
INTERMEDIA: CHALLENGES OF MEDIACOMMUNICATION

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Abstract: For almost a decade, media communication has been immersed in a complex crisis, induced by five major causes: 1) the general world economy recess, and particularly in the developed states; 2) the difficulties to adapt to the challenges generated by digital technology; 3) the super saturation of the media sphere (and of the public sphere, naturally) with messages of various types, generating confusion; 4) the unprecedented increase in message generators, most of whom are not communication professionals; 5) the decline in standard regarding information gathering and editing, as well as the increase in manipulation attempts. Media organizations have entered a difficult restructuring process, in the context of additional pressure exercised by non-professionals, who are very active in cyber media, but who function at lowers standards. Citizen journalism has indisputable merits in unveiling threats against the democratic values, but comes up short due to bias and/or amateur reporting. The current study analyzes the changes occurring in the Romanian media in relation to the evolution of world journalism, as well as to the academic world. I have employed the intermedia concept in order to be able to operate in the vast field of present media communication, with convergent, as well as numerous divergent or contradictory evolutions.

Keywords: *intermedia, post-media, cyberspace, digital convergence, Romanian journalism, new media, old media*

The last decade's economic crisis has had major influences in the media industry and organizations, compelling these to restructure and evolve. Under the pressure of digital media and the increasingly dynamic interaction with the public (publics), the evolution brought on by the economic and management crises, the media organizations have had to restructure themselves profoundly, to reinvent themselves, proposing new patterns for satisfying the consumers' need for information and entertainment. The development is conflicting, as not all innovations have met with success, just as abandoning certain seemingly outdated practices has not always been necessary, some of these representing basic constants of media production, established with time. The economic recession was doubled by a crisis of adaptation to the digital, as well as by a status crisis, of understanding the particularity of the media system and its role as a human activity¹.

Since 2014, there have been signs that the situation has stabilized or is moving towards reaching a certain level of normality. In the USA, as well as in Western Europe (Germany, foremost) the printed press has recorded a slight increase in circulation, and radio and television stations have maintained their audiences, some even achieving improvements. It is even more significant that, when speaking of extremely sensitive topics, potentially affecting the lives of most citizens, the latter

¹ Lucian-Vasile Szabo (2013), Sense and context: Elements of new media communication, in Iulian Boldea (ed.), *Studies on Literature, Discourse and Multicultural Dialogue*, Editura Arhipieleag XXI, Târgu Mureș, pp. 412-419.

turn to the established media channels. The phenomenon is quite natural, as there is a relationship of trust established with time. The WikiLeaks case has also proven that although the public learned about certain disclosures from various media platforms, it turned, in an overwhelming percent, to established media channels for verification and competent analysis. These multiple challenges have also affected journalistic education, worldwide, not only in Romania, a country that manifests certain particularities. As a cultural paradigm, we are in the postmodernist era, but there are voices that even speak of a post-postmodernism. There is no need to juggle too much with these terms to see that in the field of mediated communication we are in the post-media stage, a concept and field capable of offering a structure of analysis of these concerns and developments of global and Romanian journalism. We do, however, prefer the term intermedia, as it adequately suggests the occurrence of media and technological convergence, as well as the dynamic relationships established in communication. Also, intermedia is oriented towards the immediate future of communication, this time seen not as a threat, but as a source of gateways towards efficient communication strategies. In this context, we go back to the key-concept represented by information – seen as news, as well as an element of knowledge, with an educational role.

Challenges for Romanian journalism

Adjusting the way in which journalism is carried out and in which the future professionals in the field are trained begins with understanding a few historical elements. The 1989 Revolution would find Romania in a state of media isolation, with a press completely subject to the state and party leadership of the time and lacking journalistic education, except for the post-university course held at the „Ștefan Gheorghiu” Academy in Bucharest. Also, there were no training centers in the field of professional communication, despite the fact that they were well ahead in other countries. Romania was also far behind in terms of technology, as there were very few computers in the country, especially PCs, even the faculties teaching in this field owning only a few. The beginning of the year 1990 meant a boom in written press. It suddenly diversified after the downfall of the Ceaușescu regime and manifested itself in two main directions: 1) the continuing of the activity of former communist publications, some keeping their former employees and ideological orientation, others bringing significant changes in tone and personnel; 2) new publications, mainly democratic, liberal. Also in 1990 the first efforts would be made to break the state monopoly in the audiovisual field. The evolution towards private stations, no longer under institutional control, was difficult also due to the high expenses involved.

The year 1990 also meant a broadening of the educational offer in journalistic schooling, as great efforts were made to include this specialization in the syllabuses of a few important universities. In editorial offices there were few professionals, and the experience of those who activated in the communist press was useful only up to a point. Only after the first journalism graduate classes would things start to change, but they would remain a minority for a long time. Those from other fields would prove to be very dynamic (engineers, economists, professors, doctors etc.), who had often learned the trade in editorial offices, while basically making communication products.

The situation was also complicated for a long time with regard to journalism teachers, who came from adjacent fields, forced to perfect themselves in the field of mediated communication. After 1994, radio and TV stations began to rely on the Romanian media market, and thus, around the year 2000, they would prove to be fully consolidated, the Romanian audiovisual becoming effervescent. Then have been cyberspace development and first seen as a peculiarity and later as a vigorous means of expression. The low number of users between 2000 and 2005 (with approximation, naturally), kept virtual journalism in a somewhat experimental state. This is when a management mistake was made: the media institutions offered free media products in the electronic environment; in the hope that they would attract buyers for newspapers or that they would increase their radio or TV audience. However, an increasingly large number of users would prefer the news received (almost) for free, the activity of reading electronic publications taking place mostly at work².

Until 2009, when the economic crisis would be felt strongly in Romania, with profound social implications, the native mass-media industry experienced constant growth. There already were tell-tale signs and fears related to the future of the printed press, but the major difficulties were projected in the medium-term, somewhere between 20 and 30 years. However, the recoil was sudden and bewildering, because in two or three years the audiences dropped, and the circulation reduced. Many media organizations closed their gates, and others reduced their activity significantly. The migration towards the electronic environment (not only towards the online, as this field is often mistakenly theorized) wasn't able to save much, as there would be a drop in professionalism as well as a lack of trust among the participants in digital communication. The distrust naturally sprung from the poor experience in using the new equipment (computer, laptop, tablet, mobile phone, video cameras and digital photo cameras), as well as from the lack of efficiency on the new media platforms, especially under the pressure of social media, where professional communication was (and still is) low. Journalists are not Facebook stars, nor are they professors of journalism. The professionals from media organizations as well as the trainers in the universities still feel these deficiencies related to their activity. Few teachers have a relevant journalistic activity (of reporter and editor), becoming more feisty and impatient with age, naturally also due to the pressure induced by the great changes in the university field.

From the pen and jotter to the tablet

In this environment marked by anxiety, disappointments and mistrust in one's own abilities and in the institutions (media organizations and universities) it is hard to formulate credible ideas for the evolution of this field, as a practical activity in editorial offices and as an instructional-educational undertaking in amphitheatres. There is, however, a point won: understanding the fact that the digital is not another world, where only a few trained people activate. There is equipment at hand, sometimes expensive, but professionals should be able to afford them or receive them.

² Lucian-Vasile Szabo (2014), *Intermedia: provocări în comunicarea profesională*, în Ilie Rad (ed.), *Industria media și învățământul jurnalistic*, Editura Tritonic, București, pp. 205-224.

One does not need to be a computer or software expert (creator of programs and applications) in order to produce and post quality journalistic products. It is enough to master the equipment on a medium level, using the few functions necessary to one's own activity, without the need to waste time with hundreds and thousands of applications of little interest from a professional point of view. Well set-up, the equipment does its work... well, the technological convergence functioning without the need for the owner of a video camera to go into technical details. One does, however, need media convergence, because, no matter how sophisticated a tablet should be, it remains still life if there is no content (texts and images) to be edited. And mediated convergence is manifested on the entire journalistic path, starting from a good idea for an article, going through the compulsory stage of information gathering (with careful observations and well-formulated questions), and reaching the stage of writing a piece of news (a story) interesting to the wide public. Thus the intermedia field is outlined, firstly seen as interconnection, as creating professional communication contents using mediated and technological convergence without fetishizing the latter. Because, though to some it may seem like an extravagance, a good journalist can still write an exceptional article using a pen and jotter. Provided he/she goes to the scene of events.

A better understanding of these developments calls for a retrospective view over this domain, concerns for the future of journalism. It is a topic that concerns many people worldwide. It is interesting that a search in the virtual environment using the expressions „future of journalism”, or the version „future of mass media”, or „death of journalism” offers tens of millions of results. Therefore, an analysis context of the evolution from the traditional environments to the contemporary ones (integrated and digital) is built on two dimensions, a historical one, and a spatial one. This combination wasn't possible before, but is now enabled by the non-linear approaches in cyberspace. Ottosen & Krumsvik³ indicate the two directions of evolution, which we may further develop:

- 1) In a first sense, digital media was formed as a modernization of the old media channels. Some newspapers' online editions were opened not so much as to promote the new technologies, but to exploit them. The idea was to attract new readers (users) for the printed newspapers. As in most countries online editions were monetized, requiring logging in and paying a subscription, meaning important sums of money being cashed in. The income was not always sufficient to cover production costs for the digital editions and to compensate the sums lost in the distribution of printed copies. In Romania, for example, online editions of publications were free from the beginning. The idea was just that: to attract readers for the printed publications segment. But this did not happen. Moreover, the digital versions became a strong competition against the printed ones.
- 2) Online editions were developed to also include other types of mediatization, becoming a support for various businesses. Thus, the publication became a media supermarket, capable of selling a large range of products to any interested visitor.

³Ottosen, Rune & Krumsvik, Arne H. (2012), Digital Challenges on the Norwegian Media Scene, *Nordicom Review* 33:2, pp. 43-55.

These platforms offer journalistic contents in their classical form, but some are interactive and compound, placing, along with the text and photographs, in the same ensemble, audio and video elements. It is a new design, a form of editing also used in presenting other products and services present on the platform. They can be applications for connecting to various social media platforms, real estate transaction columns, job offers and even sales and job brokerage, games, connecting to betting houses or distribution of target commercials.

A new type of management

The two directions previously shown imply two major changes in the media institution and its management. There is a point where difficulties arise, as the old media managers may find themselves outdated. They knew the stages of documentation, they were able to stimulate finding new information, the production of entertainment materials, they could carry out the editing and distribution operations, but their skill would prove limited when having to lead an extremely dynamic and diverse communication platform, with numerous elements requiring specialized training. In this context professional digital communication takes the stand in the instructional-educational process. During the latter years, teachers have made up for the communication lag generated by the new media (digital media), presently becoming key-elements in the media universe, controlling and making the intermedia more dynamic. Control is manifested in a positive way, as new technologies are no longer refused or accepted with difficulty and constantly undermined. As teachers become familiar with new communication instruments, it becomes necessary to rethink requirements regarding the development in intermedia. The restrained attitude towards Wikipedia or Facebook exhibited by some communication (media or educational) professionals would no longer spring from a lack of understanding in the way they function, but from a critical analysis of the negative impact that these two great media empires can have, due to the fact that they are populated by mostly untrained communicators (least of all in professional communication, such as educational communication).

A. The media activity in its classical sense is diminishing, whereas the percent of adjacent elements, that can successfully be monetized, is growing. Operations need a new type of management, which can impair journalism to a small extent, as it was perceived and developed before the digital media expansion.

B. Journalists not only become a minority in the new media organization, but are also compelled to specialize in exploiting new technological instruments, as well as in other fields, such as public relations, sales techniques, real estate and financial brokerage. Naturally, the powerful media institutions can hire trained and experienced personnel for these jobs. In the case of small institutions, however, retraining becomes a condition for keeping one's job.

Another perspective is given by understanding post-media as a platform for distributing information and enhancing debates. The approach is necessary particularly in terms of democratic evolution. It is obvious that a better communication and an augmentation of the advantages provided by the information

society raise the opportunity for people to take aware decisions. This also implies two aspects, according to the way in which the data is used.

Increased communication opportunities and exclusions

New media enables information exchange, by opening new communication channels.

A. The growing access to quality information leads to an increase in the degree of public trust and stimulates the participation in debates. Informed citizens can thus correct possible democratic side-slips. In states with semi-open or authoritarian regimes, citizens can become engaged in the movements, be they even diffuse, that coagulate in order to enact rights and liberties.

B. There is, however, a negative side to this. The enemies of democracy and freedom also have much easier access to information. The terrorist offensive is obvious and is materialized by gathering information from open sources. These are very rich, comprising information on how to build bombs or on sophisticated manipulation techniques. Also, such people have access to efficient communication systems. This is a risk taken, and preventing terrorist attacks, ranging from the classical ones to the cyber ones, implies outstanding human, material and financial efforts.

Intermedia also offer a vast gateway towards integrated communication. It is a context in which everyone becomes source and communicator.

A. The journalists' initial sources no longer work for these exclusively. Beginning with the 1970s, public relations have known a great boom, but the distribution of information was mostly done through mass-media. The internet radically changed this field as well, and the institutions, companies and non-governmental organizations created their own sites. By posting information here, they quickly learned that these are no longer press releases, but only statements, as these could be accessed by anyone interested, therefore by private people as well.

B. Each person belonging to the public who has access to information found in newspapers, on television and radio sites, on blogs and social networks can become actively engaged with the initial broadcasters. One can reply, comment, but also post new information. The shape is irrelevant; it's the content that matters. But private people can build their own platforms (sites or blogs), accepting others' collaboration, increasing the level of integration.

There are two contexts from which journalists can be excluded. A piece of information can be found on the site of a public local or central administration institution or on the site of a party. It can further be used by the press or not. Common citizens have access by means of direct a technological route, without needing the mediation provided by the press. One accesses the institution's Facebook or Twitter account and replies using the already established channels. Of course, access that is unmediated by journalists can also be obtained without social media. The user becomes the provider when posting his/her own information or comments to what is already there. Moreover, the e-government system encourages such interrelations, the demands and petitions posted online being taken into consideration, as long as they

respect the form and content conditions. Thus, „the consumer has ultimate power over content”⁴ (Conboy & Steel 2008).

One cannot formulate a unitary conclusion to the facts so far presented. The openings are multiple, even antagonistic. These approaches and circumscriptions illustrate the media of the present, as well as that of the years to come, in what we call the near future, on two directions of evolution.

A. Complete communication. This is an image that implies a profound technological integration, resulting in erasing the boundaries between media and interpersonal communication. Also, journalism, public relations, advertising, propaganda, as well as the communication of messages with private content will lose their particularity, becoming parts of the complete communication, in the sense of integrated communication. Post-media enable this direction of perception, as well as the actual operations implied by this new paradigm. Naturally, postmodernism rejects this type of structuring, but postmodernism is also known for easily undermining its own previous reference points. Thus, everything is mediated and... mediatized.

B. Superspecialized communication. By means of the resources offered by technology, each field of communication emphasizes its particularity. The boundaries between communication categories will be enhanced by highlighting the differences (ostentatiously or not). Thus, new industries and disciplines for studying sector communication, of limited extent, will be developed. Intermedia can encourage this evolution as well, particularly as a result of a postmodern trend, which encourages superspecialization in small areas, denouncing the pretence of modernist universality. This is a chance for each type of media (printed, audio and video) to redefine itself in the digital media field as other... new media. It is also an opportunity for redefining the journalist profession.

Hyperlinks and contextualization

Discussing the meaning of hypertext, a fundamental concept in cybermedia and cyberspace, Steen Steensen would try to define it by using three models under which links are presented in media communication⁵. The first are the target links, those that contain documents and are the most important content units on a site. Next are the relative links, reached by the user after visiting the target ones. The third category is made up of external links, i.e. a transfer from the initial site to other sites. This theoretical presentation translates into elaborate practical operations. It is necessary here to introduce into the analysis the term *updating*, which allows us to establish the context in which reporters and editors present their media products.

A. From the beginning, digital media has provided the press institutions with fast means of communication for information transfer, quick processing and storing. At first, the technological means did not allow loading the main pages with large quantities of information, because the system was unable to run them. The problem is

⁴Conboy, Martin & Steel, John (2008), The Future of Newspapers, *Journalism Studies*, 9:5, pp. 650-661.

⁵Steensen, Steen (2011), Online journalism and the promises of new technology, *Journalism Studies*, 12:3, pp. 311-327.

still present today, but the running capacity has significantly increased. The initiators of electronic publications had to structure contents into hypertext using: 1) hyperlinks, in order to send users to related contents; 2) external links in order to send users to contents on other sites. The topic is thus contextualized, and there is an adjacent operation – updating, i.e. introducing new information and opinions into the content in the link on the front page (or first page). One of the practices employed was to provide cross- references from the printed edition to the electronic one or to television sites;

B. Currently, we are witnessing a change in the activity of online journalists. The technological convergence stimulates the media convergence by providing the necessary tools to create integrated platforms, which can run large quantities of data. But the external links are becoming less important, and there are two reasons for these limitations: 1) moving from one site to another does not guarantee the user's return to the initial site, and this translates into losing a number of users; 2) developing private archives and improving the capacity to quickly update the information stored here. There are programs, not too sophisticated, which allow the following: when a topic of current interest is presented from the electronic publication's private archive, other media products of similar content are brought to the forefront. This means working with keywords, which is not very complicated. Thus, the journalist no longer searches in the institution's or his/her own archive, as was the case before, as updating and convergence occur automatically. The public receives the data in context and according to the sequence of approach, becoming less tempted to leave the site very easily.

Private space and ideological offensives

Intermedia originate from two distinct, yet related, areas of development: 1) conceptual developments regarding postmodernism and the practical manifestations of this constructionist, and at the same time deconstructionist concept; 2) in the techno-ideological expansion of the 1970s. The ideology-technology-information rapports were obvious during what was known as the Cold War. There still are numerous obscure areas regarding the causes that determined. After over four decades of confrontation, the communist block would collapse. The economic draining, but particularly the inability to keep up with the scientific and technological innovations of the West, would represent reasons for the decline of the totalitarian systems. Perhaps the decision factors within the great press corporations never thought directly that their action of interconnecting the globe through media would contribute not only to the development of mass communication, in places where it was slow, in countries of what would be known as the Third World, but also to the undermining of the regimes behind the Iron Curtain. The relationship between the media institutions and the government factors has always been complicated in the Free World, to use the ideological-cultural terms of the era. Some even claim that there is a relation of subordination, or, at least of indirect control of these media organizations that have

become very powerful, by applying new technologies and by establishing trading companies with shares quoted on exchange⁶ (Chomsky 1989). r

However, as the important theoreticians of the media phenomenon would prove in terms of news construction, the techno-media (multimedia) expansion would also be stimulated by the involvement of international bodies. Teun A. van Dijk (1988: 33) would highlight the UNESCO involvement in the debate regarding the New Global Informational Order, a complex phrase, implying references to technology, communication and ideology⁷. Despite controversies, even regarding the role and actions of UNESCO, the Western media offensive in other regions of the world, a cultural and globalizing offensive, is obvious. It would be supported by technology, against which the less developed states would not be able to defend themselves. There would even be an acceptance of media integration, as the great Western media institutions would open offices in the more permissive states. Gradually, they would either open new publications or radio and TV stations, or would take over some of the local ones, and develop them. The phenomenon would be visible in South America, and, sporadically, in Africa or Asia. After 1989, the year of great changes in Central and Eastern Europe, the phenomenon would intensify here as well. In these areas, the changes would be, of course, radical, but for the West, owner of already tried technologies and management strategies, this would only mean an expansion, a business development.

One can accept, though, even hypothetically, a moment where the two domains take different paths, in the sense that post-media gains distinctive trait, differentiating it by means of something essential from what it was before. The commercial radio and TV stations' offensive, increasing the entertainment space (which, at the beginning of the 21st century was no longer of quality or culture-oriented), taking up broadcasting space with debates, i.e. with opinions and disputes, even to the cost of the informative space, along with the tabloidization of the printed press, did not yet mean a radical break from the previous ways of creating press. An evolution could still be seen. The beginning of the millennium would, however, bring the radical change. Electronic publications would function independently. Although they would use the old newspapers as models, and the difference would not even be noticed at the start, but by bit, they would start acting as freestanding media products. At this point, the evolution can manifest itself through a loss, through what Steven Connor calls a „narrative of the decline”⁸ (1999, 145). The decline is that of the old types of media, which have run their course.

New media and old media

Without necessarily trying to draw up a conclusion to the classifications so far presented, I suggest another one, according to the ways in which contents are

⁶Chomsky, Noam (1989), *Necessary Illusions. Thought Control in Democratic Societies*, Pluto Press.

⁷Van Dijk, Teun A. (1988), *News Analysis*, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers, Hillsdale, New Jersey, p. 33.

⁸Connor, Steven (1999), *Postmodernist Culture*, Ed. Meridiane, Bucharest, p. 145.

presented in cyberspace. It is a structuring based on a historical criterion, by looking at the period of time from the year 1993 up to the present. We are referring to the two decades that have meant the development of the activity as Intermedia, enabled by the Internet and by the emergence of web search engines. It is a short time interval, marked, however, by radical changes regarding journalism in particular, but also the activity in the media environment in general. Apart from the historical criterion, there is also a comparative one, of drawing a parallel between the media contents according to their presentation support. Intermedia is thus built on the digital and social media effervescence, as well as on the difficult and spectacular relationship with the old media. We thus distinguish four stages:

- 1) Laying out on web pages contents mostly take from printed publications. There would be cross-references from the print to the web and vice versa, the presence in the electronic environment being rather experimental;
- 2) The emergence of independent electronic publications, completely separate from the printed ones or keeping a format that maintains faint connections with these. It is an opportunity for standing out from the aspects noted in the first stage. Some informative channels will prefer keeping print-website relations, as is the case with some major publications today. It is a stage also marked by the audiovisual channels' tendency to stand out with web pages, in order to be more visible;
- 3) The shift into the virtual space of certain already existing radio and TV stations and the emergence of stations directly online. The activity would unfold either by developing existing sites, or by creating new, integrated ones. This stage is also characterized by the social media offensive, journalism (the older or more recent media channels) becoming a component among the many on such platforms;
- 4) The current stage, with significant gateways to subsequent developments, encompasses the challenges already aimed at journalism, as well as those that post-media address to communication, in all of its segments. The mass-media evolution manifests itself on two coordinates:
 - a) A globalizing and integrating vision, which can even lead to losing the particularity of journalistic communication. This is enabled by the media and technological convergence, by means of the extremely interactive platforms created.
 - b) A return to and a redefining of the particularity and values of journalism. The already existing classical platforms may be kept, but new ones may emerge as well. There are three possibilities for assertion here. The great journalism brands can assert themselves on the general media platforms, such as the ones mentioned above, provided they find their own space for assertion here. They can manifest themselves on specialized media platforms, where only the actors in the field have access. A third possibility is represented by the assertion on private platforms, powerful enough to attract other types of contents under their own brand⁹.

A conclusion with several gateways

⁹ Lucian-Vasile Szabo (2014), Information Gathering, Social Media and New Media Ethics, in Patricia-Luciana Runcan and Georgeta Rață (eds.), *Applied Social Psychology*, Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

Beyond this technological convergence, however, the evolution of journalism needs classical reference point specific of this profession. The three sides are targeted here: the practical activity, the critical and ethical analysis of the field, as well as the level of training of the new generations of professionals. We now realize that after four decades we, as well as Marshall McLuhan, were quite wrong when fetishizing what we seemed to understand from the phrase “the medium is the message”. In fact, the medium is the same as the message in terms of technological development, a fact underlined by McLuhan when explaining this short-circuit as an extension into the social realm of individual elements as a result of technological evolution¹⁰ (McLuhan, 1964). Intermedia favor this automatic unfolding of processes, just as the Canadian author had described; the social interaction by means of new and social media or of electronic equipment is a reality. But the message itself, at least in journalistic communication, needs that note of originality, and if this term is too pretentious, it needs that component that ensures the impact and efficiency upon receiving. It is carried out through media convergence, connected to or independent of technology. ‘Robot journalists’ are a reality of world press, but the public, as well as the journalists, need quality, well-written stories¹¹. We thus return to the need for relevant topics, to gathering information (especially in the field and face to face with those involved), to elegant and balanced editing, to tough and devoted editors. It is important that journalists return into the field and establish again direct contact with their sources. The same goes for journalism professors, and if they haven’t tried this so far, it’s high time they did. They are in for a pleasant surprise.

¹⁰McLuhan, Marshall (1964), *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, New York: Signet.

¹¹ Ross Miller, AP's 'robot journalists' are writing their own stories now, <http://www.theverge.com/2015/1/29/7939067/ap-journalism-automation-robots-financial-reporting>, accessed 4. 5. 2015.