Newsgathering and Public Relations in the Romanian Media

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Abstract

Newsgathering is a fundamental activity in journalism. It starts from the identification of a factual element, which becomes worthy of recounting for a wider audience. A lot of information can be found in the electronic environment, through Internet searches. However, the journalist can call himself the person who publishes a piece of information for the first time while only extracting it from other media products. This study analyzes the ways of collecting information from the Romanian press on some of the representative electronic platforms, being particularly oriented towards the relationship between the public relations activity, on social media, and on the dangers that occur when professional standards are at a minimum level.

Keywords: *mass media, newsgathering, public relations, sources, social media, press release.*

Introduction

Journalists collect their information for the production of specific communication products (news, reports, investigations) from human sources and documentary sources[1]. News can thus be acquired from individuals that have knowledge of significant facts. They can be leaders of the administration, politicians, victims or perpetrators of illegalities, witnesses, members of the police force, experts. Human sources can also be collective, coming from groups speaking on behalf of institutions, organizations, companies, associations, trade unions, or others of this

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[1] Lucian-Vasile Szabo, *Information collection techniques. Journalism, public relations, intelligence (Tehnici de colectare a informaţiilor. Jurnalism, relaţii publice, intelligence)*, Editura Universităţii de Vest, Timişoara, 2018, p. 65.

kind. The sources are people who have knowledge of significant data or of places where something meaningful takes place. Natural or legal entities (organizations, institutions or firms), as well as the areas where events that are important to report on, also constitute sources to which the journalist turns in order to check the essential elements of a journalistic product[2]. Each source must be reliable, the journalist having the duty to verify both the credibility of the source itself (that is, to know if the person knows what they are talking about, if they have the ability to know the subject well) and the information provided[3]. These are minimal and necessary steps towards fact-checking, because developed systems have been put in place all over the world in order to assess the credibility of sources[4]. Obviously, some sources can be difficult to work with, and the relationship between journalist and source does not run smoothly, which in turn is detrimental when it comes to bringing relevant information to the public, as long as the journalist cannot get in possession of all the necessary information.

When gathering information, both the persons employed by media platforms and the freelancers mainly use three techniques: observation, interviews and document analysis[5]. Observation means that the reporter comes into direct contact with reality, with the stories worthy of reporting and with the people involved[6]. Observation can be direct, when events unfold under the eyes of the reporter. Most often the process of indirect observation is encountered, the facts being reconstructed by investigating various traces. Thus, the journalist can witness an auto accident or a fire, or receive information in a press conference. But the reporter may arrive at the scene after the event has taken place. Information concerning an accident, explosion or murder is obtained by observing the traces left, i.e., dead or injured people, damaged cars, traces on the asphalt or in the field, blood, the accounts of the victims (if they can speak), of witnesses (if they are any) and of members of the intervention teams also

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[2] Tony Harcup, *Journalism, Principles AND Practices*, London: Sage publications, 2008, p. 59.

[3] Lucian-Vasile Szabo & Iasmina Petrovici, 'The Importance of Newsgathering in Communication', *Annals of the Western University of Timioara, the Philosophy and Communication Sciences series (Analele Universităţii de Vest din Timioara, seria Filosofie şi Ştiinţe ale Comunicării)*, IX (XXVI), 2014, pp. 36-46.

[4] [4]Miriam J. Metzger, Andrew J. flanagin, Keren Eyal, Daisy R. Lemus & Robert M. Mccann, 'Credibility for the 21st Century: Integrating Perspectives on Source, Message, and Media Credibility in the Contemporary Media Environment', *Annals of the International Communication Association*, 27:1, 2003, pp. 293-335.

[5] Lucian-Vasile Szabo, *Information collection techniques. Journalism, public relations, intelligence (Tehnici de colectare a informaţiilor. Jurnalism, relaţii publice, intelligence)*, Editura Universităţii de Vest, Timişoara, 2018, p. 106.

[6] Raluca Petre, *Information management in the media (Managementul informaţiei în media)*, Tritonic, Bucharest, 2019, p. 108.

being important. The reenactment of the facts is realized by appealing to the senses, the most important being sight, followed by hearing, since smell, touch or taste are not often used. Observation does not mean to only see or hear, to perceive certain aspects of reality, but to understand the elements of actuality in their context, and the facts within the broader political, social or economic framework that generated them[7].

Balance, but not Involvement

In order to carry out this study, journalistic contents present on five media platforms in Romanian were analyzed, three of them on a national level, and two local ones, from Timisoara. The method used is that of content analysis, focusing on the sources of information for the investigated media products. One has tried to identify the news items in accordance with the documentation on the ground or at the headquarters of a number of institutions, the contribution of various pieces of information presented in the form of public relations content, a special attention being paid to the relationship the political power had with various institutions.

The first media platform selected for analysis was *ziare.com*. The targeted period was of 48 hours, specifically the19[th] and 21st of June 2022, days when many events occurred both in Romania and externally, thus a number of 281 articles were presented on the platform. Of these, a third (91) were foreign policy pieces of news, taken from news agencies or other publications. Another 39 were concerned with sports topics, mainly the success achieved by swimmer David Popovici. They were generally taken from other media platforms, *ziare.com* not having their own correspondents. 14 articles were from the society pages category, also taken from other platforms, but (re)written in a balanced way, the topics being carefully selected. Other 15 journalistic products were from the category of practical advice, that is, tips concerning various life situations and needs, from depression to accessible holiday destinations. It is obvious that these ones also represent processed content from various sources. The remaining 132 articles were dedicated to news on the Romanian current affairs, none of them being written as a result of documentation on the ground, but using other sources, such as the communiqués/information provided by the institutions, including the governmental or local ones, either by transmitting them to the media institutions, or by taking the information from their websites. Also, a lot of

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[7] Peter Gross, 'Requirements and practices of a good Reportage ('Exigenţele şi practicile unui bun reportaj',), in Elijah Rad (coord.), *Documentation in journalism (Documentarea în jurnalism),* Tritonic, Bucharest, 2011, pp. 39-70.

data was obtained by following the personal or institutional pages of political or administrative leaders on social networks, especially Facebook. All articles were written on a seemingly neutral tone, those on government management being rather positive. None were critical. Controversial issues or accusations were generally left as such, with opposing positions rarely recorded, and often at a later date.

It is not the management who posts on the institutional pages, but rather the designated persons in the communication departments. This can also happen in the management of some personal pages, which can lead to controversy. This was the case with the Minister of Sports. Eduard Novak, being of Hungarian ethnicity, was suspected that in the Hungarian version of the congratulatory text for David Popovici he had deliberately avoided mentioning Romania. The minister replied that it was not him who posted on the page, but someone else[8].

Where Have the Reporters Gone?

Another digital platform analyzed was *Adevărul*. For this analysis, 74 journalistic products were scrutinized. They appeared on the main stream over two days, June 30 and July 1, 2022. A number of 20 news items are concerned with sports, and five with external issues. One is left with a number of 49 items of published material, oriented towards Romanian news, divided by areas: politics, administration, social issues or various events. The platform benefits from other specialized flows, where information appears divided into topics: Economy, International news, Education, Tech, Lifestyle, Health, Culture, Entertainment. Of the 74 journalistic products in the news feed, none were created after gathering information from the field or through the interview technique. All were constituted of public relations materials offered by various institutions or items of news taken from other media organizations. For example, there were news stories taken from *Agerpres* or *Digi24* and they contain data from ready-made briefings. There were very few investigations made by the reporters from *Adevărul* (none in the analyzed period). Some articles with information collected directly by journalists could only be found in the Local section, the regional correspondents being the only ones who still move on the ground, although in their case as well most of the communication products were made using communiqués offered by various institutions, organizations or companies.

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[8] https://ziare.com/david-popovici/a-fost-sau-nu-premeditare-ministrul-novak-felicitat-in-maghiara-pe-david-popovici-dar-cu-alt-text-1747313.

Methodology

Libertatea is one of the most comprehensive media platforms in Romania.

A number of 113 journalistic contents were analyzed. They were posted on the platform on the 4th and 5th of July 2022, in the News section, covering internal politics and administration, external events, economic and social materials, while leaving out sports and entertainment. Of these, 36 are foreign news items, with the main theme being the war in Ukraine and Moscow's aggressive actions. Only six materials contain some information on the work of the central administration. One is about the evolution of the number of COVID cases in Romania, neutral data provided by Alexandru Rafila, the Minister of Health. Although the figures show an alarming increase in cases (over a thousand per day), the journalists do not show concern about this development and do not try to find out additional information. Three news stories were written in connection with what President Klaus Iohannis had said in a press conference. As known, the president rarely organizes such meetings with journalists. It is only in these news items that we encounter a more reserved attitude towards the executive power, the president's answers regarding the proposed amendments to the national security law, but particularly the attempt to retain Prime Minister Nicolae Ciuca's favorable image, as he was accused of plagiarisms, being rendered in a negative manner. In the case of the other 73 news stories on various issues of national interest, none were produced by actually doing fieldwork or by talking, on the phone or in other ways, to the sources. We also encounter the usual practice of the Romanian mainstream press, namely to use the informative materials provided by various institutions or the documentation on their websites or social networks pages.

The Local Press Is Tired

Two local media platforms from Timisoara were selected. The first one to be analyzed was *Renaşterea bănăţeană*, namely the articles posted on July 7th and July 8th, 2022. The printed edition held between 50 and 60 articles, but the number dropped by half in the case of the electronic version, as we found 45 articles for both days. They were unevenly distributed in the 11 proposed sections, most of the articles being found in the sections: Current affairs (20), Sports (8) and Events (7). Other sections did not record any appearances during this period. Most of the news items were actually taken from other publications, especially the national level one, or contained processed information coming from communiqués made by the

representatives of various institutions (Police, Timiș County Council, Timișoara City Hall). None of the 45 items were written after having done fieldwork, which was a big surprise in the case of *Renaşterea bănăţeană*, as it had consolidated the image of a newspaper with reporters who very often travelled to various places in Timiș county in order to collect interesting and useful information.

Another local electronic publication analyzed was the *tion.ro* platform. Generally speaking, it covers Timiș county, but in fact it is mainly preoccupied with Timisoara. Although it still benefits from experienced reporters, the number of journalistic content items published is low. Only 21 items appeared in the two-day period analyzed, namely, July 12th and13th, 2022. Nine are in the News section, and five in the Event section. In the two days, no article in the fields of Economics or Sports was published. There were no news stories made as a result of fieldwork, as most of them were based on information from the communiqués made available by various institutions.

Thought-provoking Results

1. It appears that few of the Romanian journalists still do fieldwork in order to collect information through observation and interviews. Researchers in the field have long established what are the elements that define quality journalism, and these elements should be found in every professional media product[9]. If attention paid to the collection of information is essential for ensuring the high quality of the final product, the employees of the media organization producing journalistic content is equally important. Using content produced outside of the media outlet (first and foremost in news agencies)[10] should be restricted to a minimum. To a certain extent, retrieving external data is a necessary thing. Foreign news items are primarily taken from agencies, as few media outlets have external correspondents, and usually only in major capitals.

The lack of fieldwork as well as the avoidance of interaction with serious sources in order to uncover important information results in the websites of media organizations publishing poor quality journalistic material, sometimes containing inadequate or invented

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[9] Carolina Rudinschi, *The Romanian generalist press: from print to online* (*Presa românească generalistă: de la print la online*), Tritonic, Bucharest, 2014, pp. 40-41.
[10] *Idem*.

information. The dependence on advertising offered by Google-type integrators, an important source of money for various platforms, stimulates the emergence of sensationalist news material[11]. All efforts are directed to increasing the number of clicks, the click-bait phenomenon, the number of hits being the criterion for calculating the money coming from advertising. It is the old technique of baiting, when the user is lured with promises concerning information that is only partial, if at all, present in the final communication product. This deliberately misleading technique aims at an increase in revenues[12].

2. Communication content is often produced by public relations specialists in the communication offices of various institutions, organizations or companies, content that is often already posted on the websites or social media pages of the said institutions. When it comes to social media, it is necessary to distinguish between *social networks* and *content-oriented networks*[13]. Sometimes the briefings are also sent to e-mail addresses, through phone messages or on the social pages of journalists or media organisations. Sometimes this does not happen anymore, as the press gets informed directly from the websites or social pages of the institutions. A lot of the content is reproduced on media platforms as such, in many cases even bearing the signature of some members of the editorial board. This gives rise to bizarre situations when quasi-identical publishing materials are signed by different authors in several publications.

3. A third characteristic of Romanian journalism is the confusion between mass-media and social media. The press needs professionals, people who are trained and experienced in collecting important information in order to produce news material and content that has an impact in the public. Social media is open to anyone, ready or not, whether a professional or not. Some of the persons who are active on social networks have experience, they easily cope with their activity of posting content and can have an increased audience, as we can see in the case of some influencers, especially when they manage to gain the trust of an increased number

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[11] Simona Bader and Corina Sîrb, *Peculiarities of the online press in Romania. Dynamics and concepts* (*Particularități ale presei online din România. Dinamică și concepte)* Tritonic, Bucharest, 2021, p. 71.

[12] Nicolas Guéguen, *Psychology of manipulation and submission (Psihologia manipulării și a supunerii)*, Editura Polirom, Iași, 2007, p. 166.

[13] As Antonio Momoc points out (*Communication 2.0. New Media, participation and populism* (*Comunicarea 2.0. New Media, participare și populism*) Adenius, Iași, 2014, p. 36.), Facebook or Twitter belong to the first category, while You Tube belongs to the second.

of followers[14]. Media professionals can use social media pages to amplify the effect of their own journalistic productions, to draw attention to them, or for related activities, such as publishing opinions and information that did not make it into the published content because of various formal restrictions. It is obvious that media organisations and their actors can use *echo chambers* strategies to disseminate useful and necessary information to the public, but social networks are much easier and more often used for disinformation and the imposition of false truths in society, often under the guise of legitimate information[15]. But the differences between the two areas remain valid, and non-compliance with the rules frequently leads to the uniformity of the flow of communication products between the media and social media, resulting in an audience that is confused or no longer making any difference between various aspects, the role of the press as an information tool being thus reduced or canceled[16].

4. In the two years of the Covid-19 pandemic (2020-2022) the Romanian press received significant amounts of money from the state budget in order to survive. It is obvious that the pressures exerted by the political and administrative leaders are aimed at limiting the revelations regarding, in particular, the acts of corruption. A difficult problem is represented by the direct interference of the political in the media, as in Romania some media organizations are owned or influenced by party patrons or their supporters[17].

There has always been an alignment between some media organizations and the government policy, while another part of the press has ensured a balance, sometimes having a more stand than the parliamentary political opposition. In 2019, for example, a large part of the Romanian press sanctioned the errors of the then government, contributing greatly to the mobilization of the public, which in turn led to the large protest of August the 10th, brutally repressed by the institutions of force directly coordinated by the political factors in power. In 2022, the critical attitude was greatly diminished.

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[14] Delia C. Balaban, Meda Mucundorfeanu and Brigitte Naderer, 'The role of trustworthiness in social media influencer advertising: Investigating users' appreciation of advertising transparency and its effects', *Communications*, 2021, https://doi.org/10.1515/commun-2020-0053.

[15] Alina Bârgăoanu and Flavia Durach, 'ECHO Chambers and Polarization of Opinion: When Multiple Voices Create Multiple Realities', in Dan Sultănescu (ed.), *Challenges in Strategic Communication and Fighting Propaganda in Eastern Europe*, Amsterdam, Berlin, Washington: IOS Press, 2019, pp. 120-129.

[16] Jacques Attail, *Histories of the media* (*Istoriile mass-media)*, Editura Polirom, Iaşi, 2022, p. 230.

[17] Raluca-Nicoleta Radu, 'Sanctioning journalistic misconduct: An application of cumulative prospect theory to journalistic self-regulation issues', *Journalism*, 17(8), 2016, pp. 1095–1112.

Although the act of government continued to be deficient, but without sudden decisions that would have induce a broad and immediate reaction, the attitude of the media was rather one of compliance, the few critical stances coming from opinion articles, many belonging to commentators not very accustomed to elaborating news materials.

Conclusions and Anticipatory Remarks

The analysis of the work methods of five media organizations and the content on their platforms, reveals there are indications that the situation in the current Romanian press is even worse than the pessimistic premises mentioned at the beginning of this study. Practically speaking, there are virtually no more reporters, and in very few cases, somewhere below 10%, the articles are based on information collected directly on the field. There is also a lack of direct contacts with sources, and opportunities for journalists to ask questions to those who have information are rare. During the few occasions in which data is collected by asking direct questions, namely during press conferences, communication is often formal and unidirectional, in the sense that the conferences function rather as an opportunity to promote political parties, organizations, institutions or companies, in order to improve the public presence of some people and also improve their image by presenting various positive aspects. The interaction with human sources is more pronounced in the few cases when the press material has a more pronounced investigative component, or else in reports.

All this highlights an important limit to this research, which has been oriented towards quality media platforms. A future development of the investigation should focus on media organizations that more actively promote popular, sensationalist journalism. Another important area of research is constituted by televisions and radios, the audiovisual still having reporters and cameramen accustomed to collecting their information on the ground.

Most of the current Romanian journalistic and mass-media products are assembled by taking pieces of information from communication products offered by people in the field of public relations on behalf of institutions, organizations or companies, or from posts made in their name on various media platforms (social networks such as Facebook or Twitter). Sources, especially those in institutions, thus manage to control communication and avoid uncomfortable questions from the media. Moreover, and further research should pay more attention to this, many of the communication products made by those who work the field of

public relations often have shortcomings, which raises the question of ethics in this type of communication[18].

The phenomenon of using the data produced by public relations specialists has been around for a long time, but it has only been in the past two years or so, starting with 2020, that it seems to have become a generalized practice, becoming the main source of information for the media. Although posts on various platforms, institutional or personal, make the work of journalists easier, the lack of interaction, especially on sensitive topics, leads to various topics being treated evenly and superficially. Media institutions need to return to the basic principles of journalism, stimulating the discovery of sources of information and direct dialogue with them, including when the sources are difficult.

The analysis of the above-mentioned platforms shows that there is a massive increase in the volume of information, which is also very diversified, thanks to the facilities offered by electronic platforms. Institutions, organizations and companies have communication offices where specialists in public relations who also have qualifications in other fields (economics, psychology, social work, even medicine or engineering) operate, and it is them who provide the general public with information not only by passing through the media, but also in a direct manner, on their own websites or on social media. Thus, the public can access communication products directly on electronic platforms, without needing the mediation of the... media. The content offered directly by the aforementioned bodies is specific to public relations field, so they pass under silence the negative information, in an attempt to not harm the image of the institution. In these circumstances, journalists should ask questions about missing or controversial data, and not use the material provided by the public relations offices, often without any changes whatsoever. This is the linear model of communication, outdated in the age of convergence[19]. In other words, it is necessary to return to the offensive (not aggressive!) role of reporters and editors, able to ask good questions and get essential answers. Only like

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[18] Sandu Frunză, *Ethical communication and social responsibility* (*Comunicare etică şi responsabilitate socială*), Tritonic, Bucharest, 2011.

[19] Uma Narula, *Handbook of Communication Models, Perspectives, Strategies*, New Delhi: Atlantic, 2006, pp. 19-20.

this will (media) organizations be able to find out what is really happening in society and be able to provide the public with complete information and quality journalistic products.

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