

COMPARATIVE ASPECTS OF THE ROMANIAN PRESS BEFORE AND AFTER 1989

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Abstract: The instauration of communism meant for the press the acceptance and promotion of a type of discourse completely unadjusted to the civil society and his needs to be informed and get acquainted with certain things. Mass media messages facilitated the indoctrination with communist ideas, eliminating almost completely its informative role, as well as the role concerned with directing the people's attention to other horizons, apart from the communist one. The period of transition from the submissive journalism to the remonstrant, authoritative one, faced many difficulties, from the technological ones to the those related to the mentality, difficult to change. After the political moment from December 1989, an information explosion in Romania took place, the most dynamic component of the mediatic system being the written press, the resonance of the social metamorphose of the moment.

Keywords: communism, information, media, opinion, press.

1. Introduction

The press represents an institution of the modern public space, starting with the XIXth century. The instauration of communism meant for the press the acceptance and promotion of a type of discourse completely unadjusted to the civil society and his needs to be informed and get acquainted with certain things: "The subordination of the press to the socio-political objectives and the introduction of mass media into the propagandistic system represented the defining characteristics concerned with the functioning of the communist press."¹ In contradiction with the written press before the communist period, some of the journalists turned into propagandists, while their writing was dissimulated, false and mobilizing. Mass media messages facilitated the indoctrination with communist ideas, eliminating almost completely its informative role, as well as the role concerned with directing the people's attention to other horizons, apart from the communist one. The period of transition from the submissive journalism to the remonstrant, authoritative one, faced many difficulties, from the technological ones to the those related to the mentality, difficult to change.

At the linguistic level, the *wooden language* makes its presence felt – a feature of the totalitarian regimes. Although it has recently penetrated into the Romanian soace, after the 1989 Revolution, the linguistic phenomenon was anticipated a long time ago by George Orwell. Actually, the *wooden language* was used purposely to mask reality and to impose on the forms of social communication and on the members of society the possibility to manipulate the others, to imprint on them ways of thinking in conformity with the ideology, by means of the lexical units and the specific phraseological units, illustrating fixed expressions and cliches, offering thus a minimal clarity and a coded verbiage: "Beyond the (...) disasters caused by the «wooden language», we must accept

¹ Luminița Roșca, *Mechanisms of the Propaganda within the Informative Discourse*, Polirom, Iași, 2006, p. 137.

that, during the communist regime, we got used, willingly or unwillingly to using a special language, an «acrobatic» language, where silences are sometimes much more meaningful than words, while the ambiguous words abund. (...) We got used to saying what we wanted to say allusively or half-heartedly, by parables, by phrases with a double meaning, as in a game of mirrors, counting on the readers' complicity, who, in their turn, specialized in a radioscopic reading, unknown to the Occidental reader, who does not need to read between the lines."²

2. Aspects of the Romanian press before and after 1989

From among the marks left by the communist regime on the written press, the most drastic aspect is represented by censorship. Thus, even before being published, any word, any expression of an opinion, of an idea in contradiction with the communist ideology are suppressed. Unfortunately, the restrictive measures were not enforced only in the written press, censorship and various censors were also present in the cinemas, the theater, the opera or within literature, where no book, film, or artistic work could be promoted unless it was accepted by the communist regime: "The confrontation with the censorship forced us to a refinement of hypocrisy, of «ability», as the truth could penetrate into the books only stealthily, secretly, if you did not want to associate it with half lies. With time, this «acrobatic» art of making use of symbols, of an Aesopian, equivocal language, but very precise for a trained hearing, gained, from force of circumstances, more and more popularity."³

At the mid 70s, the control exercised by the authorities of those times becomes obvious, reaching pathological, proportions during the following decade. The emergence of alternative or opposing mass media was almost impossible. The few attempts to publish criticizing materials addressed to the communist authority were quickly eliminated, but with time, people learnt to read between the lines. However, the fear of sanctions or of any kind of consequences, reprisals, made the journalists set limits apart from those imposed by the authorities, which led to self-censorship, and such a self-restriction represented a big threat for the freedom of expression and briefing. The context reminds us of one of Octavian Paler's statements, significant for that period: "As long as there is one man that tells the truth, there is no perfect Inquisition. Although the nights defeated me, I can no longer separate truth from love. They are right only together. Now I know this."⁴

We lost a century obeying totalitarianism, to finally start thinking about the democratization of the world, an issue that we must currently resume, laying stress on the corruption, the falsification of its terms by the communism: "In the totalitarian discourse, the *basis of professional practices* is not economic, but ideological. None of the journalists belonging to the «Golden Age» justifies his writings by the economic pressures that harassed the system of mass media, (as it happens in the liberal systems), but only by ideological pressures. The same ideological pressures influenced the selection of the appropriate strategies necessary to approach certain issues, as the representatives of the propagandistic system privileged those perspectives convenient for the newsroom strategies. All these observations concerned with the insistence on the *news* specific to the totalitarian discourse lead to the conclusion that the instance of medietic enunciation suggested its receivers an informative contract whose informative role was essential, but (sometimes replaced) with the role of ideological persuasion."⁵ However, we cannot annul unappealably the journalism and the journalists that, for

² Octavian Paler, *Don Quixote in the East*, Albatros, Bucharest, 1994, p. 138.

³ *Ibidem*, p. 139.

⁴ Octavian Paler, *Galileo's Defense*, Cartea Românească, Bucharest, 1978, pp. 243-244.

⁵ Luminița Roșca, *op. cit.*, p. 262-263.

almost half a century, although they were oppressed by a certain political ideology and a certain thematic schematism imposed by the censorship, crystallized clear values of the journalistic writing, by older or younger representatives, some of them real professionals and well-known by the readers even in the current scenery of the written press. After December '89, carried away by the euphoric waves of the full freedom of thinking, speech and action, we manifested the wish to isolate ourselves from the past, to do away with it, remaining indifferent to the big efforts of our predecessors, efforts sown with *wonderful seeds and the world's corollas of wonders*, as Lucian Blaga would say, if he were still alive. Consequently, we must admit that everything valuable in the Romanian written press, throughout almost two centuries of writing, deserves its place and the right judgment not by antitheses of circumstance imposed by the social-political times, but by antitheses of intrinsic value of the messages formulated by "the historians of the hour," in impartial researches, strongly argued from the scientific point of view.

After the political moment from December 1989, an information explosion in Romania took place, the most dynamic component of the mediatic system being the written press, the resonance of the social metamorphose of the moment. During this period, the main democratic victory was the annihilation of the political control over the mass media and the initiation of the process concerned with the demystification of reality. Thus, the period after the 1989 Revolution was unfavourable for literature and favourable for the press. Almost completely abandoned, literature fed more on memories, while the press benefited from an affluence of new forces, including volunteers from among such writers as: Octavian Paler, Eugen Simion, Mircea Dinescu, Nicolae Manolescu, Adrian Marino, Dan Călin Cristea, Alexandru Paleologu, Gabriel Andreescu, Mihai Ralea, etc. The background of the written press is individualized by the rapid and chaotic increase in titles and printings during a relatively short period (1990-1992), followed by a significant decrease and stabilization at rates much more reduced than the "starting" ones.⁶ We do not need to take into account all the publications, but only the journalistic performances, possible precisely due to the effervescence that gained ground on the entire domain. The Romanian mediatic system was dominated by the official ideology until the fall of the communist regime, the limits of the space related to the journalistic manifestation being established by normative, juridical and political documents, in the absence of the separation of powers.

Immediately after 1989, the press polarized, reproducing however the previous structures, the best journalists will continue to be those who had known and practised the communist model "(...) the prestigious journalists of the moment give off the feeling that they rely more on their past than on our future, they display a vague communist pathos, a hardly dissimulated comminatory fervour, a certain populist sentimentalism, rudely rendered. When they want to praise, they make use of adulatory words, when they want to criticize, they use obscene language."⁷ The similarity between the press in transition and the old communist press consists in the fact that, then, as well as now, we have "an authoritarian press (...), the press does not find out, it knows. It does not pry, it makes decisions. The difference is that the source of the authority manifested by the communist press was to be found outside the press system (...), while the press of the 90s enabled itself with an immanent authority that it justifies on the basis of the

⁶ *Manual of Journalism*, Mihai Coman coordinator, Polirom, Iași, 1997, p. 212.

⁷ Andrei Pleșu, *Journalism in Transition*, "Dilema," Year V, no. 232, July 4-10, 1997, p. 3.

assumption according to which it is the only faithful and permanent mirror of the public opinion.”⁸

In Peter Gross’ opinion: “(...) the journalism after 1989 represented more an exercise of writing comments and opinions than to give facts or information about certain events. It offered pieces of information that could not be checked, often simple rumours, in a tendentious, incomplete and dogmatic manner. The political partisanship survived from 1990 until 1993, when, a slow process of self-evaluation and learning, together with the exigences of the professional, social, political, cultural and economic domain in a state of flux brought about the evolution from the ordinary dilettantism specific to the post-communist journalism, to a pre-professionalism that offered hopes for the future. In 1996, in the course of professionalization, the Romanian journalism becomes politicized.”⁹

The post-communist Romanian press also stands for a form of materialization of what the German researcher Jurgen Habermas calls “the literary model of the press,” a creation of the learnt men and of the scientists, rendering the rational and critical spirit of the intellectuals. Thus, most of the publications that appeared immediately after December 1989 belong, according to professor Ioan Drăgan, to the “literary” model. In the written press of this period, “the elitist intellectualism,” by a metaphorization of the mediatic discourse, inefficient if it is applied for a longer period of time: “After 1989, the consequences concerned with the elimination of the *control* over the press, (first, the ideological control and then, with time, the economic one), were represented by the gradual recovery of all the components of the informative contract and the first «victories, triumphs» of the press consisted in the thematic diversification and language recovery.”¹⁰

The Romanian press becomes, “after that real rediscovery of the journalism practised in December 1989, a support of the interactions between the various social and political groups, stimulating the process of deconstructing the totalitarian institutions, the private control over the social communication and the shaping of the public sphere, part of the civil society.”¹¹ After having obtained a complete freedom of speech and manifestation in various genres and styles, that individualize it and make it credible in front of the receivers, “the Romanian mass media displayed, after 1990, a mobility beneficial within the editorial strategies, newspaper summaries and the grids of programs, that can be illustrated by the following equation: functions of the press appropriate for the present situation plus interesting publicistic modalities equals effects.”¹² 1990 marked the outburst of the Romanian mass media: “(...) after 5 years since the fall of the communist regime, the number of the daily newspapers and of the periodical publications doubled, concomitantly with a disconcerting thematic diversification, even for those familiarized with the press systems belonging to the Occidental democracies. (...) The period between 1990-1992 is characterized by the abundance of the daily newspapers sharing general information, of the traditional press, of the specialized weekly publications, of those dealing with political debates, of the advertisement publications and various sensationalist reportings. This «colourful» press, of a doubtful quality, answered the needs of diversified information manifested by the public, that had been subjected to indoctrination a long period of time. This is how «the

⁸ Daniel Barbu, “Curentul,” Year III, no. 163 (524), Wednesday, 14th of July, 1999, p. 3.

⁹ Peter Gross, *The Colossus with Feet of Clay*, Polirom, Iași, 1999, p. 126.

¹⁰ Luminița Roșca, *op. cit.*, p. 263.

¹¹ Marian Petcu, *The Typology of the Romanian Press*, The European Institute, Bucharest, 2000, p. 274.

¹² Victor Vișinescu, *A History of the Romanian Press*, Victor, Bucharest, 2000, p. 216.

thirsty for» information is explained, as well as the absence of exigency from the public with respect to the quality of the information offered by mass media (...).¹³

Between 1990-1992, the main position was the informative one, materialized by concise genres, news, short reports, or articles such as those on the Revolution, the miners' revolts, the political manifestations, the organization of the political parties, on the Parliament and the debates that animated it, and so on. Starting with 1993, then with 1994 and 1996, together with the new political and economic horizons of the country that was already part of the process of transition to the market economy and privatization, by means of the reforms suggested in all the fields of activity and aiming at the Euro-Atlantic integration, as well as at the EU accession, the objectives of the press focused on these commandments and, implicitly, the interpretative function acquired legitimacy and priority. Starting with 1992-1993, the process concerned with the alienation of the press from the model of the press review and the adoption of the liberal model, the Romanian press seems to have taken a definitive liking to: "The liberal press model is not (directly) affected by the tyranny of the political power and of the ideology, but by the tyranny of profit, of the increased audiences that bring about successful advertising models. (...) the written press gradually assumes the condition of financial dependence towards the buyers of advertising spaces."¹⁴

The elite genres, the editorial, the special pages, other journalistic forms and style became to gain ground in the most important newspapers of the country, highlighting the capacity of mass-media to search every opaque bosoms of transition, the harmful phenomena – corruption, criminality, the underground economy, the political nepotism, etc. – many of these issues being subjected to press campaigns or case studies: "(...) the Romanian mass media approached two types of discourse: a *sacralized* one, that interpreted the facts from the perspective of some positive, ritual and mythological categories (...), and a *desacralizing* one, that analyzed everything from the perspective of some rituals of the ridiculous and the hilarious, as well as of symbols belonging to «upside-down» world, decaying into chaos."¹⁵

The other roles of mass-media – the role of culturalization, of advertisement, of public service, etc. – have made and they still make their presence felt plentifully, often exceeding the rational limits, as: "The first duty of the press is to obtain the newest information on the contemporary events, and, elaborating them as soon as possible, share it to the whole nation."¹⁶ Thus, the journalists, by their everyday work, do not reproduce the events, but they *search for* news, that is "notable" events, happenings that can be "acquaint the public with the fact that the pieces of information were credited with a certain importance, were considered to be pertinent in a certain context of reference, were judged as containing a certain informative value."¹⁷

A "real" journalist, that must be able to make every effort in order not to distort reality, to present it correctly, objectively and in a balanced way, must decide for himself what kind of events can be transposed into the press and which of the happenings must be thrown into the ocean of forgiveness, identifying those perceptible, relevant and incontestable realities, on the basis of which he can shape his articles: "We need events in order to get the reality shaper of mass media on the move: natural or manufactured, beneficial or evil, unforeseen or already planned, immediate or not, intelligible or

¹³ Luminița Roșca, *op. cit.*, p. 157-158.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 164.

¹⁵ Mihai Coman, *Mass Media, Myth and Ritual*, Polirom, Iași, 2003, p. 70.

¹⁶ David Randall, *The Universal Journalist*, Polirom, Iași, 1998, p. 15.

¹⁷ Eric Neveu, *Sociologie des Mouvements Sociaux*, (The Sociology of the Social Movements), La Découverte, Paris, 1996, p. 12.

astounding and difficult to comprehend. Experienced, narrated, interpreted by the people, the singular events turn into information, more exactly into «reproducible» forms that allow for «an exchange of experience between the communicators».¹⁸

The “intellectualist elitist” type of journalism, that abounds in opinions, coexisted with the information journalism, with all its limits, until the former lost the audience he had had between 1990 and 1992. Professor Mihai Coman stated in relation to this type of journalism the following things: “First, I was faced with a kind of effervescence where it was not the informative function that counted the most, but that of phrasing (...) The problem of the Romanian press is the fact that we have some excellent stylists. Our journalism has always focused on phrasing (...) But these are office, not field journalists (...) We have neither investigative, nor informational journalists, but only journalists that skillfully deal with phrasing.”¹⁹ Gradually, there takes place a transition from the model that embeds the “literary,” the factual and the fictional, passion and detachment, to one that sustains the commercial aspect of the press – the sensational, the spectacular, the fashionable, as after 14 years from the 1989 Revolution, the press still experiences the joy of forms, most of the times, without substance, but often, self-contained forms.

In post-totalitarian Romania, there was not a political, democratic culture, the population was confused, the political factors dealt with Occidental, mixed formulae and prescriptions, the politicians searched for models at random or relying on pe “their own forces.” The natural consequence at the level of the population was the severe criticism of each Government, by disapproving verbal slogans, anarchical street manifestations, overturns of prognostications during the elections. Being into the front line of the confused scenery, dominated by political doctrines and colours and that leaves much to be desired when it comes to the social layers of Romanian transition, mass-media, similar to a novice thrown on the crests by the waves, was trying to save itself, but also those that asked for help, driven by the aura of the freedom of speech and opinion, outside the censurable restrictions it had already done away with, without taking seriously the coordinates imposed by a highly desired statute, impregnated with imprevisible significations, related to the practice of writing and to the communication of liberal precept.

The periodical publications find a solid, (but inconsistent) support in the newspapers’ pages, continuing to exist in the light and exploitation of the daily event. The better the journalist speculates on the last news, the more success he will have in front of the readers. We will never see these happy “slaves” of the actuality involved in a more complex project, that goes beyond the limits of that particular evening: the following day, they start afresh, stylistically unsurprising and guided by new convictions, commenting, interpreting, expanding upon a new event.

The late press has been devoid of subjects, stated Aurelian Titu Dumitrescu (“Cotidianul,” no. 241, February 22, 1999): “The late Romanian press has been almost entirely become a social press. At least half of the pages contained by each publication are characterized by excessive talk about Petre Roman, Emil Constantinescu, Ion Iliescu, Ion Diaconescu, the general Nițu, Vadim, etc. However, the numberless qualities of these personalities, some of them, even the personalities of the day, do not justify such a presence inside the pages of newspapers (...).”²⁰

¹⁸ Mihai Coman, *op. cit.*, p. 44.

¹⁹ Mihai Coman, “Dilema,” Year I, no. 25, June 1993, p. 8.

²⁰ Aurelian Titu Dumitrescu, *The press devoid of subjects*, “Cotidianul,” Year IX, no. 241 (2286), Monday, February 22, 1999, p. 20.

3. Conclusion

“The resistance through culture” from the communist period is to be found in the current context as well, under a different form and accompanied by other means of expression, but influenced by indifference, which is much more onerous than terror: “Far from being a desert, as some people sustained, culture represented an oasis during the communist regime, one of the few oases of freedom, where the atmosphere was not contaminated by the ideology. (...) Unfortunately, as the poetess Ileana Mălăncioiu noticed disappointedly, on the anniversary of «România literară», the resistance through culture did not end together with the fall of the communist regime. It continues to exist, under different forms and with weaker means, as it is more difficult to fight against indifference than against terror. (...) How come the government officials nowadays prove to be even more indifferent than their predecessors from the communist regime, that manifested their interest in culture at least by the fear of it? They are supposed to be more educated. (...) However, culture finds itself at the periphery of the state’s concerns, it is humiliated, despised, whereas the intellectuals increase the number of the persons called pudically, «underprivileged». (...) Are the politicians so busy with the fight for the power that they do not find time for anything else? Are they really indifferent to the fact that, in the absence of culture, the history of a nation is nothing else but a long series of happenings? Could they have discovered that deafness is more efficient than terror? Is there some truth in my theory according to which the «Persians» no longer come, as once at Salamina, from outside the country?”²¹

Mass media is and remains a dynamic phenomenon and the opinion formulated by Mihai Coman in his paper entitled *From Behind the scenes of the Fourth Power*, defines to a certain extent the media environment in Romania, at present: “In the modern world, mass media has turned into a gravitational center in relation to which all the other segments of the society situate themselves - the economic system, the political system, the cultural system, the ideological system, the system of scientific researches and our daily life. Those working in the press, owners, editors, reporters, or managers are (frequently) extremely influential persons, personalities, well-known people with a social statute and prestige out of the ordinary. The control over or on the contrary, the freedom of the press, has generated and still generates harsh fights, rendering always the same truth: the importance of this system in the contemporary world.”²²

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²¹ Octavian Paler, *The resistance through culture*, “Curentul,” Year II, no. 265 (323), Thursday, November 12, 1998, p. 18.

²² Mihai Coman, *From Behind the Scenes of the Fourth Power*, Carro, Bucharest, 1996, p. 4.

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