

DEONTOLOGICAL HIGHLIGHTS ON THE COVERAGE OF MURDER CASES ON ONLINE PLATFORMS IN THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA

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Abstract

An increasing number of media consumers are accessing daily digital platforms to get informed. In this way, the deontological coordination of media activity in the online environment is becoming more and more pronounced in the eyes of public opinion but also on decision makers. In the reflection of the tragic events with the involvement of minors, it is more insisting on how to reflect these cases than on the coverage of the essence of the event. In this sense, journalists' documentation is often superficial; it does not analyze all causes that generate the problem, the consequences and the social reflex that triggered the event's coverage. The reflection of cases of violence against children should be done with a lot of responsibility, the events should be presented in context, the primary consideration being to treat the social problem itself and not to show the drama of the particular cases.

Keywords: *digital platforms, social violence, murder cases, drama, deontological responsibility, reflection of violence.*

Undoubtedly, the Internet has become a fast and efficient tool for disseminating information in the masses, and an increasing number of media consumers are accessing daily digital platforms to inform them. According to the Internet Traffic and Internet Audience Survey (AITIAS) conducted by the Bureau of Audit of the Circuits and the Internet (BACI) in April 2017, the most visited information sites were: point.md, sputnik.md, protv.md, kp.md, time.md, new.md, diez.md, unimedia.md, realitatea.md (BATI, n.d.). Adaptation to this variety of journalism is achieved quickly enough, driven by this two-way model of the interaction between suppliers and consumers of information, a model that gives users the opportunity to intervene in the information process, but also the opportunity to choose the contents they want to access. Online journalism is more convenient and, in some cases, more accessible. The advantage of this media activity is the speed, but it may well be

that this advantage is also a disadvantage at the same time, there is a risk that journalists will not have enough time to check the sources and to reproduce the facts neutrally and accurately. In this respect, the deontological coordination of media activity in the online environment is becoming more and more pronounced in the eyes of the public opinion, as well as of the decision-makers, as we witness an unprecedented expansion of the media trade. In the daily work of the online press, cohesion is insisted on the realization of its primordial function of informing the public, so that the other functions, including the formative function and the educational function, are valued to a much lesser extent. In this context, the civic role of online media in a law society must be based on both the quality and the accuracy of information provided for the broad and diverse public. We should not overlook the formative press function, as it has a significant impact on society. It is true that journalists are primarily guided by the responsibility to inform about everything that happens, but at the same time it builds models of conduct and thought. The magnitude of the coagulation of information principles insists more on how to reflect the events than on the mediatization of the actual context in which they took place.

Data from a UNICEF Global Report show that Moldova has one of the highest rates of violence among peers. According to this report, our country is ranked third in this classification, preceded by Lithuania and Latvia. The report also states that 39% of children aged 13-15 were participants of at least one interpersonal conflict in 2017 and 35% were harassed at least once in a few months (SPUTNIK, 2018a). Similarly, according to official statistics, 549 women and 45 children in the

Republic of Moldova in 2017 became victims of violence, out of which 15 women and 2 children died (PARLAMENT, 2017). On this channel, the media coverage of cases where children are involved in conflict situations, either as victims or authors of crimes, involves much responsibility, because the journalists have to report real facts about the actual victims without harming those about whom they write and their families. The Constitution of the Republic of Moldova guarantees freedom of expression for all journalists, but the right to enjoy certain freedoms presupposes the assumption of responsibility in the activity performed in the service of society. In a democratic context, freedom and responsibility are in a relationship of interdependence, or, where there is the freedom to choose the means and the techniques of reflecting events, themes, happenings and heroes, the journalist's responsibility stands out for the audience he addresses to, for victims who become heroes of their materials, the strategies used in collecting information, etc.

Even from its beginnings, mass media has manifested and continues to show a constant and special interest for events of an unusual, shocking nature, and the online platforms are no exception. However, the commercial aspect dictates the predilection for publicizing and displaying shocking details of tragic events. In the given context, it is stated that the unfortunate events involving minors and young people are thoroughly squeezed out of the massive informational and not only native, ensuring a broad reflection. Of course, by mediatizing cases where minors and young people become victims of violence, the online press carries out the function of social prevention, as it brings into question the very phenomenon of violence against them, but what drives certain discussions on the subject addressed through this article, aims namely at the discursive ways in which such information is presented to the public. The journalist's Code of Ethics clearly specifies that the journalist is required to show responsibility for the heroes of his materials and to show compassion for people who may be unfavorably affected by the reflection of the event.

In the media coverage of tragic or unfortunate events, it is necessary for the journalist to be very

cautious about the formulations he uses and to show sympathy for casualties in order not to create additional psychological trauma. He must take into account that in situations marked by tragedy, people are particularly vulnerable, especially children, so they have to be treated with much tact and delicacy. An eloquent example that provides an appropriate context to discuss this vector of social responsibility of the journalist serves the article entitled "Details of the 14-year-old girl killed in Straseni. He was beaten with planks and bricks by his friends", published on December 1, 2016, on *deschide.md*. In the material there are photos of the crime scene, especially the place where the girl's body was found, as well as pictures of pieces of bricks and planks that served as weapons for committing the murder. The victim's identity is also revealed and the picture is presented (MAFTEI, 2016). The same tragic event was also reported on another information platform, *point.md*, the title of the material being as follows: "How was the young woman from Straseni killed and who are the suspects" (...), material in which the identity of the victim, is revealed too and the photo of the girl is published (POINT MD, 2016). We must recognize that when a minor is killed, it instantly becomes a resounding case, publicized by most institutions, and the victim's full name appears in the press sooner or later.

In this regard, in the mediatization of these cases, the journalist is obliged to protect the identity of the minors involved, including witnesses, in unfortunate ending events. It is advisable for the journalist to use conventional names and surnames for victims, which he is going to specify in the content of the material. From the desire to present the event in a sensational form, many journalists are aware that the display of the victim's identity favors the identification of relatives and it presents a very serious inconvenience in the psychological recovery process of these people. On the size of public information, attention is given to the subject itself and to the details, the information presented to juveniles in vulnerable situations is not contextualized, often the journalistic documentation is superficial, it does not analyze the trigger causes, the consequences and the social reflex conjugated to the mediatization of

the event. From the desire to be the first to publish such sensational material, journalists often do not have time to sufficiently document and place the information that is not confirmed by the competent authorities at the time of publication. For instance, in the case of the Straseni murder, the deceased was found naked, which has prompted many journalists to assume that she was raped, which was not confirmed by the lawyers. In the context of the aforementioned, it is also noted that journalists, quite frequently, do not classify the information taken from the MAI or the Emergency Hospital or police commissariats, which provide them with documents with specific content, which can be categorized as "Stenograms of details" from events, all the details, sometimes morbid, are provided intact, in order to attribute the materials a shocking and spectacular character. Here's what *sputnik.md* puts in an online material: "Sources from judicial investigation told the agency that he would have suggested to the other participants to kill the girl to get his eyes out, because in his opinion the retina remains the last image seen by man. The witnesses who found Cristina Parhomenco killed claim that she had her eyes out and her faceskinned. The infant was stripped and hidden under a pile of stones and beams in a house under construction right in the center of Straseni." (SPUTNIK, 2017).

The regulation in the field is specified in: The Style Guideline with ethical norms for Journalists (API, n.d.), the Guideline for Good Practices for Media "Violence Against Children: What and How We Report", edited by UNICEF (GUZUN & GUZUN, 2006), the Code of Ethics for Journalists in The Republic of Moldova (2011), and the Law on the protection of minors against the negative impact of information adopted in 2013 (PARLAMENTUL, 2013). Regarding the murder committed in Straseni, where the suspected assassins are 4 minors, aged 13, 15, 16 and 17, *sputnik.md* revealed the identity of one of them before the sentence in this case was made public, violating thus art. (3) of the Law on the Protection of Children against the Influence of Information, which stipulates the following: "In the case of children aged between 16 and 18, under different forms of detention (detained, arrested, detained in the penitentiary); who are

suspected, accused, convicted or convicted of committing criminal offenses in criminal proceedings, either in the case of child victims or witnesses of physical, psychological or sexual abuse, they may appear in audiovisual programs if the following conditions are cumulatively met: a) written consent of the child; b) measures have been taken to protect the identity of the child" (PARLAMENTUL, 2013). So the journalists should have protected the image of the convicted boys because they were aged 16-18 years and there was no written agreement from them. Thus, *sputnik.md* managed to obtain exclusive images from Chisinau International Airport, where the 17-year-old teenager from Straseni, one of four suspected murderers of the minor Cristina Parhomenco, was extradited on the evening of January 11th. He was brought to the country with a regular flight from Istanbul. The young man was detained by the Hungarian authorities on the 6th December as he tried to cross the Romanian border to Hungary (SPUTNIK, 2017).

The regulatory acts mentioned above expressly stipulate that the journalist should not place events in a context of sensation to impress and shock the public. In the same context, it is required to specify that the presence of morbid details in the material should always be editorially justified. It is avoided "free of violence" that is not significant for the subject's fable, so the journalist should avoid the use of verbal expressions in order to amplify the dramatic events. In this regard, we refer to another material published on *sputnik.md* on May 20th, 2018, entitled "Terrible: Here it is who is and how the girl slaughtered and abandoned in Gratiati looks like" (SPUTNIK, 2018b).

The 20-year-old girl had disappeared on May 13th, a week before her body was found. The mom and aunt of the girl posted an ad on facebook about the girl's disappearance and her photo, respectively. Subsequently, the internet users identified the victim, and *sputnik.md* took over the information on the social networking site, making the victim's identity public. At the same time, all the actions taken by the assassin are specified in the material content: "... he would keep the body in the apartment for 24 hours. In the end, he decided to dismember her so he could take her

out of the house so he would not be a suspect. Without any remorse, ... he then took a taxi and went to the region of Gratieti village. There he got rid of the chopped body ... " (SPUTNIK, 2018b). These details are not suggestive of the logic of the subject, but, definitely, it will psychologically prejudice those who lecture the material, especially the girl's close ones.

In publicizing this case and *publika.md* bet on a spectacular presentation of the facts, we can even talk about a certain uselessness in presenting the details of the crime. As an example, we can serve the material entitled "The macabre discovery on the border of the lake of the village of Gratieti. The Body of a Girl Found in a Bag," posted online on May 19th, 2018. From a worker who found the bag: "It was closed. We opened it and just saw the hand or foot, I do not know what it was there. It is cut in pieces, more precisely in small pieces, because it would not fit otherwise in that bag ... " (PUBLIKA, 2018). Another example is the material placed on *prime.md* at with the title "Awful Crime in a place in Telenesti district. A girl, only five months old, was killed with a sickle by her own grandfather, "from which we quote the following:" When she returned home at noon, the woman found her baby in a puddle of blood ... "(PRIME, 2018a).

On the same footing, we believe that when producing materials that belong to the informative genre, it is advisable for the journalist to refrain from assigning qualifications to events or actions. Such cases are very common, here are just a few examples: "horrible crime", "terrible crime" and so on. In our opinion, both the type of material (excluding the subjective exposure of the journalist) and the editorial logic suggest that it is more reasonable for the victims or witnesses themselves to give an appreciation to the events or actions made by the actors. Such expressions appear in the titles of the material, written in capital letters: "AWFUL Crime in the Criuleni district. A man MURDERED his concubine and buried her in his own garden ", placed on *prime.md* on June 11th, 2018 (PRIME, 2018b), or "AWFUL Crime in a place in Telenesti district. A little girl for only five months old was killed with a sickle of her own grandfather " (PRIME, 2018a) or "TERRIBLE Details. Who was the woman who was killed, put in a bag and thrown into a tumbrel

at Buiucani, "published on *protv.md* on March 15th, 2018 (PROTV, 2018).

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, the tragic events must be reflected with a lot of tact and responsibility, the events should be presented in context, first and foremost being the presentation of the phenomenon itself, of the the social problem, and not the dramatization of the particular cases. It coagulates the need to strengthen the habits of journalists to accurately document and mediate cases with empathy and equidistance in presenting the factual material. On the social responsibility vector, it is imperative that online journalism stops displaying shocking titles and dramatic exposure to particular details, but opts for a reflection that does not disturb the public, but shapes its general perception of social phenomena.

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