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New technology, new professional practices: A study on Romanian news media

Las nuevas tecnologías, nuevas prácticas profesionales: un estudio sobre los medios de comunicación rumanos

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ABSTRACT: The article attempts to determine how the Internet has influenced the work practices of journalists in Romania, using data from a qualitative research, "The professional practices and constraints of the Romanian gatekeepers," conducted between December 2010 and January 2011, involving a sample of 73 journalists from 67 local and national media outlets. The results of this research show that the Internet has become both a guide to public expectations and public criticism of the media. In addition, it also serves as a barometer of news consumption, which guides journalists to create the media agenda. The perverse effects of the introduction of Internet in journalistic practices are considered the creation of the Google reporters and copy-paste and office journalists.

Keywords: The Internet, journalistic practices, public, Romanian gatekeepers.

RESUMEN: Este artículo trata de determinar cómo Internet ha influido en las prácticas de trabajo de los periodistas (especialmente los "gatekeepers"/ editores) en Rumanía, a partir de datos de una investigación cualitativa "Las prácticas profesionales y las limitaciones de los "gatekeepers"/ editores rumanos", realizado entre diciembre 2010 y enero 2011 en una muestra de 73 periodistas de 67 medios de comunicación locales y nacionales. Los resultados de esta investigación muestran que Internet se ha convertido en una guía de las expectativas del público y la crítica pública de los medios de comunicación. Además, también sirve como un barómetro de consumo de noticias, que guía a los periodistas para crear la agenda de los medios de comunicación. Los efectos perversos de la introducción de Internet en las prácticas periodísticas son, entre otros, la creación de periodistas Google y periodistas de copiar y pegar (copy paste), así como periodistas de oficina.

Palabras clave: internet, las prácticas periodísticas, el público, el "gatekeeper" (editor) rumano.

Introduction

That the Internet has altered longstanding patterns in the way the news media function is well documented. Many Western newsrooms were reshaped in the last decade by the Internet and by new, uncertain business models, in turn providing the wherewithal and impetus for the evolution of new journalistic products and practices, such as “aggregation”¹, and the inclusion of the public in the reporting and production of news². Thus, the Internet is not simply a source of information or space for the public debate but has become a platform where the different media products are interwoven, and where the premises for the function of domestic as well as global newsrooms are created by the co-mingling of journalists with media consumers/citizen journalists, resulting in what some have called “participatory” journalism³. By developing the new media, the public has also contributed to the formation of the citizen journalism and open source journalism⁴, and has, arguably, moved itself closer

¹ Aggregation, often amounts to “taking words written by other people, packaging them on your own Web site and harvesting revenue that might otherwise be directed to the originators of the material,” according to KELLER, B., “All the aggregation that’s fit to aggregate,” 2011, last access March 28, 2012 from <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/13/magazine/mag-13lede-t.html>.

² PAVLIK, John V., *Journalism and New Media*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2011; THURMAN, Neil, HERMIDA, Alfred, “Gocha: How newsroom norms are shaping participatory journalism online”, in MONAGHAN, G. and TUNNEY, S. (eds.), *Web journalism: A new form of citizenship*, Sussex Academic Press, Eastbourne, 2010, pp. 46-62; HERMIDA, Alfred, THURMAN, Neil, “A clash of cultures: The integration of user-generated content within professional journalistic frameworks at British newspaper websites”, *Journalism Practice*, vol. 2, n° 3, 2008, pp. 343-356; JENKINS, Henry, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*, MIT Press, Cambridge, 2006; SCOTT, Ben, “A Contemporary History of Digital Journalism”, *Television & New Media*, vol. 6, n° 1, 2005, pp. 89-126; GILMOR, Dan, *We the Media: Grassroots Journalism By the People, For the People*, O’Reilly, New York, 2004.

³ PAULUSSEN, Steven, DOMINGO, David, HEINONE, Ari, SINGER Jane B., QUANDT, Thorsten & VUJNOVIC, Marina, “Citizen participation in online news media: An overview of current developments in four European countries and the United States,” in QUANDT, Thorsten and SCHWEIGER, Wolfgang (eds.), *Journalismus online: Partizipation oder profession?*, Verlag fur Sozialwissenschaften, Wiesbaden, Germany, 2008, pp. 263-283; NIP, Joyce Y.M., “Exploring the Second Phase of Public Journalism”, *Journalism Studies*, vol. 7, n° 2, 2006, pp. 212-236; NGUYEN, An, “Journalists in the Wake of Participatory Publishing”, *Australian Journalism Review*, vol. 28, No. 1, 2006, pp. 47-59; JARVIS, Jeff. “Networked journalism”, 2006, last access November 21, 2011 from <http://www.buzzmachine.com/2006/07/05/networked-journalism>.

⁴ LEWIS, Seth C., KAUFHOLD, Kelly & LASORSA, Dominic L., “Thinking about Citizen Journalism. The Philosophical and Practical Challenges of User-Generated Content for Community Newspapers”, *Journalism Practice*, vol. 4, n° 2, 2010, pp. 163-179; CHANNEL, Amani,

to what Salwen et al. named “informed citizen ideal”⁵, exceeding the position of being an exclusive economical target. From a media consumer, the public was transformed into a network activist producing diverse user-generated contents, while journalists have acquired the role of gate watchers and guides who “direct readers or viewers to information that they may be interested”⁶. Under these conditions, a number of intermediaries have appeared through participation in the information process, such as “*online* news aggregators, *online* news publishers, and mobile news actors”⁷.

So far, most research on the transformation of the media in new technological era has focused on Western *online* media development. Much less attention has been paid to the Internet impact on the professional culture of Central and East European journalists. In this article we have focused attention on Romania because it can serve as an excellent example of achievements, but also of persisting problems in using the Internet as journalists’ working tools. The research presented in this article aims to fill this gap and expand knowledge about this region.

1. *The context*

The rise of the Internet and other communications technologies has influenced the media organizational transformation. First, digitized newsrooms were forced to be more flexible and dynamic, constantly offering new products to attract public attention. According to the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development “[c]ompetition but also partnerships between these new and more established news providers are emerging to redefine value chains, the access to the consumer and how revenues are allocated”⁸. Second, the orientation to the *online* content was a strategic economical step for many editorial offices, particularly newspapers ones, because of the decreasing advertising revenues and the lack of audience caused by the “growing dissatisfaction in the population regarding the news industry’s devotion to profits”⁹

“Gatekeeping and citizen journalism: A qualitative examination of participatory news-gathering”, 2010, last access September 13, 2011 from <http://scholarcommons.usf.edu/etd/1598>.

⁵ SALWEN, Michael B., GARRISON, Bruce, DRISCOLL, Paul D., *Online News and the Public*, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc., London, 2005, p. x.

⁶ CHANNEL, Amani, *op.cit.*, p. 8.

⁷ OECD, *News in the Internet Age: New Trends in News Publishing*, OECD Publishing, 2010, p. 3.

⁸ OECD, *op.cit.*, p. 85.

⁹ ROSEN, *apud* CHANNEL, *op.cit.*, p. 5.

and the increasing *online* media market¹⁰. The majority of the West's major newsrooms have opted to test new *online* business models, some apparently quite profitable¹¹, by reducing their costs by promoting the employees' mobility and by working mostly with the Internet savvy freelance contributors. The disadvantages of this restructuring also quickly became obvious: the establishment of weak organizational culture and significant variations in the quality of journalistic contents. Pavlik¹² explains that "some new media staff don't have strong journalistic credentials [...], and they don't always follow the same standards and practices of journalists found in the newspaper newsroom (i.e., they don't always use multiple sources, they don't rigorously fact check, etc.)".

Facilitating access to information, the Internet has also become one of the most important sources of information used by *online* and offline media journalists. On the one hand, new media enables the journalists to check the information in real time and is claimed to have raised the accuracy of reporting; on the other hand, the Internet contributes to the mechanization of copy-paste journalism. The increased speed of production and dissemination of information, the predominant focus on breaking news and content diversity, has had a detrimental effect on quality with factual and other errors committed even by good-quality *online* media. As Pavlik observes, "[j]ournalists under intense deadline pressure can make errors, sometimes serious ones (ranging from a misspelled name to a major factual error), have little time for fact checking, and can even get a story fundamentally wrong - all for the sake of making a deadline"¹³. In addition, the blurring of boundaries between traditional newsgathering, production and consumption, threaten to undermine one of the central functions of the profession of journalism, the gatekeeping¹⁴. As Lewis et al.¹⁵ claims, with reference to *online* newspapers,

¹⁰ (The) NIELSEN Company, "The Global *Online* Media Landscape. Identifying Opportunities in a Challenging Market", 2009, last access November 15, 2011 from <http://blog.nielsen.com/nielsenwire/wp-content/uploads/2009/04/nielsen-online-global-lanscapefinal.pdf>.

¹¹ KIRCHHOFF, Suzanne M., "The U.S. Newspaper Industry in Transition", Congressional Research Service, 2010, last access November 15, 2011 from <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/misc/R40700.pdf>; GRADIM, Anabela, "Press and profitable news. A business model for *online* newspapers", last access November 15, 2011 from <http://www.bocc.ubi.pt/pag/gradim-anabela-press-profitable-papers-IAMCR.pdf>.

¹² PAVLIK, John V., *op. cit.*, p. 102.

¹³ PAVLIK, John V., *op. cit.*, p. 94.

¹⁴ LEWIS, Seth C. et al., *op. cit.*, pp. 163-179.

¹⁵ LEWIS, Seth C. et al., *op. cit.*, pp. 163-164.

the media has opened its “gates” and Singer¹⁶ writes that journalists are no longer able to control the “gatekeeping channels”. The digitisation of the journalistic profession has taken away the journalists’ power over information and news and, therefore, over their audiences¹⁷ and eliminated what Deuze¹⁸ called “the most fundamental [journalistic] ‘truths’,” such as the right to decide “what publics see, hear and read about the world”.

In Romania, the Internet created a turning point in the post-communist development and diversification of the media landscape, albeit it not until the late 1990s and early 2000s. After 2005, however, the number of media that established an Internet presence and Internet usage in the newsrooms increased with the recognition of benefits that it provides¹⁹: lower production and information and news dissemination costs, and the new media’s attractiveness to large numbers of young consumers. In this second decade of the new century, most of Romanian media²⁰ have *online* editions, and some media that have been forced to abandon their traditional platforms because of the economic crisis²¹, have retained their *online* versions. Basically the Internet has become a complementary channel for distribution of traditional media products, a space where broadcast and printed information and news is posted. Much of the information disseminated propagates the traditional Romanian media’s news values such as sensationalism, triviality and the contents determined by the policies of the media owners and those of the manager-journalists and star journalists. According to Dragomir and Thompson, “[t]he quality of news was never high, and is declining. [...] The media agenda is dominated by

¹⁶ SINGER, Jane B., “The Socially Responsible Existentialist: A Normative Emphasis for Journalists in a New Media Environment”, *Journalism Studies*, vol. 7, n° 1, 2006, pp. 2-18.

¹⁷ SPLICHAL, Slavko, SPARKS, Colin, *Journalists for the 21st Century: Tendencies of Professionalization Among Firstyear Journalism Students in 22 Countries*, Abex Publishing Corporation, Norwood, 1994, p. 37.

¹⁸ DEUZE, Mark, “What Is Journalism? Professional Identity and Ideology of Journalists Reconsidered”, *Journalism*, vol. 6, n° 4, 2005, p. 451.

¹⁹ DRAGOMIR, Marius, THOMPSON, Mark (eds.), *Mapping Digital Media: Romania*, Open Society Foundation, London, 2010.

²⁰ In 2010 in Romania were recorded 1120 broadcasting companies and 1325 publications. Most of the Romanian mass media is concentrated in four media groups such as Adev rul Holding, MediaPro, Realitatea Media, and Intact Media Group. For more information about the number of Romanian media companies see the websites of National Statistics Institute (<http://www.insse.ro>) and National Audiovisual Council (<http://www.cna.ro>).

²¹ From the 36 publications that have disappeared in 2009-2010, less than 20% maintained their *online* version.

what has become known as ‘herd journalism’²². Despite all this, the Internet has brought a diversification of media contents. The rise of several independent news sites and journalistic blogs has forced the traditional media to cover a wider array of topics in order to be competitive. Active Internet users who initiated public debates have also, perhaps indirectly, affected this diversification in the coverage of information and news. After all, in Romania the public’s role is reduced mostly to providing comments on what is disseminated via the Internet. Dragomir and Thompson observe that the “user-generated content features mainly as comments on popular news websites and on independent forums, followed by blogs”²³. In 2010, according to Coman et al. there were some 200 blogs with more than 10,000 unique visitors a month, but they rarely cover politics and serious issues²⁴. Ghinea and Mungiu-Pippidi suggested that blogging “was a trend in 2007-2009” and that the “number of blogs is now decreasing, and twittering appears to be the latest fad”²⁵.

Whatever the truth may be about the increase or decrease in the number of blogs, both the amateur and professional bloggers use the number of comments, “often more important than their content,” to attract advertising who use these comments as a barometer of the bloggers’ success²⁶. This situation has given birth to a phenomenon named the “*online professional commentator*” who is employed to post comments, mostly for political parties²⁷.

The still laggard development of new media by the turn of the century was also a by-product of the reduced number of Internet uses and of low public media literacy. By 2010, 35.5 percent of Romania’s population had access to

²² DRAGOMIR, Marius, THOMPSON, Mark (eds.), *op. cit.*, p. 7.

²³ DRAGOMIR, Marius, THOMPSON, Mark (eds.), *op. cit.*, p. 7.

²⁴ COMAN, Mihai, RADU, Raluca, PREOTEASA, Manuela, PAUN, Mihaela, BADAU, Horea, “Romania: Twenty Years of Professionalization in Journalism – still Counting”, in EBERWEIN, Tobias, FENGLER, Susanne, LAUK, Epp, LEPPIK-BORK, Tanja (eds), *Mapping Media Accountability – in Europe and Beyond*, Herbert von Halem Verlag, Köln, 2011, pp. 142-154.

²⁵ GHINEA, Cristian, MUNGIU-PIPPIDI, Alina, “Media Policies and Regulatory Practices in a Selected Set of European Countries, the EU and the Council of Europe: The Case of Romania”, European Commission Report, October 2010, last access March 29, 2012 from <http://www.mediadem.eliamep.gr/wp-content/uploads/2010/05/Romania.pdf>, p. 16.

²⁶ COMAN, Mihai, et al., *op. cit.*, p. 151.

²⁷ At the beginning of this trend, these commentators were paid by political parties during election campaigns to spread various ideological messages and to activate certain categories of voters. Today the phenomenon has moved into the economic arena. There are dozens of commentators who are hired to post comments to create the feeling that a blog is not only visited, but also create spaces for discussion, a space that influence public opinions. (COMAN, et al., *op. cit.*, p. 151)

the Internet, according to the International Telecommunication Union²⁸, a significant growth from only 3.6 percent in 2000. The Gallup Organization in Romania, in a 2011 study carried out at the request of the National Authority for the Administration and Regulation in Communications (Autoritatea Nationala pentru Administrare si Reglementare in Comunicatii – ANCOM), found that 46 percent of Romania's population has access to the Internet. Whatever the exact percentage of those who have access to the Internet, Romania is still in one of the last places among European Union countries when it comes to the availability of and access to Internet connections²⁹. The Romanian Minister of Communication and Informational Society, Valerian Vreme, has given assurances that ninety percent of areas that do not now have internet connections will have them by 2015³⁰. Most of these users are 15–20 years of age, spend more than 4 hours per day *online*, and consider the Internet the most trusted source of information. It should be noted that they are not necessarily media consumers, but rather social networks users³¹.

2. Research design

2.1. Method and problem statement

This article presents the results of the qualitative research, “The professional practices and constraints of the Romanian gatekeepers”³², which was carried out during December 2010 and January 2011. The research was based on semi-structured interviews with 73 journalists/gatekeepers holding senior positions in the newsrooms of 67 local and national media outlets (11 television channels, 11 radio channels, 33 daily and weekly newspapers, magazines,

²⁸ ITU, “Romania. Internet Usage Stats and Market Report”, 2010, last access March 29, 2012 from <http://www.internetworldstats.com/eu/ro.htm>.

²⁹ Twenty six percent of Western European have access to the Internet, according to Neelie Kroes, vice-president of the European Commission responsible for the Digital Agenda.

³⁰ DORDEA, Alexandra-Livai, “Neelie Kroes: Este inacceptabil ca in Romania, 54% din populatie sa nu aiba acces la Internet”, *Evenimentul Zilei*, 11-07-2011, last access March 28, 2012 from <http://www.evz.ro/detalii/printeaza-articol/stiri/neelie-kroes-este-i...il-ca-in-romania-54-din-populatie-sa-nu7-aiba-acces-la-internet-9.html>.

³¹ DRAGOMIR, Marius, THOMPSON, Mark (eds.), *op. cit.*, p. 6.

³² This work was supported by the strategic grant POSDRU/89/1.5/S/62259, Project title: Applied social, human and political sciences. Postdoctoral training and postdoctoral fellowships in social, human and political sciences”, co-financed by the European Social Fund within the Sectoral Operational Program Human Resources Development 2007-2013.

three news agencies and nine Internet-based media outlets). Some interviews were performed in face-to-face meeting, whereas others were done *via* Messenger. The length of the interviews varied between 25 and 60 minutes. The sample of journalists was selected by the “snowball” method, identifying interest cases from editors-in-chiefs or interviewed journalists. No compensation was provided for participation. The interviews were analyzed by using the procedures of grounded theory, comparison and axial coding

The interview guide covers the gatekeepers’ orientations towards the professional culture of journalists (roles, values, standards, code of ethics, self regulation), professional practices (collection, selection, processing, verification and dissemination of information), the influence of new technologies (especially the Internet) on journalistic work, and the internal and external factors that influence the gatekeepers’ professional activity (public, sources, employers, colleagues, family etc.). This article focuses on those parts of the interviews that address the professional practices and values of gatekeepers, the impact of the Internet on the gatekeepers’ activities, and the public roles in the production of news. Thus, we pose the following research questions: How have the recent evolutions of Romania’s *online* media market modified the professional practices of the journalists in general and of the gatekeepers in the newsrooms in particular? What role in their opinion does the public have in the news production process of offline and *online* media? What are their attitudes about user-generated contents? The point of this study is not to argue that the Internet has influenced the journalists’ work for better or worse but instead to expand our knowledge about how gatekeepers understand the impact of the Internet in their professional practices (gathering, filtering, and reporting the information).

With the rise of the Internet, the ‘gatekeeping’ concept has gained additional significance, because it has extended it from the professional realm to the citizens’ realm via citizen journalists and bloggers³³. In our study the gatekeepers are defined ‘classically’ as media professionals (mostly editors) who select, write, edit, position, schedule, repeat, and negotiate journalistic contents³⁴. They are the filters, the transmitters of the meaning that derives

³³ MICHNIEWICZ, Marta, *Bürgerjournalismus in der digitalen Öffentlichkeit. Die politische Rolle von Blogs in der gegenwertigen Zeit*, Diplomica Verlag GmbH, Hamburg, Germany, 2010.

³⁴ SHOEMAKER, Pamela J., VOS, Tim P., REESE, Stephen D., “Journalists as gatekeepers”, in WAHL-JORGENSEN, Karin, HANITZSCH, Thomas (eds.), *The handbook of journalism studies*, Routledge, New York, London, 2008, p. 73.

from the information that they consider useful, interesting, and beneficial to their audiences³⁵.

2.2. Sample description

Of the 73 gatekeepers-respondents, 48 are men and 34 women with five to 20 years of journalistic experience. The research sought to identify the professional practices and constraints of the gatekeepers of whom twenty-four hold editor-in-chief positions, five are deputy editors-in-chief, one is a desk editor, 41 are editors, and two are (television) program coordinators.

Two thirds of the surveyed journalists are generalists³⁶; their activities are focused on current topics. The other third specializes in issues that correspond to the distinct profiles of their media institutions, be they political, economic, social, sports, or entertainment. Journalists working in the local media are generalists, as are about half of the journalists working with the national media. All gatekeepers in this study spent about 70 percent of their work time making decisions on editorial issues and coordinating their journalistic teams. The rest of the time is assigned to collecting and verifying information, writing and disseminating of journalistic contents.

We should note that this research involves two generations of gatekeepers: the first generation has over 15 years of journalistic experience and was educated mostly in editorial offices, and the second generation is represented by “younger” gatekeepers with an average of eight years of professional experience and a university degree or took university courses in journalism. Seventy five percent of the 1990s generation journalists included in this study have a higher education (35 percent among them in journalism, 65 percent in philology, foreign languages, history, philosophy), compared to 90 percent of young journalists (95 percent in journalism). We identify them as the generations of ‘the 1990s’ and ‘the 2000s’. These clarifications are necessary, because younger journalists have never worked in an editorial office in which there is no Internet available either as an information source or as a platform for their

³⁵ SCHOEMAKER, Pamela J., VOS, Tim P., *Gatekeeping Theory*, Routledge, New York, 2009, pp. 3-5; COMAN, Mihai, *Introducere in sistemul mass-media*, Polirom, Iasi, 1999/2007, p. 253.

³⁶ Only journalists who hold leadership positions and are considered gatekeepers who practice journalism (collect and disseminate information) were chosen. Not all Romanian editors practice journalism. Many have only managerial or administrative positions and, as such, are also gatekeeper but not journalists; they were not included in this study. Thus the differentiation between generalists and those who have specific assignments.

journalism. Consequently, interview guide questions about how the Internet has transformed their journalistic activity are outdated, because they could not compare their experiences with the past. In their case, the questions were related more to how the Internet affects their professional activity and not how the Internet transformed it. In the case of the 1990s generation, professional practices underwent a major change, which enables them to address the evolution or devolution of journalistic activities.

3. Findings

3.1. *The gatekeepers' discourse about the professional practices and values*

The findings suggest that the informational value of news, the subjective, personal skills of journalists and editors, their “flair and intuition,” and editorial policies are the criteria upon which gatekeepers select and disseminate information and news. This co-mingling of objectivity and subjectivity highlights the personalized nature of journalistic practices, which in Romania means that sometimes the journalists’ work is constrained by editorial directives or by personal interests, relegating public interest as a *raison d’etre* to a secondary consideration. To put it another way, the high polarization and personalization of the Romanian media has decreased the public mission of journalists.

According to their own testimony, the gatekeepers act more as if they were owners of information and news rather than responsible stakeholders in the quality and integrity of the news and information product. In these circumstances it is quite difficult to talk about journalistic objectivity, because in this process of journalism some practitioners try to present their own vision of events, and “customize” news by distorting facts. Very often the gatekeepers distribute information to generate conflicts, which in turn becomes news. And if the information available to these gatekeepers does not create conflicts in and of itself, they will massage the information in a way that ultimately creates conflicts. Therefore, the introduction of penalties for slander represents an attempt to reduce the number of fake or specious news reports and journalistic “investigations”. The downside of slander laws is that they have also decreased the number of journalistic investigations in general and, in addition, the fear of lawsuits is forcing the journalists to self-censorship³⁷.

³⁷ According to Article 206 of the Penal Code on the statement or allegation in public, by any means, a fact regarding a person, which if true would expose that person to a penal, admi-

Plagiarism remains one of the unsolved problems in the Romanian media. The practices of the Romanian media include appropriating the news products generated by news agencies or the press releases of various PR departments, and using photographs and other images without crediting their sources. Some journalists use information obtained by colleagues to write their own news articles, without citing the primary/journalistic sources or mentioning the colleague(s) who collected the relevant information. There are Romanian journalists who sabotage their colleagues, preventing them from contacting certain sources or, worse, denigrating them in front of their bosses. Such practices are, speciously, explained by pointing to professional constraints such as deadlines, shortages of technical and financial resources. They also point to restrictive professional rules, standards and procedures that are part of the various codes of conduct that explicitly or implicitly impose a media organization's editorial policy but are not intended to dictate administrative or journalistic behavior, rules on writing or the injection of socio-political attitudes in journalism. Romanian editorial policies consist of administrative directives, which require specific views, directions, and restrictions to be applied to journalism. These policies are intrusions in professional practices and an obvious way to censor the journalists' activity. An eloquent example are the transcripts published in the Romanian press between Sorin Ovidiu Vantu and his employees from media group Realitatea, where the employer and owner explicitly requires journalists to direct the attention to certain issues, to bring certain guests in the studio, to denigrate certain people, and so forth³⁸.

The media outlets' codes of conduct are not made public, although they are often publicly used to justify editorial conflicts, fire journalists for plagiarism, professional incompetence, and explain the need for censorship. Some editorial codes, especially in large media groups, stipulate that the journalists have to go through various competency tests³⁹. These are subjective forms of evaluation that allows employers to fire journalists invoking their incompatibility with the editorial policy or point out professional incompetence. The following quotes from survey participants capture the general attitude:

nistrative or disciplinary, or public contempt is punished by a fine of 2.5 million lei [\$760.000] to 130 million lei [\$40 million].

³⁸ See <http://www.ziare.com/sorin-ovidiu-vantu/stenograme/noi-stenograme-in-dosarul-vintu-este-razboi-cu-basescu-si-cu-gasca-lui-1049815>.

³⁹ See the case of media group Intact: http://economie.hotnews.ro/stiri-media_publicitate-10609943-angajatii-saptamana-financiara-fin-pusi-aleaga-daca-vor-lucreze-continua-re-aceste-publicatii-parte-intact-publishing.htm.

The media have been and will always remain the biggest mass manipulators. The chase after fame can drive the journalists to extreme [behavior]. I cannot deny that the journalists invent news. They invent a lot! But it is inevitable. (G56⁴⁰/ editor private TV channel).

After all, the press reflects reality like a mirror. No mirror is perfect. But a true journalist will never knowingly keeping silent about a fact. Unfortunately, in Romania, as in other countries, there are often two kinds of censorship: one traced to the editorial interests of the media (or their owners) and the other the journalists. (G13/ deputy editor-in-chief).

Implicitly, such less than professional processes are also related to the verification of information. Gatekeepers do not usually verify information sent to them by personal and official sources, a fact commonly blamed on the ebb and flow of information, the absence of possibilities to verify information in a timely fashion, and restrictions to access to information, a highly scrutinized period for the dissemination of journalistic texts, and deadlines. Consequently, gatekeepers often disseminate unintentional falsehoods. Most of them are convinced, however, that the journalism they disseminate is accurate enough to constitute truth, despite the fact that some respondents admitted that they rely on their “sixth sense” or intuition to verify information and blame factual errors on their sources. In other words, based on already known information about a topic they do not make an effort to verify the information, but they believe that, once extracted from a certain context or quoted certain sources, especially official ones, the information is true. For example, when journalists quote a press release, they do not contact the source to verify the information but take the verbatim text and appropriate it as their own. Moreover, when any official makes a defamatory statement against other public figures, journalists do not check the information, but disseminate it without verification⁴¹. Thus all kinds of fallacious, unverified news appears in the Romanian media. In order to protect themselves the journalists hide behind quotations and assume no responsibility for the information they disseminate. On the

⁴⁰ All statements presented in this research are part of the seventy-three interviews with Romanian journalists conducted from December 2010 till January 2011. To differentiate the interviewees’ answers, all the responses were coded according to the order they entered on the interview list.

⁴¹ A brief example of such statements is found in ARMANCA, Brandusa, „Acomodarea cu insultele”, in *Revista 22*, 13-03-2012, last access March 20, 2012 from <http://www.revista22.ro/acomodarea-cu-insultele-13769.html>.

other hand, even when information and news are proven to be inaccurate, there are no professional repercussions.

What creates additional confusion among gatekeepers is the concept of “diversity of opinion.” The gatekeepers surveyed define diversity of opinion as a professional value; it is the defining element of truthful information⁴². In practice, however, some journalists take into account that they are referring to the notion of “pluralism of opinion” only when the editorial policy decisions are incumbent on them, while the decisions are most often reduced to a single opinion. In Romanian newsrooms, pluralism of opinion is determined by editorial policies. If journalists are the ones who make decisions regarding their contents, then they can use pluralism of opinion as a mandatory rule in doing their work. In fact, pluralism of opinion seems more a statement of intention. They also perceive pluralism of opinion as a legitimate result in relation to the monopolization of information sources, because when Romanian journalists define pluralism of opinion, they mean two or three sources of information. Most often, these sources are the same or present the same points of view regardless of the media that give them exposure. Nowadays there is even a monopoly of information sources. This is most visible on television, where the same faces discuss the same various issues. Although pluralistic reflection has become a routine, and the ability to offer different points of view is a normative act, it could still be ignored like any other Romanian media standard. The conflicts between reporter and editor, gatekeepers said, were related to these problems. For instance, one example is that “[i]n Romania the editors are or become those that the employer selects on an informal basis to lead the newspaper and less those that are real professionals or have a certain prestige in the press”⁴³. It can be concluded that in order to promote a media director, institutions need to have informal relationships rather than be professional; otherwise one is doomed to remain forever a reporter or editor. The emergence of the Internet did nothing but to emphasize these practices.

⁴² Romanian journalists do not put a high value on complete or accurate information, because access to information is still hampered by various factors. So they insist that information has to be reliable and true.

⁴³ TUDOREL, Nicolae, *Mass media - organizational constraints and freedoms*, Publishing House of the University of Bucharest, Bucharest, 2008, p. 198.

3.2. *The Internet and journalistic practices*

According to Romanian media gatekeepers, the Internet is concurrently considered a primary and indispensable source of information, a news and information distribution channel and effective resource of communication with the public, and an information tool for disinformation and manipulation, a technology that killed traditional journalistic practices, a platform that has created Google reporters and copy-and-paste and office-bound journalists. The Internet is seen by the survey's respondents as the most effective way of gathering, verifying and disseminating information, elevating speed of producing and distributing information over quality. At the editorial level the worldwide network has become the link between reporters and editors. The reporter can transmit information in real-time to his/her editor, and the latter is capable of instantly giving some direction to the reporter on an editorial direction to a particular story or for dealing with sources of information.

In the case of the younger generation, this Internet represents the fastest, most effective, unique and reliable modality of obtaining and verifying information, and even a facile way of learning journalism outside of formal institutions. These practitioners exclusively promote office-based journalism and develop such occupational practices like plagiarism and copy-paste journalism. For some of them, the return to the old professional practices means a decline in professionalism. In the absence of the Internet, they feel less capable of being competitive and less "professional". One journalist describes how the Internet has "radically" changed the information collection practices:

This is also the reason why we are increasingly confronted with "a copy-paste journalism." Nowadays information comes to you; you do not have to run after it. You just have to be receptive to it and capitalize on it. With the Internet explosion, people do not do much fieldwork. It is sufficient that a news agencies or a newspaper to generate a story for journalists to give new connotations or build up the subject. New media is a valuable addition. You can learn everything about a subject and what has been written about it with a single search on Google and that helps you find similar [materials] on similar subjects. (G48/ editor-in-chief *online* media).

In contrast, the generation of the 1990s sees the Internet as an alternative but not exclusive source of information. These practitioners prefer the networks of sources nurtured over the years to gather the information. In their discourse about their sources, they mention activities such as regular contacts, developing personal relationships, and avoiding prejudicing them. For the '90s generation, direct contact with sources is primordial. They prefer to develop

personal relationships with them to have access to exclusive information. Their basic rule is not to impair this relationship by giving false statements, and inventing or distorting their words. As a result, the worldwide network appears to them as only one of many tools to improve their professional practice. It has largely influenced their professional activities by facilitating communication with the public. After all, for many years the public was, figuratively speaking, unknown to Romanian journalists; the public was a target, but never a client who had interests and needs that must and should be satisfied by media products. The Internet has changed the journalistic perception about the public. The velocity of dissemination of journalistic contents was matched by the speed of public feedbacks. Journalists were pressured to learn to interact with the public. At least at the declarative level, their professional activity is relying on “old” working methods, including fieldwork and contacts sources. One of the gatekeepers surveyed spoke about the negative effects of using the Internet as a *primary* source of information:

The Internet radically changed the gathering of information. The question is whether this is good or bad. First, with the development of the Internet, news flow is extremely high but at the same time not ranked [by its importance] and of poor quality. Thus, many journalists can retrieve false “news.” Secondly, the fact that all sorts of sources can be accessed on the Internet, reduces the exclusivity of the information that a journalist might wish to have. Many people can immediately receive an idea/law/decision/statement [via] a blog, and until a journalist publishes it, it cannot have a news value. Finally, the Internet has become a permanent resource for journalists too. By becoming increasingly more dependent on such a source, they lose contact with reality and with sources. (G60/ editor public TV channel).

Survey participants suggest that the differences between offline and *online* media gatekeeper practices are not substantial. For the offline and *online* media gatekeepers, the Internet is the one big multifunctional editorial office where they can coordinate the activities of their employees, select topics, news and information sources check the received information, establish goals and professional interests, etc. All young respondents and a third of the 90s generation respondents and editors have developed a practice called Google journalism⁴⁴.

⁴⁴ We found this expression in the young journalists’ speeches. They were related to the Google journalism as professional practices based exclusively on information identified on Google.

In practice, the processes of information collection, verification, and editing was carried out exclusively through Google. They take information posted on Google, without verifying it, and present them as their own creations. Such practices are routine, especially for local media gatekeepers. The virtual space is also often used as a tool for sorting true from false information by confronting various sources of information usually inaccessible to journalists or by following the reactions that occur after an event. In the offline media, the information appears only after a thorough sorting process conditioned by the limited broadcasting space or by the reduced number of pages. In contrast, on *online* media all types of information are distributed, without regard to time or space limitations. The Internet is considered ‘Mr. Gates dustbin’ in which unused news is thrown⁴⁵.

The differences between the two generations of gatekeepers are visible not only in the manner in which each adapts to the new technologies, but also in the ways they understand the journalistic profession in general. In order to comprehend how these two distinct generations of gatekeepers have evolved, we should remember that the ‘90s generation practiced journalism during a period of profound, post-communist reforms when journalism was regarded as a liberal occupation and practiced by engineers, teachers, doctors and others who had no specific education in journalism. The editorial office was considered the most effective place to professionalize journalists. It was believed that “many brilliant journalists have never been to a journalism school, whereas quite a few of those who have, do not really make it into this profession”⁴⁶. Talent and innate vocational skills dominates the discourse of the ‘90s generation, which indirectly suggests minimizing any attempt to professionalize and valuing the “professionalization” of amateurism. Any change in the way a journalist became a journalist was seen as an attempt to destabilize the professional activity or to marginalize and remove the old generation of journalists who dominated editorial offices.

In contrast, the 2000s generation is the stepchild of Western-style journalism education in post-Communist Romania. The creation of dozens of journalism schools at the university level has produced visible effects in the professionalization, feminization and rejuvenation of the journalists’ guilds.

⁴⁵ WHITE, David Manning, “The Gate Keeper: A Case Study in the Selection on News”, in BERKOWITZ, Dan, *Social meanings of news*, Sage, London, 1997, pp. 63-71.

⁴⁶ ULMANU, Alexandru-Bradut, “The Romanian Journalism Education Landscape”, in TERZIS, Georgios (ed.), *European Journalism Education*, The University of Chicago Press, 2009, pp. 479-490.

The Romanian practitioners of the 2000s generation claim to adhere to Western journalism model; they wanted, they say, to reconstruct their professional identity in line with Western professional norms and values. These practitioners claim that the values that animate their professionalism include, the public's right to information, unrestricted freedom of the press, protection of human rights, and the struggle against corruption and abuse of power. They appreciate the professional values as objectivity (i.e. accuracy, completeness, credible sources, absence of bias in the reporting or presentation of news and information), fairness, truth, honesty, and credibility. Half of the respondents from the 2000s generation see themselves as watchdogs and teachers who educate the public, opinion leaders and defenders of the citizen /civic rights and freedoms, supporters of social change, and the main suppliers of information.

Although educated in the "ideal" model of journalism, these gatekeepers have never been able to practice this kind of journalism. Various obstacles in developing the journalistic profession (including the older generation's reticence to accept new professional standards), and foreign and domestic (political) pressures and interests have perverted the practice of the journalism they have formally studied. Like their colleagues from the '90s generation, they have been forced to adapt to a working model that is strongly politicized and addicted to economic gains that are ultimately manipulated by political interests. The media's overall survival depends on political interests, which by and large control economic. They often choose to practice journalism in line with the political ideology (and those of its practitioners) that brings financial and professional advantages, political power and social prestige. Any media market transformations, caused for example by ownership changes or political and social alterations that affect the media, such as election or new political coalitions coming to power, bring about changes in editorial contents. They can support, protect and promote a certain political ideology by choosing to cover (or not) certain news stories, selecting certain sources of information, meeting with select officials, choosing to use certain sentences from a politicians' speeches that can be interpreted positively by their backers as positive or by their opponents as negative. An comment on this kind of journalism is offered by Tudorel⁴⁷:

[One] explanation for this finding is that leaders of the new media (in a professional sense) continue to be the same as those who were socialized to and

⁴⁷ TUDOREL, Nicolae, *Mass media - organizational constraints and freedoms*, Publishing House of the University of Bucharest, Bucharest, 2008, p. 211.

practiced in the Communist/authoritarian media model. The young generation of university graduates from specialized institutions has failed to exert sufficient pressure on the older generation who still manage the Romanian press. The resemblance between old and new news-making consists in [the fact] that both in past and present an authoritative press exists that does not seek to] to find out but knows. It does not seek, it decides.

If we are to accept the gatekeepers' answers in the survey and Nicolae Tudorel's conclusions, it could not be argued that there is a major professional conflict between the two generations of journalists. On the contrary, although each generation has its own discourse on the journalistic profession, they cooperate with one another and show a lot of versatility in dealing with the challenges imposed by the media market, by owners and by the political system and its major players. One of the characteristics of the media market in contemporary Romania is that each generation has a niche in which to develop: the 1990s generation is more active in the traditional media and the 2000s in *online* media). Moreover, one of the features that limits the generational difference is that the Romanian journalistic guild is heterogeneous, pragmatic, non-associated professionally and made up of more individualities than professional groups. One of the factors that led to this situation is professional insecurity and journalists 'struggle' to survive in a hostile professional environment. What really matters is the ability of each journalist to resist to editorial constraints. According to Péter Bajomi-Lázár who quoted the chair of the Association of Romanian Journalists, the Romanian journalists can "easily lose their jobs whenever there is a disagreement with their employers"⁴⁸. For this reason their discourse about professional practices and values is a general, undifferentiated, common one. Unable to define the current status of the profession, their activity or professional values, they hide, pro forma, behind journalistic patterns associated with Anglo-Saxon professional standards reflected in various professional codes, studied at Faculties of Journalism or presented by Western experienced professionals. They reproduce without managing to apply these standards. The lack of a reliable professional discourse is caused by a limited representation of journalistic activity. Even for trained journalists this activity is a craft that requires skills and not knowledge, tal-

⁴⁸ BAJOMI-LÁZÁR, Péter, "Romania. A country report for the ERC-funded project on Media and Democracy in Central and Eastern Europe", University of Oxford&The London School of Economics and Political Science, last access September 11, 2011 from <http://mde.politics.ox.ac.uk/>, p. 13.

ent and not professional training, resistance to pressure and not professional solidarity.

3.3. *The Internet and the public*

Compared with the younger generation, the 1990s journalists consider the Internet a less trustworthy source, partly because they see an increasing number of citizens creating journalistic contents. From their point of view, the public should be a passive consumer of journalistic products, because the public is subjective and changeable. These journalists consider that the public is not rational but more emotional, i.e. they change their opinions depending on their states of mind and the journalistic ability to persuade them. The public is not able to discern valuable information from worthless information, according to the gatekeepers, and must accept “the objective information” offered by the professional journalists. In their opinion, the public should have only a minor role in drafting journalistic contents and a major role in their consumption. Even more specifically, they say, the information received from the public is often insufficient to conduct journalistic investigations or to become bona fide news, because it contains a high level of falsehood. From this reductionist perspective, the public is not considered an active participant but rather a passive receiver of journalistic messages. In these circumstances it can be concluded that these gatekeepers do not know their publics and relate to them only in terms of the economic benefits that it can bring for them. As a result, the audience becomes an instrument for achieving organizational objectives, that is, it represents a means to attract publicity and to increase media prestige. The media quality was surpassed by its level of profitability. However, the Romanian media business model is hybrid one. The only profit which it can and is really interested to make is the political one.

The 2000s generation sees the public as a more or less credible potential source of information, one that may participate in all stages of creating the journalistic contents, which creates new questions not only about journalistic practices but also about journalistic ethics⁴⁹. For these gatekeepers, the audience is a barometer of public opinion on the quality of information the media disseminate. The public consumes information and news but also comments, criticizes or supports it. However, even this new generation of gatekeepers

⁴⁹ SPENCE, E.H., Quinn, A., “Information Ethics as a Guide for New Media”, *Journal of Mass Media Ethics*, vol. 23, n° 4, 2008, pp. 264-279.

does not sufficiently know its audiences. Often their contact with the public is reduced to visualizing audiences via by reading comments members of the public make on the Internet or e-mails they receive from them, but most often only count the number of public comments. They usually divide public comments into two categories: positive or negative, for or against an article or its author(s). The comments are directed mainly toward the author of the article in case the author is made public, while in case of an anonymous author the chances for objective comments directed toward the content are much higher. Public comments are not really discussing social problems and are not creating resistance movements or action groups. They are separate points of view which sometimes are not even related to the contents of the article. Obviously, for these gatekeepers it is difficult to measure the general public's reactions. Under these conditions there is a false impression that the audience is active and participatory and that the Internet has made reporters out Romanian citizens. In our interviews, several gatekeepers talked about the public's positive effect on the journalistic contents:

The audience has an important role from several points of view. First, by way of the circulation or the number of articles accessed on the website, and particularly the latter, we can establish what is of interest or not, we find possible mistakes and attempt to correct them for the future. Also, Readers' comments are also very important, primarily because [through them] we construct our idea about our audience, and they are also our best critics, practically those who guide us in our profession. From their comments and emails we find unique ideas for new topics. (G24/ editor private TV channel).

The interviewees declared that their purpose is to change "how things work in society" and to make each individual an active citizen. Concurrently, through their professional demarches, their messages rarely coincide with this intention. The public is associated only with "the audience" and the economic benefits it can bring. From these gatekeepers' discourse, it can be inferred that the public has a minor influence on editorial decisions, even if three quarters of the surveyed journalists declared that they are guided in their decisions by the public interest:

The public has a role, of course. If you think about this process of gate keeping, it [the public] can be seen as a partner because when it buys the newspaper it expresses a selection, a ranking [of newspapers]; that is, it validates you, [the public] has expressed an opinion about your product... It the feedback is that tomorrow you have 100,000 fewer readers, it means there is something wrong and then you have to change something, the

editorial policy, to please the public. I can say that the audience is part of this process every day. (G21/ editor-in-chief quality daily).

Many journalists are indulging in the position of owners of information resources and the public is perceived as a potential client to whom they should sell media products for mere profit. In these circumstances the broad public (and not the fragmented public from various audience rating research) remains unknown to most journalists. More than half of the respondents were confused when they described the public profile in terms of media needs and preferences. One of the gatekeeper even argued that public knowledge is useless, because “the public wants what the journalist offers him\her” (G7/ editor). Their representations about it mostly relies on the stereotype that the press is used by intellectuals, while television and radio are used by the masses. Based on these stereotypes, the media requires certain types of journalistic contents. For instance, the gatekeepers appear to believe that the masses today are more interested in sensational news and less in social, economic or political information.

One of the functions that defines the role of the respondents is entertainment. Because the media have turned into a battleground for audience and for advertising revenues, they proposed demands a new role for gatekeepers as organizers of public leisure time, that is, they pose as agents of the public’s media consumption. The Romanian journalists have easily accepted the role of entertainers. In their search for sensational news they have managed to establish new practices such as inventing facts, using hidden microphones and disseminating personal documents without the consent of sources and others. Under these conditions it is extremely difficult to disassociate the social functions of the journalism from the professional and economic functions of the media. The social mission of journalists has been replaced by the economic function of the media. The journalistic content is channeled to generate economic benefits and is not be determined by the public interests.

4. Conclusion

The professionalization of post-Communist Romanian journalists is an uncertain, unguided, and unfinished process that is inhibited by endogenous and exogenous forces. This reality voids any questions about how the Internet will change the profession and highlights the question of *how it will affect the process of professionalization* in Romania. The Internet, as an outlet for these journalists’ work and as a tool for its evolution, has increased the professionalization

process' problems by (1) delaying the establishment of a bona fide definition of news in the eyes of Romanian audiences, (2) making it easier for journalists to continue their less-than-professional practices, and (3) by increasing the array of money-making vehicles to the detriment of increasing the platforms for socially responsible media.

The study shows that journalists on the whole perceive the Internet to be a guide to public expectations and public criticisms of the media, and a (qualified) barometer of media consumptions. Whether these journalists actually use the Internet as such in practicing their craft, and for purposes of increasing their professionalism, remains a question mark and the subject of future research. Another focus for scholarly research in Romania should include news audiences and whether they are broadening their views of what is news and who can supply such to them.

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