro!> . The article talks about the humanity and consideration Montenegrins showed to help Romanians involved in the accident ... < Sunday afternoon, just five minutes after the accident Romanian coach, resulting in 18 deaths, at the bridge over the river Grlo Moroc, the Montenegrins had already made the first steps to help victims. Until they reach the hospital, dozens of doctors who were free, rushed at the hospital, where blood donors already had formed queues > writes “Adevarul” newspaper ... The tabloids have on the front page as headlines references to articles about the accident in Montenegro. “Libertatea” newspaper treats the subject from the guilty driver point of view. “Click!” newspaper comes with an article about the night when the relatives came to take home the coffins with loved ones. <Dead from the bus, heroes at the airport, “goods” to IML> is the headline on the front page of the newspaper “Click!”. As we can see from these examples, with Montenegro case, media attention has focused mainly on two important feelings of awakening attention of the readers: gratitude towards Montenegro citizens and revolt against the criminal carelessness of the driver. What was lacking in articles about the tragic accident was therefore not the emotional trait. It was the inability of speech to create a strong character and equally suspense standby generator to a particular outcome. Why insist on non - informative elements? Because they contain the germ of the story with information “in flow”. It is about these processes which include promises about the future, speculative news, expressions of doubt or indecisiveness. These elements that highlight the waiting (*almost, soon* etc) are accompanied by a clearly sensational props such as insinuating approaches (the Year of Apocalypse) or adjectival emphasis taken from sensationalist vocabulary: *catastrophe, collapse, emergency* etc.

Equivocal or metaphorical designs and narrative developement. In recent years, the news has lost a lot of rigor and consistency. As Stanyer observes (2010: 139), “the distinction between news and comment – another milestone date mainstream media - crumbles ... The change was partly due to advertisers, interested in reaching as quickly and efficiently to certain audiences. In terms of news flow for 24 hours, the media had to adapt itself and find a new role, no longer having any sense to transmit what the audience had already seen the previous day”. Under pressure of audiovisual and online journalism, the newsperson ceased to be a “historian of the moment” (see Y. Agnes, 2011). He/she preferred to be an illustrator, a colorist or an imitator of the moment. He/she preferred to run from the present through the projection into the future or through the “metaphorisation of information” – a process increasingly used by journalists and professional communicators. Taking great advantage of ambiguity, mimicking the information through metaphor has proven to be one of the most elegant and efficient way to honorable overcome the communication of crisis. Traditional and online media compete in memorable headlines (main qualities of “metaphorical statement”): *The plague of state debt increases ... Bomb for business environment etc.* . Even formula already entered into active street language (*Rolling debt... Sovereign debt crisis*) is a means of informing in a non-informative way, historical consecrated repeating other formulas such as “Black Thursday” - the day of the opening of the Great Depression in 1928 . In general, all the metaphorical props of the crisis can merely subsume a dedicated journalistic process. It’s about “vulgarisation” – a discursive style element used in most scientific articles. In our case, however, the process belongs less to the journalist, as to the source (politician), which means that vulgarization by “analogy” does not cover a plus of clarity and understanding of the message, but a pull down information, a deliberate imitation of the novelty. Metaphor is saving every situation. Metaphor pleases everyone – the receiver (each read or understand what he wants), and the transmitter (shown to be tans without offend anyone). Without our ruling on the value of the journalistic “story flow” (time will tell), we can detect manipulative virtues of “flow” technique, and that this process seems designed to remove the reader from the real events of the day, to offer in return astonishment, impatience and the widest range of intense feelings of bias more or less assumed.

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