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Tudor VLAD\*  
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## **New Media and Democracy. Introductory Remarks**

Researchers have argued that a true democracy cannot function without freedoms of association, information, and communication. While in the Western countries the consolidation of these characteristics of the society occurred during a long period of time, in the post-communist space the process has been much more compressed. These countries have moved toward democracy in starts and stops, sometimes with regression. The Arab Spring has shown how complex and sometimes dangerous this transition can be and how a successful path in one region might not be an effective model for other parts of the world.

Political science literature suggests that a country becomes a stable democracy by going through four phases. These four stages of societal development have been labeled pretransition, transition, consolidation and stable (or mature). The pretransition stage focuses on societal conditions before the fall of the old regime, while the transition is that moment when the previous regime loses its political power. A state becomes consolidated when the ideals of democracy are understood and embraced, and then it is entirely stable when democracy functions over a longer period of time.

Media experts have emphasized the role of mass media in a democratic society. They have argued that media that are free of interference from government, business or dominant social groups have the ability to support the competitive and participatory elements that define democracy. Free and independent media foster the societal objectives of democracy, a healthy economic system, more cultural dialog and general human development. They also provide citizens with a public forum where they can express their opinions, beliefs and viewpoints to others. The media in a democracy informs, entertains and enriches the life through the profusion of others' ideas, opinions and visions, and it properly informs so that meaningful decisions are made by the public and by the governments. The media provide for an expression of options so meaningful decisions can be made.

An overview of the media evolution in East and Central Europe suggests that media tend to be most supportive of democracy in the early, often euphoric, period after the previous regime has fallen, when journalists, as well as other citizens, are enjoying their newfound freedoms. As the transition process moves toward consolidation, the media as well as the public can become more cynical, particularly in the face of continued political wrangling and the financial pressures of a market economy. While government censorship or influence tend to decrease across time in the democratic consolidation phase, other types of pressure be-

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come equal or more powerful, such as those coming from political and economic groups. In some countries, a process of partial remonopolization of the media has been noticeable, and the ownership of some of these media groups has not been transparent. The hypercompetition in media markets in some emerging democracies (defined as too many media outlets in relatively weak economies) has led to low professionalism of journalists, biased coverage, sensationalism and, as a result, low credibility and a decline in audience appeal.

The new communication technologies and the new media have added more complexity to this already complicated landscape. They have dramatically changed the relationship between those who generate news content and those who have access to and benefit from that content. A huge volume of material is currently produced by non-traditional communicators. The public can better control what and when to read or watch different types of content. Communication has ceased to be unidirectional, as many new media allow and encourage feedback, and many consumers have also become producers. Portable storage devices and other technologies have transformed consumers into programmers. One can say that mass communication in the last thirty years has gone through a process of democratization.

The new technologies and new media have challenged the traditional media, creating a new type of competition for audience attention, for advertising revenue and for content. The established media have lost their exclusive access to the distribution of the information and their exclusive access to content.

Bloggers, citizen or community journalists don't have to observe the professional norms and organizational strategies that journalists working for established media follow. These new communicators can express opinion, can be partizan, and can merge the status of an information provider with the status of an advocate. They can focus on a small community or on specific issues that are not covered by the mainstream media. They can produce debates that are of interest for a narrow group of readers or viewers. As long as these alternative sources of information generate a better informed citizenry, it is a gain for a democratic society.

This revolution in the mass communication landscape has given more power to, but also has created more challenges for, the members of the audiences. Consumers have a vast range of news sources, and making the right option is not always easy. At the same time, the use of social media stimulates a new type of writing and reading that is based on a more limited investment of time and attention. The news consumers in the future might become unable to watch, read or process more complex pieces of information.

One can argue that information distributed via the traditional newspapers, television and radio station still has the advantage of the institutional credibility that the organizations and institutions possess. Even consolidated democracies, however, the economic crisis has affected financially the mainstream media newsrooms. Many journalists have lost their jobs and, as a result, the quality of the coverage has suffered. In authoritarian regimes or in emerging democracies, people often distrusted the established media in the past, and that bias against them continues today. In those cases, social media often become the major source of information during a crisis situation. The Arab Spring and the situation in authoritarian regimes have shown that authorities in those states are suspicious of new and social media and perceive them as a potential danger.

The impact of the new media in emerging and consolidated democracies is a fascinating topic of conversation and area of scholarship. The relationship between the media and political and institutions in society is dynamic. The changes now taking place have altered in an unprecedented way the mass communication landscape and demand that scholars develop new theoretical perspectives to analyze and understand. This volume responds to that demand.

Nicolae URS\*

## The Internet, the Crisis of the Written Press and Why Should We Care

### Abstract

The internet has changed the way people find data. Connected 24/7 to the internet through their mobile phones and tablet computers, this new form of communication is influencing all those that earn their paycheck working with information. It seems that no other area is as affected as journalism in general and, in particular, the printed press. A combination of newspaper's mistakes, technological advances and shifting consumer habits push the once king of the media to the brink of extinction. Media executives around the world are trying to put together a new economic model for the venerable newspaper. Even if they succeed, the media landscape is changed forever.

**Keywords:** Newspapers; printed press crisis; internet; online journalism.

Going from an industrial to an information society has fundamentally altered the way in which information reaches people. The newspaper was the perfect instrument to deliver information to a large number of readers in a reasonable amount of time. It appeared together with the industrial revolution and it borrowed from the attributes of mass production: its content was preset (the same for everybody), it was multiplied in a huge number of copies which were delivered via a complex distribution network throughout a state like area. This type of creation and distribution of the newspaper (the only one available in that period) has led to several of the „unchangeable” rules of journalism (like deadlines or the need to fit texts in a limited amount of space). These rules established hundreds of years ago, are still followed by the printed press because, essentially, nothing has changed in the way information is wrapped and delivered to the readers since 200 years ago. The product (article, newspaper) had to be finished in order to be printed and dispatched.

Radio and Television have taken on mostly the same pattern, dreaded deadline and all, because they are also one directional channels of information transmission, almost never interactive. In the end, a report needs to be finalized before it is aired.

The internet is the first information outlet, following the ancient Greek Agora, which profits off of interactivity. One of the main characteristic of Internet – the fact that it's online, that it's available at all times, that it's always connected – makes the deadline obsolete. The pressure of first publication increases enormously. What this means is that the new disseminators of information (bloggers especially) do not consider their articles finished, and journalism (if we can agree that at least a part of blogs are media) becomes a process which does not deliver a finished good but engages a debate. The process is in this case is the product that bloggers publish, and this process is improved by the contributions of those who participate in the

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debate. In this case the one writing the article supplies the contextual information, the available data and explains what is unknown, by relying on the contributions of the community in order to improve the material. The easiness with which, we can update and complete an article, online, is essential in order for this system to work. Printed newspapers do not have this luxury; once the article is printed it cannot be altered (unless we are in the dystopia society that George Orwell imagined in the novel *1984*).

We may say that traditional journalists see their product as finished while a lot of online bloggers and journalists consider their materials in a perpetually *beta* state. One problem of this transformation is that for thousands of years people have been engaged in seeing a newspaper article as the final version. This habit is applied to articles appeared in online papers or blogs. Kicking that habit will take time.

The arrival of the printed newspaper led to institutionalizing distribution, for it was expensive. Press institutions built a capital of trust, which was different from their main means of achieving and maintaining audience. Once distribution was almost free of charge, because of the internet, a new model of journalism appears, the cooperative one, where trust could be placed not only in an institution, like the *New York Times*), but in the process that allowed the information to be published and verified. There is no blog that can compete against the *New York Times*, but a group of blogs together with a list of people on Twitter, can do so.

## 1. The Death of Newspapers

It seems like the written press was always destined to doom. James Gordon Bennet, founder of the *New York Herald*, stated in 1850 that “newspapers must face their destiny and disappear” (Shannon, 2003, p. vii). This strong affirmation was made under the influence of the telegraph – seen at the time as the next big thing in terms of means of mass communication.

Several times, along the four hundred years’ life span of the written press, have there been predictions about its doom. First there was the telegraph, then the radio, then movie theater news bulletins, after which came television with the appealing moving images that we could watch from the comfort of our own homes.

Once the radio emerged as a means of mass communication, and furthermore, once the US stock market crashed in 1929, the US written press faced a significant (45%) decrease in advertising incomes between 1929 and 1933. Hundreds of newspapers went bankrupt and about a third of all journalists lost their jobs (Emery & Emery, 1978).

Last on the black list of the written press is the internet, and it seems that it is the greatest threat it has had to face so far.

Printed newspapers went through very little change in the last century. If we look at the pages of a newspaper printed in early 20th century, and compare them to those of a recently dated paper, we will find only small differences: a less overwhelming design, and more colorful pictures. As for the content, and the journalistic genres – they are the same as 100 years ago. This is a comforting stability, on the one hand, as a large part of their audience relies on such stability. However, if we take into consideration the latest technical developments, we may wonder whether the written press has not missed some opportunities to transform and to turn the information revolution to its advantage.

In the western countries, the number of issues sold per capita has been constantly decreasing for decades. In France, the sales peak was the year 1950, in Great Britain it was 1957, in



the United States it was 1971, and in Japan it was 1981 (Dunnett, 1988, p. 2). In 2009, for the first time since we have had official data, the number of issues sold globally was dropping. In 2010, the numbers went down even faster (McAthy, 2011). This means that, for the first time, the increasing number of issues sold in developing countries (like China, India, or Latin America) did not cover the decreasing sales in the developed countries (North America, Europe, Australia, and Japan).

Therefore, the written press appears to be in a state of decline out of which we can foresee no exit. Still, this crisis is not generated by a lower audience. The number of printed issues sold is indeed decreasing, but the number of people who read the online editions of the same newspapers is increasing. For instance, in the United States, there was a 4.6% decrease in 2009 in number of written issues sold, but a 16% increase of web viewers the related pages (US Congress Hearing [1], 2010).

## 2. The Falling Number of Journalists

Increased audience does not seem enough to stop – at least in the Western World – the bleeding out of reporters, photographers, and editors who are losing their jobs. According to *PaperCuts.com*, designed to track the evolution of newspaper layoffs in the US written press, between 2007 and 2012, 204 newspapers were closed down and 19 gave up printing issues and turned into online publications. Starting with the same year, 2007, the number of journalists who lost their jobs in the US got to at least 41,344 in August 2012. The number of reporters and editors (people who write the articles, do the field work, and check the truthfulness of information) dropped from 56,900 in 1990 to 40,600 in April 2012 – a decrease of over 28% (Mutter, 2012).

Things look the same in Romania. According to Cristian Godinac, the president of the *MediaSind* Romanian Federation of Journalists, some 6,000 (out of 22,000) journalists lost their jobs (Ștefan, 2011) between 2008 and 2011.

The lower number of journalists is just one side of the story. Those left must now produce more articles, and every one of them must not only cover more stories, but also shape them in different ways, for the digital issues of the papers. In 1999, the Wall Street Journal produced an average of 22,000 articles a year. In 2009, the number had grown to over 40,000, while the number of journalists had dropped down by 13% (Starkman, 2010). The increase in the number of written pieces was also acknowledged by a study conducted on Great Britain's dailies (Lewis, Williams, Franklin, Thomas & Mosdell, 2008) – which stopped at 2006. Besides having to fill the pages of newspapers with articles, journalists are often also responsible for the online editions and the *facebook* and *twitter* updates. Essentially, journalists work on more articles at the same time than they did 5 or 10 years ago. This could easily translate to a more superficial approach on any story, to articles that rely more and more on press releases of different government agencies or private companies, and largely on other articles taken, with slight adjustments, from press agency feeds (Johnson, 2012). When we read an article in our favorite newspaper, even if we are not very familiar with the topic, we usually trust that the journalists did their research well. If we master the topic, and the piece is riddled with gruesome mistakes, our confidence level in that journalist and newspaper suffers a serious blow. Still, we must also bear in mind – not as an excuse, but as mitigating circumstances – that journalists are faced with an overwhelming workload.