

## THE JOURNALIST - INFORMATION SOURCES RELATIONAL ORGANIZATION: ESSENCE AND OBJECTIVES

Georgeta STEPANOV<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Assoc. Prof. habil. PhD, State University of Moldova, Republic of Moldova  
Corresponding author: Georgeta Stepanov; e-mail: garseni@mail.ru

### Abstract

Relational organization and the journalistic behavior as part of the creation process are dictated by the unpredictable and immediate character of events, by the necessity of an ample and most prompt access to information, which assumes a priority contact with the information sources. Establishment of the relational background and a correct understanding of journalistic behaviors become especially important mainly when the judgements do not derive directly from some normative principles, representing instead a conglomerate of obligations assumed in favor of certain segments of the society.

**Keywords:** *journalist, mass-media, relational background, information sources, professional behavior, relational organization.*

The capacity of establishing informational contacts is an important quality in journalism, the more so that the pluridimensional character of daily reality imposes a complex approach, both from the perspective of the various social, political, economic factors involved, which act concomitantly and transactionally, and from that of the institutions coordinating the evolution of diverse contemporary processes, events, phenomena, and assuring their management. Mass-media treat daily events from several perspectives, laying stress on different aspects of theirs, while the information sources traditionally employed by press are quite varied, being always in direct or tangential relation with the topic under discussion.

To meet their ends, journalists should build up and use a most diverse network of information sources, for example: official and non-official, primary and secondary, direct and indirect, internal and external, physical and human, confidential, anonymous, etc., while the relationing techniques established by journalists

with them differ according to their nature. The diversity of sources, their importance for press materials, the soundness and credibility of the information provided, the extent of their involvement and the interests manifested in relation with the issues under analysis – all these outline different patterns of journalistic behaviors. For each of the above-mentioned categories of sources, journalists display various types of behavior, the treatment of the information received being also different, mainly from the perspective of its credibility.

As known, no general method for gathering information is available in journalism or, documentation, direct observation, the interview – as stages of the process of collecting information – differ from one case to another, depending on the type of event described, as well as on the general training level, knowledge of the issue, style and professional ability of the journalist. The documentation methods are also different, referring mainly to the form of expression and type of material prepared for publication, as well as to the temporal parameter of the event. In cases of unexpected, casual events, documentation is rapidly done, the journalist being entitled to use reserve-sources. "Hot" events require more rapid reflection abilities, leaving no space for a well-grounded documentation. An insufficient documentation renders the journalist more active, more insistent during the very occurrence of the event, for fully exploiting the methods of direct observation and of the interview, applied on the spot.

Relational organization is performed according to the classical scheme of target definition. The target-sources of the journalists may be:

- Social individuals and social groups appearing as main or supporting actors of the event or phenomenon;
- Decisional factors responsible for the adoption of the decisions and laws, for the elaboration of the policies, strategies, plans of social-political and economic actions, etc.;
- The central or local public administration responsible for the practical application of the decisions and realization of the national policies, programs, projects;
- Representatives of civil society;
- National and international experts.

The *journalist - information source* relation is based on the reciprocal confidence between these two actors. The confidence of the source in the fairness of the journalist gets formed in time, constituting a condition for his success. "Gradually, the sources will learn to trust you", so that "the habit of calling or of visiting them on a regular basis, when this is possible, appears as an important practice, similar to that of not disturbing for no reason" (KEEBLE, 2009). The relations established by journalists in their work of approaching reality require various types of professional conduct, directly influenced by the type of sources employed. From this perspective, the relations of journalists with their sources may be symbolically divided into: official and non-official ones.

The non-official sources involve a more relaxed conduct of the journalist, the relations between the two actants being usually informal, spontaneous and frequently paternalistic. They generate such type of behavior-professional attitudes, as the non-official sources are vulnerable both in relation with the decisional factors and with their mates and social group to which they belong, as well as with other community groups coexisting within the same area. The pattern of paternalist conduct assumes, on one side, to approach the mediatized issue from the perspective of the feelings experienced by ordinary people, and, on the other, to protect, when necessary, the actors of the journalistic materials. Protection assumes to avoid publishing of veridic, concrete information which may significantly alter the life of the persons involved and of those around them - family, relatives,

friends, colleagues, etc. Having this in view, in materials reflecting, for example, aspects of criminality in relation with a concrete person, the real name of the protagonist is substituted by a fictitious one. Special attention should be given to the manner of approaching such aspects prior to the moment of the decisions taken by the Court, as some negative characterization of the person involved may affect, on one side, his and his family reputation while, on the other, it may create a certain social attitude and public opinion which, in its turn, may influence the final decision of the instance.

Journalists support and encourage communication of non-official sources by the open character of their actions, declining their professional position and making known, from the beginning, their scope, expectancies and theme of the material they are preparing. Once known that the psychic side of the persons having a certain problem is highly fragile, journalists treat them carefully, initiating any discussion in a friendly and correct manner, explaining that the information they need are very important for solving the problems they are faced with, with beneficial effects for the whole society. In certain situations, the journalist is obliged to warn the sources on the risks they may be exposed to if they unveil their identity as, in many situations, the people who made public their social ideas or political options had been isolated and suffered social repercussions in the communities to which they belong.

Sometimes, from certain reasons, frequently well-grounded (the fear of not being labelled, marginalized, excluded from the community, considered guilty or despised by the society, etc.), this type of sources refuses to communicate with the journalists. Observance of the decision taken by the source of providing or not information, is a principle of social journalism. The right to intimacy and confidentiality to which any subject from this category is entitled will determine the establishment and agreement reached by the interviewed persons on the manner in which the discussion will be organized: "on the record/off the record".

The information offered under confidentiality conditions should not be retransmitted, while

the journalist is obliged to keep hidden its identity – a principle stipulated by all international, national or local deontological codes. Sh. Wheeler asserts that maintaining of confidentiality and of the secret is a general rule, which may be disregarded only if the journalist is prepared to take the risk – namely, to lose the source. "On short term, one may obtain an article, however, on long term, one will lose the confidence and support of a source. If, when working for an important journal, it appears unimportant whether you might meet that person again or not, for a journalist of the local press, where the area of contacts is much narrower, such a conduct is equivalent to a death punishment. More than that, it is a non-professional conduct" (KEEBLE, 2009).

Confidential sources play an important part in the documentation process, they usually provide the so-called "hidden information", which the official sources have, but hesitate to make it public. However, to avoid the risk of making public false or incomplete information, checking of the information obtained from confidential sources is mandatory.

Equally important appear the relations established by journalists with the sources which render them the character of official data. The professional activities of the journalists in relation with certain events, briefings, press conferences, official presentations of projects, programmes, products, etc. type, include official communication and interviewing of the officials at various levels – from press secretaries up to presidents and prime ministers. Obviously, relationing within the official activities is influenced by certain norms and regulations, sometimes extremely rigid, referring to the vestimentary aspect, language, positioning *vs* the officials, the modality of asking questions or the perspective of judging the decision factors. Worth mentioning is that the notion of "place for the press" within the official ceremonies organized is present all over the world.

The institutions of power and the decision factors are of indisputable value to journalists, or, the quality of materials which reflect various aspects of reality depend, to a certain extent, on their opening for the representatives of mass-media and on their availability to provide valuable information, corresponding to the real

situation in the domain. Journalists focus on the programmes and projects elaborated by the officials for improving the state-of-the-art, and also on the concrete actions taken for their implementation and for solving the social problems. The relations established by journalists with the decision factors are of objective nature, being absolutely necessary for the creation process. However, the relation between journalists and the decisional factors has a varied and even ambiguous character.

Between the mass-media and the official sources, whichever the type of social organization within which these two actants live together, there always appear conceptual tensions, generated by a different understanding of the notion of public information and of the effects they produce upon the health condition of the social organism. Principially, the democratic pattern, based on the investition on confidence, assumes that the institutions of the state are obliged to activate in a transparent manner, granting to the journalists free access to information of public interest. The free access of journalists to public information is not a simple constitutional principle, detached or detachable off the general behavioral system of the state, known as determining, at legislative level of the country, a coherent and unitary behavior of the social institutions *versus* the citizen, whichever his representation: at individual level or represented by the mass-media. The idea that these two protagonists are opposers with no reciprocal confidence between them is false. The strategy of alliance is really useful both to the journalist and to the decisional factors, as the former one obtains the information he needs, thus gaining time - as he will not be obliged to look for other documentation sources and possibilities, only to check it, while the latter ones may have confidence in the press, thus reducing any mediatic pressures. Th. Libaert asserts that the journalists who know their interlocutor will show less systematic doubt or even manifest an emotional approach upon the event (LIBAERT, 2008). The journalistic behavior in relation with the decision factors has a permanent, urgent character, derived from the basic activities developed by journalists in this context, namely: monitorization and evaluation of actions.

The *journalist - decision factors* relation is influenced by the standardized reaction of the officials and their reflex of justifying each action and of keeping the public calm. To this end, usually, the decision factors avoid to expose the real situation, providing exclusively data which can by no means affect their image, neither the individual one nor the institution they represent, in general. The sources belonging to this category never refuse to give a direct support to journalists by offering them information, on the contrary, they look for any occasion of contacting them - however the data they provide are not always of quality, or are frequently false. Usually, they prepare their material, "cleaning" it and elaborating it according to the interests of the moment, thus attempting at diverting the attention of journalists from the negative aspects of the situation and at manipulating them, for avoiding some potentially negative reactions from the part of the society, generated by the effects of the journalistic materials. This involves a cautious- insistent journalistic conduct, including, on one side, the insistence of journalists to obtain all information the society is entitled to know about the social issue under discussion, on the other, the permanent checking of the information obtained. "In the relations maintained with the public authorities (...) during the realization of his professional obligations, the journalist has to avoid any relation that might affect his independence or impartiality" (COUNCIL OF EUROPE, 2011).

Worth mentioning in this context is also the relational background of the journalists and spokesmen and of the persons responsible for the relations with the public - persons authorized to provide information about the activities of the institutions representing the power, and also of the decision factors. They appear as important sources in the process of making known the reality to the media, as, on behalf of the institution they represent, they make public the information required by the press. Communicators, similarly with decision makers, have the tendency to calm down any possible agitation and disorders and to justify their actions, which explains the cautious-insistent conduct adopted by journalists.

The collegial relations developed between journalists and communicators are extremely

rare, as the first reflex of spokesmen is of avoiding spreading of the information about the real state of things, whereas journalists, perfectly aware of the interests of the communicators, look for alternative sources, capable of denying or confirming the official data. The refusal of spokesmen of offering complete information makes the journalists to appeal to information from other sources, and, in quite numerous cases, to auto-referential attitudes. Checking of the official information involves its confrontation with the data obtained from alternative, usually non-official, informal sources. Collision between the official and the non-official information can establish the truth, or, it is exactly this moment that the official sources attempt at avoiding, possibly generating conflicts between journalists and communicators, between journalists and decision makers. The confrontation between the journalist and the interviewed person, aiming at provoking the interlocutor for obtaining the information he possesses, but hesitates to make it public, justifies the unexpected questions, quite aggressive in relation with the official sources. Consequently, once accepted that the relations of the sources from this category with the mass-media express certain interests, checking of the information they receive is mandatory.

The *journalist - experts* relation (the latter ones belonging both to the category of official sources and to the non-official ones) assumes a different behavioral and communication attitude. The type of conduct adopted by journalists *versus* the experts, a category usually including public persons or specialists in the field, is a neutral journalistic one. The experts are involved in press materials due to their professional competence, being authorized to intervene in ambiguous situations or in circumstances beyond one's control. The concrete information provided by experts may be used as arguments in press analyses, as a starting point for some ample investigations - from either press or from an alternative source - necessary for checking the data offered by decision makers or spokesmen, etc., whose opinions and comments assure the validity of the information and a higher credibility of the journalistic materials. However, the internal experts affiliated to various institutions of state may be determined to provide a certain

type of data, which would support the information asserted by decision makers. The experts belonging to autochthonous ONGs (non-governmental organizations) may have their own interests in relation with the issue under discussion (for example, of obtaining some financial support or of increasing the existing financing resources), which may also influence the quality of the expertise. More credible appear to be the external expertises, done by external institutions and international companies.

The relational character of the social action shows that the interaction between the journalistic behavior and the conduct of other actors, who become the object of their professional actions, whereas the tactics of relationing with the sources necessary for the mediatization of social reality are highly different. In this way, the official sources may and should be differentiated from the non-official ones. Or, if the non-official sources should be unleashed and predisposed to dialogue, the official ones may be contacted even without a special psychological education, as their mission is exactly that of providing the required information.

The nature of the journalistic conduct depends not only on the types of sources, but also on the individual-psychologic characteristics of the journalist, on one side, and of the interlocutor, on the other: on their psychic condition, on their attitudes and interaction, on the specificity of some moments, etc. Sometimes, from lack of time or from other reasons, journalists do not succeed in adapting their conduct to the new situations, which may provoke misunderstandings or even obstacles in the relations they develop with the sources. The relational background in social journalism has a potentially conflictual nature, due to the variety and diversity of sources - as to their weight, social status, character, temper, informational consistency, etc. This requires journalists' adaptation to the situation, namely a rapid and spontaneous adaptation of the various patterns of conduct, which reduces their behavioral flexibility.

The journalists approaching social issues, for covering as many of their aspects as possible, should examine a maximum number of sources, whichever their type or status. The relational journalist - information sources background

requires from the part of the journalist to adopte an equally ethical and deontological correct behavior, involving the obligation of the journalist to:

- Require permission/authorisation from the part of the person involved or from his legal representatives for gathering information about their private life. Exceptions are only the cases in which the information on one's private life is of public interest or when it affects the capacity of exercising one's public attributions;
- To avert the interlocutor - be he a simple citizen or a public person - upon the realization of recordings. Press investigations are exceptions in this context, however they involve certain risks;
- To make (video, photo) recordings in public locations without the consent of the persons appearing in them, or to consider the presence of a person or his public speeches as belonging to his private life. Consequently, no special permission is necessary;
- To take no (video, photo) recordings in the houses and/or properties of private persons without their permission - with the only exception when the information on one's private life is of public interest or when it affects one's capacity of exercising his public function;
- To make films with persons with high responsibilities or public clerks without their permission.

The role of the journalist is to inform the public on the surrounding reality, which appears as the total number of nuances of the truth. The more numerous will be the aspects of the issue reflected by general and specific details, statistical data, citations of the persons involved, general observations of the journalist, conclusions of the experts, the more authentic and reliable will be the final journalistic product. Journalists realize a sufficiently intimate relation with the sources, capable of generating confidence and, at the same time, of providing information, while remaining sufficiently detached for assuring their objectivity, even in situations in which the truth is not quite favourable for the sources (ŞESTIORINA, 2010).

The semantic, structural, pragmatic variety of the contemporary social-political events and phenomena impose to the journalist maximum mobility and flexibility of his conduct, mainly when mediatization is performed under exceptional conditions, when the attitude of the mass-media, in general, and of journalists, especially, evidences serious psychological, social, professional modifications etc. Such a situation requires from the part of the journalists and of the media institutions the ability to establish various relations and to adopt different lines of conduct, suitable to the moment and to the situation. In this way, journalists create, while also create themselves. Creation makes them establish

relations, elaborate projects, take decisions and select different patterns of conduct, for rendering meaningful their professional actions.

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