



Romanian local journalism. An increase in sarcasm, allusive speaking and abusive quotes

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Abstract

Local media plays a pivotal role in society. My study could potentially contribute valuable insights into the dynamics of information dissemination and the impact of local media. The examination of the language employed by journalists is providing valuable insights into the nuances of communication within the context of local media. The Romanian written press is torn between the quality of the materials and the struggle for financial survival of Romanian journalists. The situation of the local press in my hometown Arad is representative for the state of the Romanian written and online press as a whole. The traditional model of production, diffusion and reception of printed journalism is currently undergoing a complex reconfiguration. The print media is losing ground to the online press. The online press is also becoming more attractive because of its gratuity. Paying readers of the internet connection can access numerous sites without bothering to buy a press product from the newsstand. Easier access to the online press product, as well as the possibility to intervene anonymously, commenting on various articles posted by journalists, all this led to a decrease in interest in the written press. I will present an up-to-date situation of the local publications, written and online press from Arad, Romania, analyzing some trends that have occurred over time regarding quality of the local journalism. As a method, my study analyzes local Romanian publications¹ in Arad, between 2019 and 2023, following the recurrent trends that appear in writing. I used a qualitative method and my 26 years experience in local mass-media as a guide to better understand the phenomenon. Analyzing language use, my article not only expands the understanding of local media transformation but also sheds light on the crucial role that linguistic choices play in shaping public perception and discourse. We see an increase in sarcasm, allusive speaking, abusive quotes in traditional journalism. Subjectivity is manifested in the written press both at the level of words and their adjective determinations, as well as graphically, by the preference for exclamation marks, inverted comas and numerous suspension points. We can noticed an extension of the colloquial tone in local newspaper due to journalist's desire to be familiar with the reader. Slum expressions win in the press's discourse, as the rudeness of the language attracts the audience.

Keywords: *the quality of local media; unserious speech in print and online; case study Arad; Romania*

1 Online: <https://www.jurnalradean.ro/>; <https://www.aradon.ro/>; <https://www.nyugatijelen.com/>; <https://www.arq.ro/>; <https://specialarad.ro/>; <https://www.ziardearad.ro/>; <https://www.ghidularadean.ro/>; <https://www.independentul.online/>; <https://www.arad24.net/>; <https://tvarad.ro/>; <https://sportularadean.ro/>. Print: Jurnal arădean; Glasul Aradului.

A captive and untrustworthy press

At this point in the analysis of the Romanian local press, we can say that the press has lost credibility. In addition, another important aspect: local press is captured by various local political interests. A few years ago, the journalist saw clearly how a politician is held accountable because of his articles. Today the press text remains without consequences. It's like writing and nothing happens after what you present. This is a demoralizing state for the journalist who also leaves the press boat to jump into the more decent and secure area of public relations or in other fields, such as advertising, web design etc.

In an interview with the journalist Petrisor Obae, in 2009, Cornel Nistorescu, one of the long-standing Romanian written press journalists, drew attention to the fact that Romanian journalism has now become a profession made on mobile and on the net. The impact of writing is minimal, says Nistorescu. It's just "an interesting computer game, but it's not journalism that can move anything":

"The meeting with the net was not a lucid, professional and balanced one. Romanian journalism went online (...) a result that damaged the profession and almost suffocated it".

The Arad local print media lost ground in favor of free online publications, which offered readers the opportunity to comment, under the protection of anonymity, on the various texts published by journalists. The report on the state of the media in Romania, of the Center for Independent Journalism, presents the main problems faced by the Romanian media. The report was based on the responses of 80 journalists from 22 cities in Romania, including Arad, managers, academic professionals, who were interviewed (between September 2019 and February 2020). Here are some pertinent observations, from the report:

"With very few exceptions, the Press in Romania seems trapped in a time tunnel, caught between two fundamental problems that feed each other and make it spin in a vicious circle: the lack of money and the discrediting of the profession. If in 2015 the professionals said that «below that is not possible», the years 2016 - 2019 proved us, with some exceptions, the opposite. In the profession there is a struggle between exhaustion and the feeling of irrelevance, on the one hand, and the conviction that the primary mission of journalism is to inform, to serve the public interest. 'We're too underpaid not to do our job properly, we don't have another reason to stay here,' says a part of the community. 'We are too poorly paid to die on the barricades,' say those who either go to professions that bring more satisfaction or remain in PR domain. (...) If we were to judge by the number of media channels in Romania, the press seems very vivid and very diverse. (...) We see that there is a lack of content with value for the community. (...) The newsrooms have never recovered from the crisis that hit them in 2008 - 2009. Although the advertising market is growing, money is still scarce and goes, in particular, to central television. According to Media Fact Book, the advertising market was estimated, in 2019, at 485 million euros, of which only 12 million were intended for print (for comparison, in 2008, the print advertising market was calculated at 82 million euros)". (Lupu, 2021)

Orlando Toader, one of the two journalists interviewed from Arad, editor-in-chief NewsAr.ro, considered that Romanian local journalists are struggle to survive and to attract advertising from various companies. He believes that if the economy were healthy and the market would function honestly, without underground agreements, journalist can survive: "Journalism no longer succeeds in making its public mission (...) If it were

possible for companies to allocate more money for advertising, then newspapers would automatically have some extra financial support, too. Otherwise, in a city like Arad, it is very difficult, especially if you write about irregularities in the local administration. Companies fear because they don't want to be seen supporting a newspaper that is against the administration. We are lucky, for example we have contracts with advertising agencies in Bucharest, and that's how we manage to support ourselves." (Lupu, 2021:7-8)

Cătălin Moraru, editor-in-chief of the Monitorul de Botoșani, speaks about the "illusion of journalism". "There are a lot of publications, but they only publish press releases, accidents and book launches. They have no content obtained through the work of documenting journalists. This whole situation is very dangerous because it gives the public the illusion of being informed. People are consuming what these "media businesses" offer them. (p.9 in the report)

Adriana Barbu, local journalist at the Jurnal Arădean, believes that: "Journalists are very poorly paid, therefore it is very difficult to write quality journalism, because you always stumble in the thought that you may not be able to manage until the end of the month. And you don't have the same enthusiasm to do things, the same energy." "You are underpaid and you live poorly. Because there is little money, there are few journalists, so you write a lot. You can't specialize in a particular subject, you write about everything (...) quality journalism should mean: A mega-security in what you offer to the public." (p.28 in the report)

At this point, public money entering the media are the most powerful form of control. Journalist Orlando Toader, from Arad, reminds of the government's attempt to limit the independence of journalists: "Things are very simple, especially regarding the local press, where everything is practically about the financial factor. The administrations, the ones who run the administrations, prefer to have a mass media to support with money from the budget through all sorts of actions, through our cultural centers that have appeared in the cities. And then there are discrepancies between the press that wants to remain independent and the journalists who want to do their job the way it should be done. Some journalists do well, some of them live in compromise. And it's pretty hard to deal with things like that". (Lupu, 2021: 51)

The report of the Romanian press speaks openly of a de-professionalization among journalists and of the "temptation" to go to public administration, where wages are two or three times higher, "at least in the local administration". Hannelore Petrovai, journalist from Deva, said in the report that "at this moment, in Hunedoara, there are more journalists in public institutions than in newsrooms". (p. 36 in the report). After journalist Cătălin Tolontan, from newspaper Libertatea, for younger journalists, "the profession has been stripped of shine and attractiveness. This is obvious, because in ten years there have been relatively few young people who are ready or want to get into this job." (Lupu, 2021:39)

Local tendencies in the Romanian press

After December 1989 we are talking about a gradual professionalization of local journalism. The appearance of the Communication faculties in Romania led to new people in the press. Currently, the city of Arad has two universities, which have programs of communication-journalism, the State University, "Aurel Vlaicu", and the private university, "Vasile Goldis", a number of graduates students from the two universities enter the press.

Starting with 1990, the press in Arad changes its status: from a state press, party press, it becomes a free, commercial, tabloid press. The press also changes its ownership structure, so countless publications appeared and died after a few years Elec-

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toral campaigns are favorable times for publications due to advertising paid generously by Romanian parties. The crisis of 2000 affects the structure of the newsrooms and the number of journalists employed. They end up accumulating multiple functions, covering many areas of actuality: political, administrative, culture, economic, police, health etc.

From 2007 and 2008, the local press from Arad is going through a major financial crisis, many publications closed or went exclusively online. Press dissemination is difficult, through postmen subscriptions (through the Romanian Post Office) or through the own distributors of written press publications, which, very frequently, delays the distribution of newspapers to subscribers. They often complain at the editorial office, signaling problems with the distribution of newspapers. The newspaper newstands disappeared one by one, there are only a few available in Arad.

Now, we can also talk now about opportunism, partisanship, mercenary from journalists, who show obedience to employers (who are frequently active politicians) and state structures, who pay advertising to journalists and their publications. In Arad, for example, many representatives of the bankrupt written press saved themselves, jumping into the boat of the state, of the local administration. Journalists have reconverted into councilors of various local politicians or into employees of the City Hall, Arad County Council, the County Cultural Center or the Municipal Culture Center of Arad etc. From there, many journalists are still active in the online press or have broadcasts at the local TV station (TV Arad), where they have as guests their own bosses, those who sign their monthly salary. In these circumstances, objectivity, impartiality, the courage of the journalist to criticize, to signal the wrong are nonexistent.

The local journalistic result is a PR product, an advertisement in which the guest is not disturbed with any difficult questions. All we can see is a story of administrative/political success. Very few Romanian publications have any content obtained through the work of documenting journalists, being simple platforms that distribute ready-made texts by the PR office of various institutions. That is why, frequently, we find the same texts, in local newspapers and in the local online press, with the same titles and the same content, without the slightest intervention of the journalist.

In an ECREA 2022 postconference from 24th of October, organized by University of Beira Interior, Covilhã, Portugal, MediaTrust.Lab – Local Media Lab for Civic Trust and Literacy and LabCom–Communication and Arts, in my intervention about the state of local media, I used a quote from English writer Oscar Wilde: “In the old days, people used the torture chair. Now they have the press”. Under the current conditions of the press, this quote from Oscar Wilde has lost its relevance and remained a beautiful phrase, without any cover in practice. We notice that the Romanian press on paper is gradually dying out, the circulations being destroyed. Newspapers that remain printed on paper also pass their content online and gradually give up complex articles, reports, interviews, surveys, preferring to be news collections. Thus, there is no difference between them and online publications, from which the reader can find his information in real time and at no cost other than those of the paid internet connection. Romanian online publications fail to convince readers to pay for the content offered. Under these harsh conditions, in Arad, only three newspapers appear in the classical formula, printed, one being in Hungarian language: Jurnal Aradean, Glasul Aradului and Nyugati Jelen. They all have online content. On July 24, 2022, the Glasul Aradului newspaper gave up the printed edition. The explanations given by the editors: too high production and distribution costs.

Regarding the quality of the press, professor Jacques Attali (2022) pertinently observed that when the 21st century begins, most newspapers show a predilection “for the show, to the detriment of information and indignation to the detriment of argument. Totally concerned about the competition between them, they don’t see that they are all about to be swept away by digital platforms and social networks.” (Attali, 2022:204) “the economic model of the paper press will be impossible to maintain.” (Attali, 2022:244) The French professor is more optimistic in his predictions about the survival of sports and local newspapers, but also of magazines that will include more complex articles. That is exactly what it is now missing from the local online press. “Some newspapers on paper will survive for a while.” (Attali, 2022:243)

Many of the local journalists I have talked to are aware of their permanent compromise in order to survive. Most of the time they come to cumulate editorial tasks: they document and write articles in various fields, they also end up attracting and actually bringing advertising for the publication, and some of them are involved in PR work for various parties. In their endless pursuit of more readers and of sensationalism, journalists seek the insolent, the strangeness that horrifies, the outrageous events, being tempted to treat the serious information in a soft manner. (Neamțu, 2022:67)

The current situation in local press from Arad

In the years after the fall of the communist regime in 1989, texts sold the newspapers. Today, in the newspaper page the image bites from a text that has become increasingly inconsistent. Established press genres, such as the report, the survey, the review, the chronicle of the book, film, concert, even the interview as a stand-alone genre, no longer exist or appear sporadically.

In the pages of regional publications of Arad, we may observe the preference for news articles. The lack of more complex genres is replaced by the opinion of the journalists. Not in a separate commentary article, editorially, but right inside the news. The information is infused by the subjectivity of the journalist, who wants to write more than a simple briefing about what happened, where, when, how, possibly why. As Barbe (1995:174) noted, we are living in an ironic age, so this state of affairs affects the press that reflects the state of our present society. This is a paradox of the press. The press writing clamors objectivity and neutrality, impartiality. And irony only breaks down these principles of correct writing in the press. The irony is used to signal “rhetorical opposition to the official speech”. (Ghiță, 2000:160)

Local journalists hardly master their subjectivity in their informative articles. The news is filled with journalist’s impulses, sympathies, dislikes. The temptation to give lessons, verdicts in the news is a mistake and it must be avoided. Indignation, sympathy are translated by adjective associations (crime/ aggression is odious/abominable/horrible, unimaginable; a gesture is despicable/ unforgivable etc.). Phrases like: Why, why on earth?; Friends know why!; Hey, O.M.G., Oohh... my god, What about this? are usually presented at the end of the article or inside the news. A simple cultural news story announcing the release of a novel is inflated by the journalist. Confessing that he has not read the book, the journalist is talking about it and try to rate the author. On the same principle, the news with the opening of an exhibition is filled with appreciations toward the painter, the journalist forgetting to provide useful information: where the event takes place, theme of the paintings, who is the painter etc. (see also: Neamtu, 2002:18-57).

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She is nervous became in the newspaper she is pissing herself.

She failed became she screwed up.

She lost her temper became she blew a fuse.

Things are no longer far away, they are at the arse-end of space.

He will not keep quiet became he wouldn't shut his trap.

She is not just stupid, she dumb as a stump.

He will not look at you in confusion, he will be like a calf looking at the new gate.

The politician does not have unusual ideas, he has a weird mind.

She is talking nonsense became she beats about the bush.

I will defend her always became I will defend her till the cow comes home.

<https://sportularadean.ro> - news from local, national and international areas, covering sports.

Analyzing the local online press in Arad we can say that there are no significant differences in the way the information is treated. With a few exceptions (see Special Arad) the online press presents the same news received usually through PR from institutions, without providing opinion articles, interviews, comments or analyzes on the topics treated.

Conclusions

Regarding the quality of journalism, the local press is in a fierce struggle for survival, being preoccupied to pay journalists from one number to another. We noticed an extension of the colloquial tone in local newspaper due to journalist's desire to be familiar with the reader. Slum expressions in online win in the press's discourse, as the rudeness of the language attracts the audience. It seems that slang makes the spoken language more picturesque, expressive and exotic. Professor Mihai Coman, founder of the Faculty of Journalism and Communication Sciences at the University of Bucharest, is convinced that, at the moment, the Romanian press is going through a generational change: "It seems to me that we are dealing with a trend: Generational change. The public, which had some socio-demographic characteristics related to education, age, aspirations even political orientations, is beginning to thin. The new generations that are coming are those of the Internet, which consume much more passive information, watching TV from the armchair. They search for their information online and are not very interested in debates and opinions of specialists, because they are, as they say, each in their bubble. There, on Facebook, Instagram, and other forms of social media, opinions flow and, naturally, choose those they resonate with", explained professor Mihai Coman, in an interview with Gabi Simon for Q Magazine.

The local press in Arad, with rare exceptions, has become an exclusive news provider, some taken exactly in the formula received from PR of various institutions. Thus,

the journalist turned into a copy machine, a fact observed by journalist Florin Negruțiu: “In order to justify his salary, the journalist is forced to produce more and faster, at a line to assemble texts that exclude any initiative and creativity. Thus, online newsrooms are transformed into Chinese factories, in which no more investigations and reports are written, but items are produced per person, through the copy-paste process (...) the journalist does not need «professional training» or «editorial orientation», as long as he is able to operate with the two basic functions of the profession: CTRL-C/Ctrl-V. The de-professionalization of the press is a terrible reality”. The local print media from Arad lost ground in favor of free online publications, which offered readers the opportunity to comment, under the protection of anonymity, on various texts published by journalists. We can notice an increase in sarcasm, a rise of snark, informal speech, allusive speaking, abusive quotes in traditional journalism. The crisis of year 2000 affects the structure of the local newsrooms and the number of journalists employed. They end up accumulating multiple functions, covering many areas of actuality: political, administrative, culture, economic, police, health etc. Under these conditions, the quality of journalism has declined. Online journalists are concerned about the number of click-bites, so often the headlines of the articles are sensational and without any coverage in reality. Journalists have understood that a photograph of a deadly accident is more accessible than the text written about the accident itself. We can speak of a chase for click, and the click-bite came from topics related to abominable crimes, blood, sex or even vulgar words presented in articles. The local press is the mirror of the Arad society from this moment on. The media is under the pressure of advertising, which may or may not come. Romanian local journalists are perceived as working “for someone” rather than belonging to a serious press entity, printed or online. Thus, we can speak at the level of Arad County, of a press rather instrument of influence than a means of correct, free (in)formation of the Romanian public.

We are living in an ironic age, so this state of affairs affects the press that reflects the state of our present society. This is a paradox of the news. The press writing clamors objectivity and neutrality, impartiality, or irony only breaks down these principles of correct writing in the press. In news articles the irony is used to signal rhetorical opposition to the official speech.

The analysis of the local press in Arad after 1990 and until today led me to a conclusion: irony, the rise of sarcasm in writing, the abundance of colloquialisms along with sophisticated language, the choice of exclamations in titles or inside the written text, all are ways to get closer to the reader by choosing a style of writing that is out of the ordinary. I would call it an unconventional style. Out of the desire to be original, to be different, the local journalist chooses this strange style for the Western press, clean, objective, impartial in dealing with news topics.

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