

THE INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON TRADITIONAL JOURNALISM

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Abstract: A history that began two thousand years ago, with the Roman gazette “Acta Diurna”, is currently in front of an important challenge of its existence. Journalism has embraced the most diverse forms and has undergone changes throughout years. But it might have never reached such a point. For the first time in history, almost everyone can make the world's audience aware of what they know, what they see, what they hear and what they feel. And this, in real time. Social networks have changed how we get to know what's happening around us and, at the same time, anywhere on the planet. Social media changes the way news is made, and the influences they have brought to journalism are becoming more and more prevalent. Through this new form of communication, every man on the planet with access to the Internet can become a news correspondent at any time. A film shot, a photo or even a text published on social media can become a support for news, reports, or classical media materials. The purpose of this paper is to analyze how the emergence and development of social networks have influenced traditional journalism. What did social media bring to the classic press? How did news content change, how are text edited, how are titles chosen? How did the traditional media adapt? How do journalists use social media and how does social media help journalist? How did the behavior of the audience change? But the journalists' behaviour? What are the risks of this influence? What are the trends of the coming years? These are some of the questions that the present paper will try to answer. The study is based on a selected bibliography, but also on concrete examples encountered during my own experience in 12 years in press, in a period of transition between traditional journalism and the one increasingly influenced by social networks.

Keywords: social media, journalism, new media, digitalization, Facebook

At the beginning of 2017, there were 9.6 million active facebook accounts in Romania. Compared to the country's population, this means that every second inhabitant has an account on the social network. The percentage increases exponentially when it reaches the penetration rate of the population with Internet access - over 85% of the mentioned people are users of the mentioned network¹. A study published by Forbes shows that three years ago, Romanians spent an average of 5.5 hours on the Facebook², and the trend was upward. Under the conditions of a mobile revolution that facilitates communication and, implicitly, information, it would have been impossible for the traditional press not to be influenced by the social networks.

Every social network user is a possible reporter

News agencies have hundreds, or even thousands of reporters and correspondents scattered around the world to cover the planet in an informative way. However, no matter how extended this network of correspondents of a media structure is, the area that each of them has to

1 <http://www.facebrands.ro/demografice.html>

2 <http://www.forbes.ro/cat-timp-petrec-romanii-pe-facebook-si-cum-incalca-acestia-legile-si-drepturile-altor-membri-28302>

cover is, in a simple calculation, impossible to get through with the speed of news spreading and, especially with the speed the public asks for. In addition, there are still countries where the press is still controlled by government or authorities, and even correspondents of major global agencies have difficulties in accessing information. Up to some point, social media is the solution for those two issues. Whatever happens in this world, anywhere, there is someone with a mobile phone who can take pictures, film or simply share information through social networks. This brings us a first influence that social networks have on the traditional media - anyone can become a reporter. As the best camera is not the most expensive or the most technologically advanced, but the camera you have at your right time when you need it to shoot that important picture, the same happens with reporters. The best is the one in the right place at the right time. In this situation, the writer's or investigative talents come second.

The development of a kind of journalism education among social network users has been facilitated in the first phase by Twitter. The network has encouraged users to submit as much information using as few words as possible, which corresponds to one of the basic principles of journalism. Specifically, Twitter allowed texts to be written within 160 characters. The information was instantly sent to the public, which encouraged people to write, using the idea that anyone can do it. It was the shift from the classic, organized, written press format to a format that anyone can create. Twitter was, in fact, the main source of information and communication during the April 2009 protests in Chişinău, when tens of thousands of Moldovan citizens, dissatisfied with the Communists' victory in the parliamentary elections, went out in the street to denounce the fraud from the voting day. The events were also known as the "Twitter Revolution," precisely because the youngsters mobilized through the social network and they also used it to send messages between themselves and to communicate information all around the world. However, the case is not singular. From the Arab Spring to the February 2017 protests from all over Romania, most massive street manifestations have had social networks as a common element. In protests against Ordinance 13, in Romania, social networks were not only used to mobilize the masses, but also to transmit real-time information from the venues. And the phenomenon is repeated in all states of the world, at every event of general interest and on all social networks. For example, during Hurricane Sandy, 10 pictures on this subject were published on Instagram in every second. On the US presidential election day in 2012, more than 30 million posts on Twitter had this topic.

A first consequence of this type of communication was the fact that the speed with which the information began to be transmitted increased radically. People have become accustomed to publishing information on their own social media accounts in the form of images (photo or video) or text, from the events they are witnessing. The information is then transmitted via social networks in real time. Traditional press has had to adjust to keep pace. So what did it do? It has begun to take real-time information and images from the social networks. For example, in street protests in February 2017, live video broadcasts made on the personal pages of ordinary people participating in the demonstrations were taken over by media sources at both local and national levels. Sites like adevarul.ro or hotnews.ro, as well as news televisions, such as Realitatea TV and B1 TV, have used, specifying the source, pictures transmitted live on social networks. In this case, the average man even went beyond the statute of reporter, because he had the control of some live broadcasts in front of tens, perhaps hundreds of thousands of viewers. So if before the popularization of radio and television, the information arrived at the reader through newspapers with a 24-hour delay, generated by the whole process of writing, printing and distribution, the spread of social media helped the audience to receive the news right in the moment when the

journalist writes it and even in his own pocket, via his mobile phone. Besides, the combination of these two terms (smartphones and social networks) led journalism to a new era, that of the citizen reporter. With Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat or YouTube, the man in the street can produce and spread content at any time and his content can be retrieved by classic media sources.

Another feature of social networks with an influence on traditional journalism is interactivity. Regardless of whether we are talking about television, radio or print media, the classical media represented a unidirectional communication channel. The message was directed at the viewer, the listener or the reader, who could no longer respond, or could do it in a too long time. The advantage of social media is that messages flow in both directions. And, moreover, communication between the two sides is done in real time. Any post is accompanied by reactions and comment options, any live streaming can be a way of communicating and can provide a dialogue with the public who has the comments section at hand, in order to make appreciations or to ask questions about the related event .

As social networking posts bring the public face to face with the person directly involved in the event, the degree of empathy they generate increases exponentially, especially in extreme cases - catastrophes, unfortunate events or, on the contrary, moments of happiness. Basically, the filter between the protagonist and the public disappears, and Twitter, Facebook and YouTube become alternatives, especially for the reluctant audience of mass media sources. The information is transmitted directly by the witness. Thus, the one who was a simple viewer, listener or reader until now can easily become a reporter, either by transmitting from an event, perhaps even before the journalists reach it, or communicating and trying to find information from his home or office, directly from the witness who transmits live from an event. Unfortunately, this last option has also transformed the behavior of a part of the press, as there are journalists who are content to take on social networking information without going to the scene for more detailed documentation.

Despite an increasingly globalized world, the public has retained and even increased interest in the immediate neighborhood, working, engaging, living. The interest in proximity news is directly proportional. The public wants to know what's happening internationally, but at the same time wants to be informed about what's happening on his street, because it affects him directly. Social media has become a source of direct information for the average man, but also for the journalist, who gets his information here and delivers it via traditional press. There are online communities of counties, cities, districts or even streets, where topics that directly affect their members are being transmitted and debated, and due to the easy access to this information by professional journalists, the community problems are exposed to decision-makers. The fact that all media sources, from CNN and The New York Times, to any local newspaper, retrieve social networking information is the signal that people's voice is heard much easier and can have a much greater weight.

How traditional media adapted

Traditional media have had to adapt to these trends and, first of all, have turned their content into a portable one. Beyond the sites, many newspapers, radio and television stations have built mobile phone applications to communicate more easily and effectively with the public. For example, the Digi Online application, which offers free streaming to multiple TV stations, for subscribers to a Romanian internet and cable provider, has been downloaded over 1 million times only on smartphones. There are TV programs that have their own interactive

applications, precisely to diversify the ways of communicating between journalists and the public.

Moreover, traditional press uses social networks in three ways: to promote their print, radio or TV content; to provide the same content to the public who does not usually consume the classical media; and to offer exclusive content. It became a habit for newspapers, radio and television stations to publish links on their social networks on their own websites and stream live on their own broadcasts, but lately the concept of online shows spreaded. Despite the 24-hour broadcast, Digi24 offers a daily live programme, called "24 minutes", that is only broadcasted online on their own website and on their facebook page. In addition to print editions, Adevărul newspaper has exclusive online multimedia content: interviews, reportages, documentaries, debates, etc. And the case is not singular. Popular are the broadcasts made by Ziarul Financiar or ProSport.ro, exclusively in the online environment. They always generate news topics both for their own newspaper and for other traditional media sources. The trend has grown more and more in recent years, so the traditional local media has adapted. In Timisoara, the pressalert.ro site has, besides the printed version with weekly appearance, a daily talk show, streamed live on YouTube; the site Opiniatimisoarei.ro has a periodical live broadcast, exclusively on Facebook, and the strategy was recently adopted by the website expressdebanat.ro, from Resița. And the examples can continue.

Interactivity proposed by social networks also influenced the way news is written and edited. Classical media approaches and plans journalistic materials taking into account the constraints imposed by this aspect. Interactivity allows for a better dialogue between the author and the reader, and the exploration is generated by the ease with which the public goes through the material. "Nothing is worse than a user who abandons a product not because of content but because it faces too many problems due to poor interactivity."³ Journalists started to use more and more often a style with a direct addressing. They use a telegraphiy style with short phrases and strong verbs. In addition, for news sites, texts were "broken" in short paragraphs to make them easier to read. Even the typology of online titles has changed over the last few years, from the desire to get attention and generate traffic, giving rise to what is known as *clickbait*. In this case, Facebook introduced a new algorithm this year, discouraging the posting of newsfeed titles that hide or overstate real information. However, social media influence is not only found in online media but also in television programs. News stories and debates increasingly use uneven windows, precisely to meet the viewer's need to constantly receive information from multiple sources. Moreover, the concept of "picture in picture" is used to simultaneously inform about two different events. The concept of video news has also borrowed elements of the way multimedia videos are built on social networks. For example, Digi24 has introduced more types of graphic elements in its news, such as carousels, graphical effects, or infographics, which were rather specific to the virtual space, in videos, commercials, or even vlogs .

How the behaviors have changed

As the public's options to select news and information has widened, its behavior has also changed. Having the opportunity to choose the news they receive, people have diminished their passivity. Their involvement stems also from the fact that people are no longer satisfied with the traditional press. The public began to play an active role, contribute to the informative content, and make its voice heard using the comments section. The many options available to the public

³Mallender, Ariane, 2008, Cum să scrii pentru multimedia, Polirom, Iași, p.13

change the the old idea that "media professionals" determine the needs of the people. The trend has also been observed by authorities, politicians, public institutions, and companies that have begun to use their public or even personal pages (in the case of public figures) as ways of transmitting information. The explanation is simple - not just that they have adapted to the requirements of the public, but the possible audience exceeds the one generated by the traditional press. For example, in the top 10 of facebook pages in Romania there is a single source of traditional media - PRO TV, with 2.7 million fans. Most of the other top pages belong to show-biz stars, among which are even employees of the TV station, such as Andra (3.4 million fans) or Smiley (3.2 million fans). Compared with the circulation of any newspaper in Romania, the audiences are huge and this is also available for other categories. For example, the president of Romania, Klaus Iohannis has over 1.8 million followers on facebook, the Ministry of Defense - 344.000, and E-ON Energie Romania - over half a million. This has created a habit for the public to get information directly from the source, especially since social networking pages create a sense of direct communication with the person or institution they are pursuing. The radical change that social media brings about in this case is that the public reaches the information most of the times at the same time as the journalist do. In this case, press is no longer a filter between authorities and audience.

On the other hand, the avalanche of information that came to the audience in different ways also led to changes in the time spent by the reader in front of an article. Information sent in a telegraphic way via social networks (twitter limited the number of characters of each post) has made the audience no longer be patient to spend so much time in front of a press article. In fact, the time spent on a single subject has fallen from year to year also in the case of social media products. A survey by Locowise in the first quarter of 2017, on 500 facebook pages with a total of over 180 million followers, revealed that the average time spent by a user on a video decreased in just one year from 18 to 10 seconds⁴. On the other hand, it has increased four times the time spent by facebook users in front of video clips⁵, which highlights the increasing trend of the public to constantly seek new information. This type of behavior has also generated the adaptation of traditional media, especially regarding their online presence. On the one hand, in order to generate dialogue, any article has now a section of comments that users can connect to using their social networking account; on the other hand, the format of articles published in the online environment has adapted to public tendencies. Texts are interleaved with explanatory video, photo galleries, or infographic images, and may contain direct links to other sources of additional information. In this way, the reader is constantly assaulted with additional sources of information, as it happens in social networks. The classical media has even adapted to the shorter time that public allocates to browse materials. Often, online articles are no longer identical to prints, they are shorter and show only basic information, while for larger, deeper content, there are sites that let the reader know from the very beginning which is the estimated time to read it. Linking classic media to social networks also changes the journalist's behavior. As news posted on social networks generates talks, the feedback the reporter receives is almost real-time. It is therefore a good method to determine what types of news a particular audience is looking for (Facebook provides information about gender, age, location, interest areas, hours of networking, etc.) and adapt the content to the data received.

The emergence and development of social media also influenced the traditional media from an economical point of view. Companies have adjusted their advertising budgets according

4 <https://locowise.com/blog/the-state-of-facebook-video-in-the-year-2017-video-length-up-time-watched-down>

5 <http://buzzsumo.com/blog/facebook-video-engagement-learned-analyzing-100-million-videos>

to the targeted audience's habits. Part of it was directed to social media, especially in the cases when the target is getting used to spending time online. On the other hand, we have to say that the big advertising campaigns, belonging to the companies that have a large budget and want to address to the general public, are still made in traditional media. At least for the moment, social media is the main source of advertising for small businesses interested in bringing together people: bars, clubs, concerts, etc. Their purpose is to gather social groups of people who can do things together, who socialize.

What are the risks of this influence?

Communication and distribution of information through social networks are also accompanied by a number of risks. Given the expansion and the fact that anyone can post almost anything at any time, the control over the veracity of the information is much lower. If in the case of traditional media, there is an assumption from the editorial staff and the journalist for the articles published, in social media one can propagate at any time untrue news, behind some fictional accounts. This weakness favored the magnitude of *fake news* in recent years, but also propaganda campaigns for the most diverse purposes - from taking power of states, to mobilizing the masses for certain purposes. From convenience or from other reasons, the public easily takes on this type of information, without verifying it from sources recognized as official. On the other hand, what may also be equally dangerous is the attitude of journalists who find information in social networks and turn them into news, without checking them, skipping essential steps before broadcasting. In the battle between traditional media concerning who is the first that comes with the news, this temptation may appear. Information that appears in the social media can be taken directly, although journalistic norms impose several steps: documenting, verifying information, and only later publishing it. The risk may also be manifested in other ways. It is more and more common in recent years the strategy of the televisions to take on the phone, in live broadcasts, eyewitnesses of events. Although the initiative commendable, it can be turned into a two-edged blade when it comes to taking on so-called witnesses, just after their posted something on social networks. The risk of having a viewer posting or sending a news item, text, video or photo over the phone is big because even if his is trustful and well-intended, he may offer incorrect information only due to his assumptions.

Conclusions

The development of social media and the rapid propagation of information through it has led to a superficial view on the importance of discerning what is authentic and real to what is false. Without an authority to sort true and false information, the risks are high. Spreading social networks has brought the information closer to the public, but the public has to be accountable, carefully selecting information, weighing, seeing which sources are trustful and which are not, in all the avalanche of information that seeks him. This is how people can benefit from the liberalization of information transmission, as the control of large companies, advertisers, media owners and even governments is no longer an unwavering barrier to access to information.

But even if anyone can be a reporter through social media, not everyone can be a journalist. That is why society needs journalists more than ever, people to tell which stories are true and which are not, it needs specialists who create contexts in order to help the public understand. Therefore, the social media revolution does not mean the end of classical journalism, but rather the beginning of a movement that highlights some key elements of journalism: transparency, honesty and communication with the public. What the traditional media can learn

from social media is to deliver information faster, to bring more voices into conversation, to create an environment that, before the emergence of social media, was only possible by bringing the public together physically.

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