

JOURNALISM - BETWEEN UTOPIA AND PANDEMIC DYSTOPIA

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic led to dramatic mutations for all humanity. On the one side, the house, used in general to restore the forces of the human being, individually or in family (group), suddenly expanded its role as a temporary small station in a social continuum. On the other hand, the entire social universe collapsed inside the four walls of the house, which has become job, school, playground, fitness hall etc. The present study analyses the changes that took place in the media world after the outbreak of epidemics, because journalists are the only foreigners accepted in a house in which not even all family members are allowed. The mission of the guard dog of democracy seems to have been abandoned. The old values are quickly forgotten and, and the empire of the fear disseminated by the press (consistently sponsored by governments), the most important media channels now focus, with a few exceptions, only on the health of the society. A noble ideal but one that, objectively, should represent the preoccupation of specialised institutions. The idea that the press abandons its position as the fourth power in the state and that it accepts to be the speaking trumpet of the executive power is therefore induced. Is this just a subjective perception or is it a reality? Because, if things really are like this, in this way one could draw the conclusion the media shifts from the utopia of power in the state (I have proved in other papers that it is only a tool of the power) and it takes another decisive step towards the dystopia promoted in recent years until exacerbation. This time, there is the pretext of the pandemic. Which pretext will there be tomorrow?

Keywords: *journalism, pandemic dystopia, culture of fear, skeptron.*

Just one year ago, mankind was intrigued by the evolution of the disease caused by the new coronavirus. The haunting insistence with which all television channels broadcasted images from Wuhan was striking, as if these images came from science-fiction movies. People in nuclear war suits were running through the deserted streets of the gigantic metropolis, hunting down the people who continued to ignore the authorities' self-isolation instructions. No one could believe that in just two days' time this horrible image was to become a planetary one.

As for September 11, 2001, clairvoyant minds predicted the end of one world and the birth of another, a completely different one. A paradigm shift had begun.

The house - a permanent life environment

The most radical anti-COVID measure adopted by almost the entire world was home isolation. The house suddenly became the entire human universe: the reality of every moment, the dreams, the hopes and even the future. As in a war when you have to get into the shelter. Just that, if in military confrontations we speak about a very short-term refugee, in the case of the attack of the new coronavirus, the house became for the vast majority of people the only living environment. The house, which up to COVID-19 was only a place to relax and recharge the batteries, usually during the night, suddenly turned into the place where the entire existence was concentrated 24/7. Time stopped. Because the individual has a real tendency to relax, at the beginning work or school at home seemed amusing and they were received even as advantages. The dramatism of the new situation occurred at the same time with the separation from the loved ones. Even parents and children were not allowed to stay together, the only foreigners allowed between the four walls of the house were the television and the form of artificial intelligence that each person afforded. The key to this "prolonging" was the presence of electricity which fundamentally marked the modern habitat. It created "the four markers" describer by James Baumlin: the massive transhance from village to city, the creation of an urbanized and industrialised habitat, the development of transport and communication networks (BAUMLIN, 2020). This is the human landscape that COVID-19 infected the old Gheea

with, as a warning that posthumanism is not merely a word. As it was expected, most of its victims were townsmen. There, in urban overcrowdings, most infections and deaths occurred. Therefore, in such human conglomerates, home isolation was considered the only and the most rewarding solution to stop the spread of the virus that many perceived as one of the non-human partners that the individual of the future will be forced to accept: "the virus literally transformed the urban spaces, recovering them for himself." (BAUMLIN, 2020)

In order for this disposition to be accepted there was also a need for something incredible, even for the military confrontations. If during wartime any defeatist message may get you in front of the military court, the COVID pandemic became the strategic playground for defeatism. Allowed to circulate by itself, the information which generated panic represented the mechanisms with the help of which the authorities succeeded in this unprecedented transformation. Fear became the official protection tool against the disease. "Panic is a key psychological state of postmodern culture," we deal with an authentic "culture of fear" in which "we live on the brink of ecstasy and fear" (KROKER et al., 1989). How can one secretly induce such a feeling without anyone being accused of this intrusion in the intimate life of everyone? Without the help of the press, the only foreigner who was allowed to enter in every habitat, at any time of the day, the population would not have accepted home isolation. But can the press be incriminated for something like this after centuries in which it was seen as "the guard dog of democracy," especially since we speak about the suppression of some inalienable human freedoms: the freedom of movement and the freedom of expression?

In order to better understand the mechanisms behind his amazing and almost impossible to accept action we start from the signification of the Greek word *skeptron* that Homer regarded as "the attribute of the king, of heralds, of messengers, of judges and of all the people [...] invested with authority" (BOURDIEU, 1991).

The sceptre of the modern world which every people listens to with religiosity is no one and nothing else than the media (Baumlin și Meyer,

2020). The reference to the first testimony of John the Baptist in the Holy Gospel of John, "In the beginning there was the Word, and the Word was with God ..." is superfluous. "While the camera records the visual presence of a loudspeaker (as it is the case with the institutions which assumed the role of protecting the whole society), the microphone nowadays replaces the *skeptron*" (BAUMLIN & MEYER, 2018).

The confirmation also comes from Bourdieu who, in his 1991 paper, shows that essence of management is centred on the authority of being listened to. In contemporary media, Bourdieu localises the material-technological-cultural symbols of the *sceptre-microphone authority*: "The multitude of microphones, cameras, journalists and photographs is similar to Homer's *skeptron* ... a visible manifestation of hearing the orator, of his credit, of social importance of his deeds and words. The photograph – which, through recording, makes it eternal – has as effect ... the sacralisation of the outstanding deeds of the political ritual" (BOURDIEU, 1991).

Aware of the force of the sceptre embodied by the press, during time authorities tried to maximize the benefits of this power. In our opinion, the "guard dog of democracy" label represented the most refined manifestation form of this power.

One of the most important moments was the well-known Watergate case in which the press posed in the great artisan of the dismissal of President Richard Nixon. But the aureole of the fourth power in the state proved nothing more than an illusion. If we are accepted to use the journalistic language in a scientific research, we could say that the coup de grace for the so-called watch dog of democracy was the deed of the old American securest Mark Felt, who continued to head FBI after the death of Edgar Hoover (IOAN, 2017). Sometime before his own death, Felt recognized the fact that he had used *the sceptre-press* in something that conspiracy theorists might see as "a deep state" action, meant to compromise and remove the illegitimate president Richard Nixon, a classic coup on the ground of the world's most powerful democracy (O'CONNOR, 2005).

Up to 1989, the communist *skeptron* in Romania allowed the press to broadcast only

positive information, reflecting a beautiful, good and hard-working society, and the seldom negative news was used to correct some behavioural deviations. The subsequent changes generated the illusion of a desired freedom of expression. The hope that the media will truly be *vox populi*, that through it the slippage of communist power will be avoided, that the wishes of each will reach the ears of the rulers faster than through the party secretary, it proved futile. After that moment, the Western news slogan appeared: *no news, good news!* Everything that takes place in the Romanian society is negative, bad, dangerous and even catastrophic. No code of ethics is in force. Its force is limitless. It even possesses the power of the judge to decide what is right and what is wrong, who is fair and who is corrupt. From a dystopic perspective: anybody who seems to be good is, in fact, an executioner.

More than one decade ago, I have showed how fatal the influence that the daily bombardment with negative news is for every individual and for the society as a whole. Of course, journalists are not the only ones responsible for this deformed perception. But, they did nothing to try and change it. The desire to be read or followed (and the pursuit of money) was more powerful. This adds to the suspicion that the media broadcasts kind of unorthodox information. The feeling amplified exponentially in recent years and now the public perceives this situation as an authentic phenomenon. The appearance of some heads of the special services (GHEORGHIU, 2015) who confirmed the presence of undercover officers among journalists eliminated any doubt and delayed the feeling that we live in the era of the great conspiracies.

Going beyond the legal duties and the intelligent services' mixture in the affairs of the states' institutions (ROGOJAN, 2017) was signaled even more recently when civil society accused them that they control the strategic centers of the national internet network (NICOLAE, 2018). This information gains incredible significance in understanding infodemia that the Romanian society is confronted with starting from the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic.

But the dystopia goes even deeper through the upsetting media messages of some important

corporations which belong to foreign powers. According to some analysis present last year, four media organisations belong to foreign states: *RFI (France), Deutsche Welle (Germany), Radio Free Europe (USA), Sputnik (Russia)*. The well-known "Severin's list" from the 1990s, which spoke about the existence of some journalists and of other influence factors belonging to some foreign powers seems hilarious today (SIMIONESCU, 2020). Democracy allows their activity in the foreground. No one and nothing can taunt them for the fact that the information they disseminate is closely connected to the interests of other states. There are also some media institutions directly connected to the secular power of other states: *Ziare.com, PRO TV, Vice.com and Kanal D*. At the level of the Romanian press there are also alliances, such as the Swiss-Austrian partnership *Rise Project*. There are however some press organs which support the business communities of different countries: *Newsweek and Pressone, Europa FM* or the newspapers *Libertatea and Gazeta Sporturilor*. Placed on the strong positions of the power actors behind them, journalists no longer bother to maintain the appearance of equidistance and promote insistently or, as the case may be, react whenever the interests of the entities they represent could be affected.

Pandemic dystopia

The paradigm shift took place after the World Health Organisation officially announced the coronavirus pandemic. This was on March 11, 2020 and conspiracy theory lovers noticed the coincidence with the Madrid terrorist attacks, attacks also connected with the first terrorist coup on the land of the American democracy (CBC, 2020). As global measures collided with the principles of democracy, the Romanian authorities tried to attract *the skeptron* – press on their side. Therefore, after 30 years of fierce competition and economic fragility, the government finally noticed the precarious living conditions of the Romanian press. In order not to attract too many commentaries, the Executive placed its goodwill under the mask of the anti-COVID fight. The investment amounted to more than 40 million euro in four months (ARMANCA, 2020). For "the consonance" of the media chorus one of "the juiciest" parts was offered to the

opposition (PANTAZI, 2021). The government's list also included some publications which belong to foreign media organisations that, if they had lacked funding, they would surely not have stayed to struggle for the public from other countries. Therefore, the Romanian press turned into supporters of the authorities, supporting completely the decisions issued by The Strategic Communication Group. Caught between "the carrot" of help and "the stick" of the National Audiovisual Council, the media did not tire to broadcast endless lists of tested, infected and dead people, without checking the consistency of the information. The situation is understandable as long as the journalists have neither the training nor the time necessary to verify the accuracy of the data obtained. Even more so since the situation is not clear even to specialists.

Ed Wassermann, the dean of the Journalism University School in UC Berkeley stated that: "you look at a press complex, which is probably 40% lower than a generation ago, when it comes to field reporters able to approach a difficult story" (Bashor, 2020).

Despite all this, the public's trust in the media remains constant, according to the specialists from Columbia University (NATIVIDAD, 2020). Unfortunately, they claim, the infodemic impact of disinformation has extremely damageable sequels and it jeopardises the anti-pandemic measures (BASHOR, 2020).

One of the first consequences of both the online and offline information excess is an extreme polarization of the society, whether we speak about Romania, France, Italy, the United States or any other country of the world. As it is normal, in the name of the freedom of opinion, the press broadcasts extremely diverse information. People are extremely divided, their opinions are built on fragile fundamentals, devoid of content. Specialists say they are more and more convinced many years from now on will be necessary in order to rebuild the cohesion of the society.

Information was intentionally falsified in order to trick the public, destabilize trust in public institution or in order to obtain economic benefits through advertising. According to professor Deirdre K. Mulligan, from the UC Berkley School of Information, the most relevant

example of misinformation are the tweets of President Donald Trump which undermined the trust in science, medicine and governmental institutions. For Baumlin, the significations of these attitudes are much more profound. He notices here the abuses of partisan press and of politics exerted with the help of *the spectre-microphone*. We speak about an attempt to silence the health experts who had an *ethos*, meaning a moral physiognomy of the society which would have opposed to the partisanship if it had the freedom to speak and enough time on the podium (BAUMLIN, 2020).

But this is not the only case of this sort since the Brazilian President, Jair Bolsonaro, also created a similar situation. Right from the beginning of the sanitary crisis, even after he got sick, Bolsonaro relativized the seriousness of the pandemic and questioned the efficiency of the anti-COVID vaccine, claiming that he was against the isolation measures imposed by the governors of the Brazilian states and insisting on the necessity of not blocking the national economy (DIGI24, 2020a). In fact, the two examples, just like many others, only managed to increase the fear of the public.

In brackets being said, the contradictory information regarding the seriousness of the affections triggered by COVID-19 were also present in Romania. The statements made by President Klaus Iohannis are well-known. At the beginning of the pandemic, he stated that we deal with a simple cold and one year later he noticed that the number of victims is too high (PECHEANU, 2020, HOTNEWS, 2020). More significant is the change of opinion of a specialist, Dr Adrian Steinu-Cercel, the manager of the "Matei Bals" Institute of Infectious Diseases. In February 2020 he claimed that the new coronavirus is 10 times weaker than the flu virus and one month later he became one of the main supporters of isolation (DIGI24, 2020b). This phenomenon perpetuated throughout the previous year when well-known personalities of the medical world continued to broadcast reassuring information as opposed to the information presented by The Strategic Communication Group.

The responsibility for the dystopia created does not solely belong to politicians, claims

professor Hany Farid. He says that from the beginning of the pandemic “*the social media companies are the ones who created the ingredients for COVID misinformation and the conspiracy landscape that we are confronted with today*” (BASHOR, 2020). Farid considers that media actors have few or no editorial standards and that they systematically promote a conspirative content, as this attracts more advertising viewers than the other information.

Today, the situation is even more complicated because social networks have an unignorable power of dissemination. While the media has some standards that it has to uphold, the socialising platforms are only concerned with protecting their own interests and not the accuracy of the news. In an attempt to diminish the jamming of disinformation and manipulation, specialists even created a series of algorithms able to filter the real from the false information from the electronic environment. They were also tested by Facebook during the days prior to the November 3 elections. But, according to Farid, the public massively migrated towards unfiltered information sources and this is why Facebook went back to the misinformation fluxes or to errors. “*Crazy things ... the most outrageous, conspiratorial things are good for business.*” Can the society oppose to the dystopia that we are subjected to? Can we force socialisation companies to give up incomplete or even fake news?

Experts consider that we have very few tools that we dispose of. The owner has a socialising network that he uses in his own interest or as long as it does not demand any payment from users. Therefore, the tools that could make socialising companies more responsible for misinformation or manipulation are extremely few.

According to professor Farid, users cannot exert pressures since we, the beneficiaries, “*we are the client, we are the product*” that Facebook actually sells to advertising companies. And even if some advertising agents have boycotted Facebook at the beginning of the pandemic, the company continued to record huge profits.

On the other hand, state authorities can also not intervene in favour of a decent communication, as long as the legislation takes socialising services out of the sphere of information suppliers and, therefore, they cannot be accused of slender.

But, a complete dissociation between the official press and the socialisation networks cannot be performed as long as the advertising interests permanently interlace.

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