

## MASS-MEDIA AND DEMOCRACY IN ROMANIA

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**Abstract:** *Mass-media has an important role in the functioning of a democratic state. It informs the citizens, it assures the space for public debates and educates the public in the spirit of democratic values. There are situations when the press skids from this role, when it becomes an instrument of propaganda, misinformation and manipulation or when, by over mediatisation and by spectacular treatment it changes the character and the sense of the public debate. Some specialists consider that these situations lead to the damage of the principles and of the mechanisms of the democratic life. For others, though, the media revolution brings benefits to democracy, the never seen before rise number of participants in the process of taking decisions.*

**Key words:** *mass-media, media revolution, democracy, public space powerful publicized, citizen.*

The role of mass-media in the democratic life manifests itself daily, as a natural fact, without noise. This represents an action made for the consolidation of the law state and for the defence of the democratic values, for the benefit of all citizens. An action that has as principle informing the people, for them to understand what happens around them and to take the best decisions for their faith and for the community in which they live. Hence, the free affirmation that a democracy without a healthy and professional press cannot exist! But there are situations, not many, in which the media, not only from Romania, but from all the states with democratic regime, skids from its mission, starting to make more propaganda than information, renouncing to impartiality and turning into the partisan of some politic interests and games. And where can they be seen, these skids of the press, then in the moments of social convulsion, when the camps start a dispute, without any reservation, all their arsenal of arguments, but also of accusations and threatening, and when the public debate takes powerful accents. Such events, with a big social and emotional load were last years' "Colectiv" tragedy and the public protests in the Capital and in the big cities, from the beginning of this year, against the two ordinances of justice urgency, one for pardoning the other and for the change of the penal Code. Then, the media chose to participate in the public debate, taking the side of one or of the other of the politic actors, misinforming and manipulating the masses, becoming a powerful pressure factor over the governments. So big was the mass-media's power of influence, that, because of the fear of the public opinion, Ponta government fell (fact that created

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confused murmur in some states with advanced democracy, like France, some journalists and politic people from here being astonished by the fact that a fire provoked the resignation of the premier)! And premier Grindeanu abrogated the pardon orderly. The number of people disrespecting the journalistic deontology during these events has influenced the selection and the way of writing the news (there were chosen only those that corresponded to a special kind of interpreting perspective), the encouragement of only one camp position and the stultification of the other, exaggerated conclusions, aggressive and provoking talk of the moderators and of the invited people (many of them being known opinion leaders, from whom you wouldn't expect such way of behaving), exaggerated populist and nationalist arguments, repeated messages and images, the large number of breaking news, in the end, there has been more emotion than truth, or, at least, verified information). In front of this propagandistic avalanche, what could the citizen possibly do? As always, most citizens have accepted the interpretations of the media, filtered by personal predispositions, and have retrieved the press words and expressions, which they have then used in their discussions. Few were those who looked at the events and the mass-media's reaction with a certain detachment, who informed themselves from more sources and who examined the ideas from the public debate using their own reason.

All this illustrates, again, the characteristics of nowadays new public space, one powerfully publicized, where the press is omnipresent, and, more than this, it configures it (Coman, 2010, p. 5-39). Nothing escapes the press attention, many times the press establishing what is important or not at a certain moment. The media informs the citizens, offers them an interpretation and a perspective of the events, it pushes them to follow a certain cause. But it also educates them, with its possibilities, and, none the less, it amuses them. Thus, it is easy to understand the mass-media influence over the life of citizens, especially over those who do not perceive this influence and did not form personal resistance mechanisms. For many citizens the press is almighty, entering their houses day by day, for some of them, more than 5 hours per day, becoming its captives.

There are aspects of the media revolution, produced firstly by the television (in the 90s of the past century) and continued nowadays by the new media. A revolution that brought, as it always happened, not only positive consequences, but also negative ones, that manifest themselves on many levels: of the citizens, of the society, but also, of the politic life in a state.

"The press-the fourth power" means the place and the role of the press in a democratic state. We say, in a certain manner, because there is not a declared and sealed the hierarchy of powers (legislative, executive, judiciary, media, church, military etc.), the hierarchy being made by the relations between them. In some situations the executive power crosses over the legislative one, the judiciary one over the political one and, sometimes, as it happened in Romania at the second tour of the presidential elections, in 2014 (with the mobilization of the diaspora and from the country), and after the Colectiv event (by the instigation to the revolt against the politicians), the media power surpasses other powers. But the expression "the press- the fourth power" has imposed itself in the collective mentality, after classical studies political science and after her vulgarisation, media being considered the fourth power in the state, after the legislative, executive and judicial power. Much more important than the formal aspect, is the one of the expressions content. The power of the press is given by its condition of power of control form. The supervision and the monitoring of the political system functioning in a democratic state, but also by warning the public about the power excesses (Coman, 2004, p. 173). Not accidentally the press is called the "watchdog of democracy"!

Besides the role of watching the power, the media participates in the political life of a country in other forms too. One of the most important roles is that of informing the public about what happens in the political space. In the news and in the articles appear the parties and the political leader activities, the changes in the management of the institutions, the positions in different political problems, ideas and political programmers. The problem that is put is that the press should treat political subjects as the deontological journalistic norms require, meaning that the press must prove impartiality and objectivity. From this perspective, analysing the situation from the Romanian media, the mass-media audio-visual and the written one, it can be easily seen that the majority of the television channels and newspapers all declare themselves independent, but, in fact, they sustain, less or more certain kinds of political trainings and interests. More indicated would be if the events happened as in England, where on the front page of the publications appears their political orientation, the readers being informed about this detail.

At this moment we arrive at the subject of the press independence. A media institution, if it is sustaining itself by its own activity (by selling the media product and using promotion) it has all the chances to become neutral politically. If the institution isn't autonomous financially, creating its surviving resources, it becomes vulnerable to certain groups of interests and will be obliged to make certain compromises regarding the editorial press. In Romania the situation was more complicated because many of the party leaders have been and still are the owners of television or newspaper.

The influence of mass-media over the course of political events manifests itself also by the journalists, opinion leaders and studio invites commentaries. Using commentaries, the press explains political and social events and it offers them a certain understanding. From the confrontation of the different positions of the press, or sustained in press using a subject that contains opinion currents (pro, against or neutral), and, afterwards, it is formed the public opinion (determined most likely by plastic or synthetic expressions, as the phrase used nowadays "all the politicians are corrupted, to jail with them"). It is easy to be understood that, once it becomes one of the politic actors, with its own interests, the Media will try every time to impose its own themes on the public and citizen agenda, to influence, to detour and to manipulate many times the process of public opinion formation, in its own favour. An illustration of these facts could be found during the protests against the two urgency calls, of pardoning and modifying the penal Code, when it has been obvious the split of the televisions and of the other media, also the electronic one, on the side of the opposition of the power, of the president Klaus Iohannis and of the PSD.

Nevertheless, mass-media puts in scene the public appearance of people in politics. (Coman, 2004, p. 184) The political events and manifestations have an administration, a certain progress, in order to create and promote a pre-established public image, at which participates, also, the press. When they create their communication event, nowadays politicians start from anticipating the way in which the press will present them to the public.

For politicians the relationship with the media is essential. So important has become the communication for the politic person that, it is natural to ask oneself, in the context of the new media space, whether this person isn't more than a communicator (Beciu, 2002, p.11). The present politicians have learned to adapt their communication to the mass communication demands. They are paying attention not only to what they communicate, but also to the way they are doing it. For this reason, it is common for political people to use the services of certain communication specialists, who observe and study all their public appearances. With the help of experts, politicians build an image. They hope to

become more credible, more convincing, and, why not, more seductive. Then, how much truth is there in their image? Sometimes, the difference between their created image and who they are in reality is so large that the citizen asks himself for whom to vote, in the end. Everything takes place also with the mass-media competition, which, without compunction, intervenes in the communication between the political character and the citizen, amplifying or simplifying, depending on the case, underlining or hiding, praising or criticizing the elements of the political speech. Thus, it is not exaggerated the affirmation that media is a big illusionist.

Mass-media is indispensable for the politicians because only with its help can they transmit their political messages to larger masses of voters. There are well targeted messages, to a very well chosen public, carefully constructed and credible, after the rules and after the principle of politic marketing. If they were to resume themselves to only convince the citizens, with true arguments, using this recipe, there wouldn't be much to reproach to political people. But when they are changing the truth, selecting only what is to their advantage from the information, repeating obsessively expressions that manipulate the people, hiding the true nature of events and missing forming, the politicians detach themselves from the democratic spirit and values. The same behaviour is displayed, in certain moments, by some people in the press, taking the role to be undergoing transmitters of political messages, and worse, becoming true mercenaries, who lose from sight the public good and turnaround from the deontology, serving the political scene protagonists.

From the press, through ongoing activities and systematic monitoring and analysis, politicians may perceive the pulse of society and their convulsion, they can grasp the trends of public opinion, what constitutes a premise to seriously good decisions, targeted and grounded about a specific topic subject to a public debate at a time. Having knowledge of the public opinion, political the communicator also determines the most appropriate ways of influencing it, depending on the goals and objectives pursued by him. From this perspective should be perceived the phenomenon of Romanian journalists who choose to become politicians, some of them reaching high positions and titles in the Romanian state by popular vote. There are so many examples of journalists, both from the national press and local, who moved lately on the other side, into the political domain, that one can speak of a social phenomenon. Beyond personal motives, political parties were those that encouraged people in the media to enter, building on the experience and skills of experts in the collection, transmission and manipulation of information.

Politicians have adapted themselves to the changes made recently in the field of media: massive penetration of entertainment, information related to privacy, accessibility easy and inexpensive technological possibilities to achieve in a short time and large spaces very large masses of people and so on. If in the past politics was based on direct contact of the politician / candidate with citizens, achieved through direct meetings, now, if you are not on TV you are not a politician. Nowadays politics is TV and Internet social networks, and if you do not show charisma you are not at all attractive to voters. Because politics today is, above all, a show! We live in a civilization of image and of performance. For this reason, politicians must entertain the public. For many televisions the main criterion taken into account when selecting the guests at the show is to be a show person, and, in this way, they increase the rating of the product and of the press institution. We see politicians on television or in their posts, the familiar stance: planting trees, mowing grass, playing tennis, participating in car racing and so on. We see and how often

simulate television discussion, how quarrelling among themselves, each of them is simply to get from the audience points for the impression. And the audience, in its turn, is drawn into the game, waiting to see who comes out the winner from the apparent serious, but small talk, debate.

Regarded as business, media institution is a factory not only of news, but also of the audience. The bigger is the audience, the bigger are the gains from the direct selling of the products (newspapers, magazines), or from publicity, that are more consistent. Hence we get the hard competition between the press institutions for rating. In their effort to gain readers/ listeners/ television watchers, as many as possible, and to obtain a big profit, the editorial teams lowered little by little the bar of journalistic quality, accepting to offer to the media products with an easy content, marked by entertainment elements. What makes the viewer happy is the golden rule of any television. And if the viewer wants a media show, he gets it! Media offers generously, every day, sensational news, announcements, shocking events egregious scandals, everything except true and verified information, comments that can give them reasons to doubt, documented analysis, reports interesting interviews with people who have something to say, etc. Society, through its representatives, started again to ask itself the questions that the past century thinkers from Frankfurt School asked themselves about the impact that mass media has over the society. Is the press nowadays the negative factor in society? Doesn't it provoke all these states of negative things to the participant democracy? Are they still usable the affirmations that say that individuals have lost their critique, reflexive and participative dimension, transforming themselves from a citizen- individuals into a consuming-individuals, interested in the gain of relaxation and imaginary escape (Coman, 2004, p. 64-66).

Patrick Lecomte, in "Communication, television and Democracy" (Lecomte, 2004), speaks of televised mass communication, which is the focus of media revolution, and the public space of the cathode agora. The French researcher maintains that political communication coverage through a magnifying mirror-cathode screen by reflecting the dramatic or caricatured manner causes a jamming of the conventional codes of the democratic representation. The opinion is shared by R. Barre, who claims that "excessive use of media, the competition of political parties, the tendency of some media means to impose their own views and rhythm, to deal less with the problems, to investigate systematically the hostile or conflicting opinions, the relationship between political power and media, which stands them out from the reality sphere, the exaltation time when the environment starts against the requirement duration that requires any government action or policy, is a serious problem for our democratic society" (Lecomte, 2004, p. 8). The media revolution represents the consequences that are felt beyond doubt in the Romanian political space, including the Colectiv moment and during anti-government and anti-presidential protests of early 2017.

P. Virilio goes further with the critique against the role that the powerfully promoted public space has over the democratic mechanisms. He is condemning "the absolute speed" of light, touched by the electronic techniques of information transmission, which produces an effect of acceleration on the change and on the social interaction incompatible with the functioning of democracy. Democracy, P. Virilio says, involves "going out to others, to discuss, to allow time for reflection and to share responsibility for the decision. When you have no time for sharing responsibility with the inevitable acceleration, democracy is no longer possible. We see clearly the consequences once the cessation of interest policy, this meaning a system of representations and delegations in

total contradiction with telepresence” (Lecomte, 2004, p. 8-9). On the other hand, another specialist in media, D. Wolton, promotes an opposing view. In his view, audio-visual communication is an essential factor of democratization of contemporary societies. “Democracy table says Wolton (Lecomte, 2004, p. 9), is a significant rift in the political history of humanity. Never before have so many people participated in political life expressed and voted in an egalitarian manner. Who besides mass media, including leading television can ensure this equality indispensable exercise of democracy? Television is therefore an obstacle to democracy, but on the contrary, a condition of its exercise”.

There are two entirely different perspectives, but that taken together, give a complete picture of what the presence of generalized mediation has in the current public space, highlighting the process of recoding the symbolic device of politics and democracy.

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