

Country Report on Media

1. Introduction: The normative, political, social and economic framework for the development of the media during the last 10 years (1989 – 1999)

The events that took place in Romania in December 1989, shattered the command-media typical for the communist regime. It enabled journalists to take a new position in the society and to exercise their profession – theoretically at least –without any interference, except for their own judgement and moral considerations. The society as a whole had great expectations. During the last years of Ceausescu's regime, the television had only one channel broadcasting only for a couple of hours each day; the press was totally under the control of the communist party (through censorship and the recruitment procedures of personnel). In general, the audience rate was very low for television (a joke that was common in those days said that house-wives were reluctant to use their irons for fear that the dictator might speak through it).

Significantly, the most obvious sign of the changing times was the freedom of the press. The public television was broadcasting all the time, and the public was watching it with equal intensity. The number of newspapers grew rapidly and in a matter of months, literally hundreds of newspapers appeared throughout the country.

Soon though, the first problems arose. There was no proper legal framework for the media, neither for protecting journalists, nor for regulating their activity. Because the communist media was totally devoted to the personality cult of the dictator, the new newspapers became aggressive and indiscriminating in their approach. Everybody was endorsing somebody. Neutral accounts were eluded because nobody read them.²

It is also true that the training of journalists was faulty. Actually, journalists were graduates from various study fields – most of them from the field of Humanities and Social Sciences – and had a training for journalism at the party academy of political studies. The sheer amount of media outlets brought forth another phenomenon, which is still developing: many non-journalists developed a career as journalists.³

The problems created by this pistol-media and the fact that regulations were needed in order to defend individuals from the unwarranted attack of the media raised the problem of legislation. The adoption of significant legislation is an on-going process.

1.1 Legal stipulations, licensing procedures, legal censorship

The legal framework for media activity and institutions is still being debated, and improvements have been demanded by various agencies and institutions.

For the newspapers, the licensing procedures are rather simple, because they are regarded as economic enterprises; for them, the general legislation is enacted. For radio and television stations, however, the procedures are somewhat more difficult. The owner has to obtain from the National Council for Audio and Video the licence and wave-length for its broadcasts; the licence is periodically renewed, and can be lost if the station does not comply with the stipulations of the Audio and Video Law. The latter demands that no open political positions should be taken, that information be provided on a neutral basis (that is, no clear endorsement is allowed), that advertising should be released under certain conditions, and so forth. If these rules are not respected, the NCAV can immediately prohibit the station to broadcast, and to pay a fine. The

first conclusion is that there is a difference in the legal treatment applied to the various media. This is the result of the first years after 1989, in which the television was the crux of public interest and much more subject to political pressures. Furthermore, until the appearance of privately owned television stations, people had to rely on the state-owned stations; whereas they could choose to buy a newspaper or not, they were compelled to watch the broadcasts of that station. The dissatisfaction with the position of these television stations created a special sensibility of the public towards the television (especially the state-owned).

1.2 Number of print media, TV and radio stations, their regional distribution and their economic/financial status

The number of media has, as a rule, increased in the last decade. Several elements related to the topic are obvious:

The number of media actually fluctuated. After a period of fury, in which dozens of short-lived journals appeared throughout the country, the number has settled to around ten major newspapers with nation-wide distribution⁴, and up to three local newspapers in major and smaller cities around the country. Although there is no accurate statistic, a total number of 200 to 250 journals of general interest is a good estimate.

The number of TV stations is significantly smaller, due, perhaps, to the legislation and financial burden. Aside from the state-owned TV station (with two broadcasting channels and an international channel), there are four major broadcasting stations (7abc, ProTV, Prima, Antena 1), and one of secondary impact (Atomic – a channel for teenagers, with music, fan information, and so on). At least three of them, including the state-owned station, have local stations, which have several hours of local news, entertainment programs, and so forth. A recent decision of the NCAV will give local stations a broader framework, including autonomous emission channels; it is hoped that this will increase the freedom of expression and customer's choices.

The financial status of the various media is also significant. The state-owned TV and radio stations are practically in a state of bankruptcy. The private ones – especially ProTV and Antena 1 – are faring much better. The printed media is more strongly influenced by the economic situation. The prices have to be kept low, for fear that people will not buy the journals. If bigger newspapers – such as Adevarul, Romania Libera, Jurnalul National, Curentul – can afford to lower prices, smaller news-papers will lose ground. The local media has a small share of the market; the distribution networks of the major newspapers is quite efficient⁵. Noteworthy is the appearance of great European media groups (such as Ringier) who buy Romanian newspapers, or create Romanian versions of international journals (such as Burda, Paris Match, Elle, Chip, PC Direct). Nevertheless, the advertising contracts are the basis of economic strength in the Romanian media.

A significant development in recent years is the appearance of specialised journals. There is an increased number of journals dedicated to hobbies, leisure, haute couture, cuisine, sports, computer science, fitness, and so on. A significant proportion is represented by Romanian versions of international journals, which establish franchises for distribution in Romania.

1.3 The relationship between the state and the media

The relationship between the state and the media has developed throughout the last decade in a significant way; demonstrated, first of all, through a period of lack of control from state agencies. This, however, ended very soon after the first visit of the miners in Bucharest (January, 1990)⁶. After that, the increasing involvement of the state in the media became obvious. Denial

of public replies to allegations of distorted reports of various news, incorrect and/or biased comments on the opposition were used to enhance the influence of the established political power. Nevertheless, the existence of privately owned media limited the amount of damage; this was obvious during elections, when the national TV stations had smaller ratings than the private ones. Since 1996, the media seems to have found a certain balance. But, there are some traits which remain, and which are, quite probably, common to the entire area. Briefly stated, these traits are:

the state media are – without submitting entirely – closer to the official viewpoints than the private channels;

the private channels seem to occasionally have a politically biased discourse, probably because the owners have specific sympathies;

it is doubtful that we can speak of a pistol-media in Romania; this is true insofar as indiscriminate attacks ensure a broader audience;

the importance of controlling a greater share of the market, forces TV channels to actually create news (taking one fact and transforming it into a media hit by means of bombastic language and the hiding of context);

privately owned media seem to be more advanced than of the state-owned ones;

there are practically no state-owned journals (with the exception of professional journals, which are public companies with the majority of shares owned by the state).

Obviously, the state TV and radio have certain advantages. They are received throughout the country and are financially backed by the state budget (in fact, everybody who has a TV set and a radio pays taxes for the national radio and television)⁷. The board and the director of these institutions are appointed by political and professional factors (the presidency, the parliament, the Ministry of Culture, the members of the trade-union within the state radio and television).

1.4 Working conditions; recruitment and training of journalists

Generally speaking, journalists are some of the best paid specialists in Romania; some of them have greater salaries than doctors, accountants, or university professors. This is also true for journalists working as state employees. There are actually only a few instances in which journalists have been intimidated while exercising their profession, and the great majority of them prior to 1996. The problem is not that journalists are intimidated by someone, but the fact that the legal provisions do not ensure a correct protection of the journalists, nor does it establish the proper limits⁸. As previously stated, the situation is developing. A recent initiative of the Justice Ministry transfers the cases related to journalists from the field of penal justice to the authority of the civil courts. But, by and large, the freedom of expression is a reality; the reality of inconclusive pieces of legislature, however, remains.

That is why journalists that have actually been trained are rather rare; most of them come from other areas of the humanities and/or social sciences. Usually, newspapers prefer public figures as columnists, as they are considered to attract readers. Journalists from the written media are significantly used as television hosts.

The training of journalists takes place in the universities. Each major university centre has a faculty for journalism – with a four-year curriculum – which stands either alone (as in the case of

the University of Bucharest), or in the same structure with history and other social sciences (at the Babes-Bolyai University of Cluj, for example). The curriculum includes subject matters like foreign languages, mother-tongue, techniques of information gathering, history, and so forth. Nevertheless, the system of transferable credits allows students to take courses in other faculties. The interesting thing is that rather few of the graduates from this faculty actually get to work in the field. Those who pursue a more technical career in the media study at the Academy of Theatre and Film, which has a Faculty for Television and Film. Here they are trained in the techniques of directing and script-writing for television, as well as the technical elements (sound and light, stunts, recording, special effects, and so on).

One experience is, though, noteworthy. In 1998, one of the prominent TV stations (Pro TV), started the so-called Pro TV College; at the same time an experience in correspondence education and in the teaching of gifted children. Part of this school is the Media College, which tries to train young people who want to make a career in the television. This college – the result of a private initiative – trains media journalists in the proper sense of the term.

2. The media and human rights⁹

The issue of human rights and human rights violations is not a central issue in the Romanian media. It occurs when the authorities' behaviour show a blatant breach in the legislation or inter-ethnic conflicts arise. Nevertheless, there is one publication – "The Romanian Journal of Human Rights" – which is published by the APADOR CH (The Romanian Association for the Protection of Human Rights – The Helsinki Committee), and which covers the significant pieces of internal and European laws pertaining to human rights. This publication also presents cases in which violations of human rights have occurred. Other NGO's which deal with this issue prefer to use the established media for the publication of their reports (this is the case of the League for the Protection of Human Rights, LADO).

There are several elements which need to be analysed. For one thing, the general public has a reduced knowledge of human rights (especially the difference between human rights as such, and the minorities' collective rights, customer rights, and so on). One of the significant elements seems to be the effort of educating people in these issues (see below). If this is true for the educational specialists, it is, however, not the same for the media as a whole. Secondly, inter-ethnic conflicts are not of a singular nature; it would be wrong to consider that all such conflicts are the same. If the conflicts which opposed the Roma minority groups to majority communities are dealt with as such (i.e. inter-ethnic conflicts), the conflicts opposing Romanians to the Hungarian minority are biased also by religious prejudice. In the media, the latter aspect tends to be put forth. This instance is obvious when regarding the political enrolment of the media (especially at the level of the written media).

The issue of media and minorities (ethnic or otherwise) has to be considered while taking into account several elements: the existence of a serious media tradition for several minorities (e.g., the Hungarian and German minorities); the participation of a minority in the current government (i.e., the Hungarian minority); the geographically localised character of minorities. As a result of these factors, the access of minorities to the media is somewhat differentiated. The Hungarian minority has several local newspapers and radio stations; to this we could add the weekly two-hour broadcast on the state television. The same is true for the German minority. But the presence of the Roma in the media is somewhat different. They are rather evenly spread throughout the country, but their cultural assimilation in the mainstream population, as well as their social status is very different. That is, the Roma minority is as diverse and divided as is the majority of the population. As a result, their representation in the media is not what it should be. The Roma minority also has a two-hour programme each week, but it is quite different from

what the other two major minorities offer. While the Hungarian and German minorities offer information concerning the cultural and political life of their communities, as well as series concerning their history, the Roma minority presents mostly information and programmes concerning their cultural traditions. Debates over human rights issues are broadcast only when cases of inter-ethnic conflict or the neglect of human rights (which involve members of their minority) appear. The rest of the minorities (and in the parliament, the Minorities Group is composed of the representatives of 17 minorities) have a similar broadcast (i.e., two hours weekly for all).

The position and function of the media in Romanian society is demonstrated by the case of the miners as a media event.

2.1 The case of the Romanian miners in the media

Recent events in Romania have attracted a more than casual interest in the social problems which are typical for Romania. The social conflict which has raged in the western part of the country has had interesting reflections in the media.

First of all, we shall present some of the raw data.

2.1.1 The miners

A very conservative professional group, with an unique esprit de corps, the miners were in the last decade a permanent issue in Romanian politics. There are several explanations, some of them put forth in the newspapers, while others are the result of (far to few) sociological inquiries made in the last years. The first element is their revolt against the Ceausescu regime in 1977. Barricading themselves in the mines and declaring a strike, they managed to attract the attention of the then prime minister (now chief of the Socialist Working Party) to "their" region (i.e. the Jiu Valley). The media, with sympathies for the left political spectrum, stresses these events as a positive influence of the miners, and – at any rate – of their goodwill (even if not correctly applied); the critics consider that this was the moment in which the former political police began to infiltrate in order to control this possible sore point. Sociological analyses consider the particular problem the harsh living and working conditions, in which solidarity can mean the difference between death and survival. Furthermore, the social structure was (and still is) artificial. Due to the lack of manpower in the mining regions, in the last 20-25 years of communism, large numbers of people were settled in these regions. All of them came with their own traditions and behavioural patterns; the lack of decent living conditions, of social integration, and reward led to a significantly higher degree of alcohol abuse, violence, and school drop-out. Particularly the school system was neglected. All of this occurred under the cover of an intense propaganda devised to promote the idea that the miners are the backbone of the working class.

After 1989, the situation became more dramatic; the events in February and June, 1990, and in September, 1991, helped the miners' trade-unions to blackmail the government. Economic reform in that region has remained stagnant until now.

What we have then, is a region with a decaying economic and social structure, in which the only solidarity is created by profession. Solidarity is, however, a double-sided coin, as this solidarity has also enabled trade-union leaders to use the miners in political conflicts, as well as for personal gain.

2.1.2 The media

When considering the entire period in which the miners as a group were politically active, the media had a strange attitude. During the period 1990 – 1996, the newspapers presented the events totally partisan; that is, the newspapers of the then opposition castigated the acts of violence, and the newspapers of the governing party kept silent or tried to explain the forceful – and non-constitutional – intervention through the lack of civic education or through the necessity of intervention. Sometimes, the official radio and television were blamed for manipulating the miners¹⁰, which was denied through silence of the official radio and television channels.

After 1996, the situation changed dramatically. The miners – or to be fully correct, their leadership – were blamed for the lethargy of Romania in its quest for European integration. The entire media created a black-and-white portrait of this professional group, which still is called a "social group" (for reasons rather obscure for me). The fact is that the media in an economic and socially unstable setting has to do more than inform over happenings; in order to sell, media often creates happenings. That is, it blows insignificant elements out of all proportions, or tries to put an information in other unusual frameworks. Other mechanisms are the use of "hard" symbolism (instead of, say, "the miners' actions were stopped", several journals and TV channels used formulae such as "the miners' uprising was decapitated", or "the fierce battles between the police and the miners' pushed Romania to the brink of civil war", or "Miron Cosma [the miners' major leader] – a Mediaeval outlaw", and so forth), the live coverage with "spin" comments from political analysts who are not exactly neutral in the matter. The entire coverage of the recent events demonstrates that, at least sometimes, the media emphasises the spectacular with little regard for the proper analysis. A further proof is the fact that such events are often personalised; leaders, politicians, administrators, trade union leaders, and so forth – are blamed or considered to be geniuses. The constant personification blurs actual facts and causes.

The first conclusion is that media lacks the skills necessary to manage crisis situations, or to mediate between parties involved in a conflict¹¹. The second is that the entire society has lost its ability to accept dialogue instead of clear-cut conflict. Communication within the society has still to be regained.

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1 The dissatisfaction towards the communist media was so strong, that almost everybody was listening to the Radio Free Europe, and watching Bulgarian, Yugoslav, or Hungarian television. A flourishing underground industry of handmade receiving antennas developed quite fast.

2 This is one of the reasons for which education for media consumption should be a major focus for international programs in developing civil society (see below).

3 As a result, you can have engineers giving advice to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, philologists with a keen eye for Economics, and so forth.

4 To my knowledge, there is only one journal, namely The Monitor ("Monitorul"), that has local editions; it is, however, more of a group of local journals clustered around a central newspaper.

5 One of the major points of dissatisfaction in the years previous to 1996 was that the state-owned distribution company was hampering with the distribution of the opposition journals. As a reaction, many of those newspapers created their own distribution systems.

6 For the case of the miners' movement and the media, see below.

7 Recently, the National Transmissions Company decided to reduce the emission time for the state-owned radio channels, due to the fact that the state-owned stations have absolutely huge debts.

8 The best examples are the right-wing journals which, by declaring that some articles are actually pamphlets, can publish whatever accusations they want and use the most malignant vocabulary possible.

9 As a small note, Romania does not have the death penalty.

10 During the latest (February) events, the miners heading towards Bucharest refused to talk to the media, although a couple of weeks before their leaders participated in several talk-shows, and the television channels ensured a live coverage of the events.

11 There was one interesting exception. During the January conflict, when the miners tried to reach Bucharest, one of the TV channels held a talk-show with one of the miners' leaders, asking him to present the viewpoints of the trade-union; the result was rather confusing.