THE IMPLICATIONS OF THE ONLINE PRESS IN THE ELECTORAL CAMPAIGN FOR THE 2020 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS

Ludmila RUSNAC[1]

[1]Assist. Prof., PhD, Moldova State University, Chişinau, Romania
Corresponding author: Ludmila Rusnac; e-mail:liudarusnac@gmail.com

Abstract

During the election campaign, the media considerably expands its audience. Reported to the press, the main tools used in the election campaign are: election advertising, debates, opinion polls and election news. Of these, the election news represents the favourite of the online press. During the election period, the news is very important, because through it the electorate is informed about the activity of politicians, their behaviour is monitored, some political subjects are slandered and others are brought to light. In the Republic of Moldova, the ethical-legal basis is very vulnerable, compared to this media segment, because there are no legal provisions for this type of media activity. It is this "vulnerability" which, unhindered by anyone, can play the game of power.

Keywords: *online press, electoral campaign, presidential elections.*

The theme of the media influence on the electoral process is extremely up to date in the Republic of Moldova as we witness a political situation which is highly unstable and is marked by a pronounced and continuous political migration. Undoubtedly, the means of mass communication play a huge role in shaping public opinion, especially today, when the implications of the media have become much more complex. Technology development largely increased the opportunities of the press under the aspect of information and directed the press towards the online environment, the last decade being marked by the massive appearance of news portals and sites which represent the online variant of the traditional press institutions. Even if many researchers still hesitate to regard the online information means as mass-media, we have to acknowledge that they achieve the same functions as the traditional press: information, persuasion, socialization, education and entertainment. The strengths is that the online press does not require the same amount of investment and that it offers citizens the possibility to become information broadcasters and therefore they themselves can influence, to a larger or smaller extent, the public opinion.

In the online environment messages instantaneously, with the help of a single click, reach all parts of the world and they are not limited by space or time. Access to information is completely simplified and therefore the public is daily confronted with a huge flux of information and it is becoming more and more difficult for it to select the quality information. This process becomes even more obvious during the periods of electoral campaign, when the media considerably enlarges its auditory. People want to be informed and up to date with everything that takes place in the political environment, in order to fully aware exert their constitutional right. Both politicians and the media are very much aware of the fact that the poll can be influenced and manipulated through the messages spread in the public space and therefore various manipulation techniques are employed. In his article entitled "The voting behaviour between rational and symbolic," researcher Claudiu Coman largely describes the concept of electoral behaviour and the factors which direct it, the significance of the media being highlighted as crucial in this process (COMAN, 2008). Therefore, as strange as it might sound, the political environment cannot imagine life without mass-media. The press represents the main tool of the political power or, as the one who has information has power, there are politicians who own press institutions as well as press institutions which are politically partisan. However, the role of the media in the political environment is not only focused on the bidirectional transmission of information (from the resources of power to the poll and the other way round), but also on the

selection, analysis and interpretation of the information broadcasted by politicians, in order to direct the poll towards a vision, platform or political actor and even to clearly manipulate public opinion. The media can create successful politicians in the eye of the poll or it can completely destroy the image of politicians. In this context, we refer to the sayings of researcher Dale Carnegie who stated the following: "mass-media collects the truths and the lies that we use to analyse social and political realities. Our attitude towards problems and phenomena, our approach regarding to the meaning of a problem of phenomenon, is largely predetermined by the ones who direct the means of mass information" (CARNEGIE, 2017). Since successful campaigns do not only refer to the presentation of a structured and persuasive message, with an activity plan appealing to the poll, but they also appear as authentic shows in which the behaviour, the dress code, the gestures, the tone of voice, the reaction to stress or even the private life are presented, without the help of the press no candidate can promote itself and cannot gain the trust of the poll. Referring to the press, the main tools used in an election campaign are: electoral advertising, debates, surveys and the electoral news. Among these, the electoral news in the favourite of the online press. During the electoral period, the electoral news is very important because it informs the public about the activity of politicians, it monitors their behaviour, it slanders some political subjects and it sheds light on others. There are voters who do not have time to watch the political debates or to read the analytical materials presented. Mostly, voters form their opinions based on the news they read. This is why news represent for many media institutions the main promotion tool for political interests or views. The following techniques are usually employed in the manipulation process:

- *Placing news on sites in a suggestive order (*news in which the favoured candidate is placed in a positive context have a more powerful effect if it follows news in which the political opponent is placed in a negative context*)*;
- *The language and tonality of news (*they suggest, create associations and trigger emotions in an unconscious manner*)*;
- *The selection of quotes* (the breaking from the context of those mentioned by the candidates, may disadvantage them);
- *The fragmented presentation information* (this reduces the impact and significance of the message);
- *Pictures* (an unsuccessful picture has a greater impact than some news in which a politician is presented in a negative context);
- *The production or distorting of facts* (opinions and assumptions are presented as facts in order to advantage or disadvantage a certain candidate);
- *The hiding or the selective presentation of information* (negative information are hidden regarding the candidate or, on the contrary, only the negative information is presented or certain candidates in general do not enter the interest sphere of the press institutions);
- *Repeating* (information is offered as patterns which activate existing stereotypes. Through excessive repetition information is grounded in the subconscious and therefore the desired ideas are promoted, certain political actors can be promoted or "disqualified," certain political views can be emphasized or disregarded);
- *Placement in a sensational context* (the sensational headlines are the first to be assimilated);
- *The selective approach of the political realities (*stemming from the interests of the editorial office and its political affiliation*)*. Therefore, press institutions "present an interest both in the strategy of the use of resources and in the selection of information that is to be presented to the public, triggering political implications unavoidable to the information flux and amplifying the significance of the selection process" (MORARU, 1998).

According to article 69 of the Electoral Code of the Republic of Moldova, which reflects the general principles regarding the presentation of elections in the mass information means:

1. The written means of mass information founded by public authorities are obliged to respect the equity, responsibility, balance and impartiality principles in reflecting elections;
2. The written means of mass information are obliged to offer equal, indiscriminatory conditions for electoral advertising

3. The means of mass information are not allowed to offer privileged treatments to electoral competitors;
4. The means of mass information have the right to reflect elections and to inform the public about all electoral aspects without the interference of any public authority, competitor, electoral candidate or of other entities (PARLAMENT, 1997).

At the same time, the main principles of press behaviour presented in normative documents refer to:

✓ Equity (the press institution is obliged to ensure everyone the possibility to be visible in the public space);
✓ Impartiality (the mass information means is obliged to treat all competitors in an objective manner, without favouring certain parties or politicians);
✓ Objectivity (the media institution is obliged to make a clear difference between facts and opinions);
✓ Balance (the media institution is obliged to present the facts about the electoral competitors in a balanced manner)
✓ Transparency (the media institution is obliged to ensure free access to public interest information) (CONSILIULDEPRESA, 2019).

Despite all this, we have to state that in the Republic of Moldova there is no body responsible for monitoring the contents presented by the online press. Moreover, the ethical and legal basis is highly vulnerable in regard to this press segment, as there are no legal provisions for this type of media activity. This vulnerability is exploited by numerous online media platforms which can play the game of power. As the media expert Ion Bunduchi stated during the public debates entitled: "About old and new habits of the 2020 electoral process, presented by the press and the old and new habits of the press presented by the electoral process", organised by the IPN Press Agency: "… in this electoral campaign, a major part of dirt passed over this segment, where no one cannot do anything" (IPN, 2020).

In order to understand the implications of online press portals in the electoral campaign regarding the November 16, 2020 presidential elections, what behavioural relationships were sketched by the political elites, and also in order to establish whether or not they were equidistant and impartial we undertook a quantitative-qualitative analysis of the materials published on various press sites, between 02.10.2020 – 13.10.2020. We selected the following three press portals: unimedia.info, newsmaker.md and actualități.md. Since our intention was to compare the presentation and interpretation manner of political facts, in the selection process we opted for sites which present different political views: oriented towards the West, oriented towards the East and a site which in time proved to be more or less equidistant. It is known that actualități.md is a portal which favours Igor Dodon, the former president of the Republic of Moldova, newsmaker.md clearly manifests European views and unimedia.info neutrally presents the political events. We mention that eight competitors took part in the presidential elections and as a first observation we notice that even though the press institutions had to ensure a balance in the presentation of each candidate, we noticed that the media, including the online press, focused mainly on three candidates: Igor Dodon, Maia Sandu and Renato Usatâi.

For example, the portal newsmaker.md adopted a balanced politic in the media coverage of the election campaign and it was equidistant in presenting facts. Referring to the types of journalistic materials published, they were mostly news, with few comments, analysis materials, opinion materials and interviews with electoral candidates. This is basically the most significant problem of online press, which mainly focuses on short materials, mostly news, information which can be constantly updated in a continuous flux. Longer materials require more time to be read and that is why they continue to represent the joker of written press.

Journalistic contents mostly presented the following subjects: the electoral process, the statements of the candidates, the organisation of the presidential elections in pandemic circumstances. At the same time, issues belonging to the political, social, economic, cultural or health fields were briefly presented in an electoral context, alongside the activity of the government, of the ministries, of other state structures and of the local public administrations. Also, in the case

of the newsmaker.md portal we noticed a balanced presentation the candidates and the presence of a second opinion in the news in which a candidate was presented in an unfavourable manner. Under a quantitative aspect, newsmaker.md published 168 materials during this period, which mostly referred to Igor Dodon and Maia Sandu, the candidates with the highest odds of winning the elections. From the total number of materials, we identified 5 in which Maia Sandu appeared in a bad light and 9 in which her political opponent, Igor Dodon was presented in an unfavourable context. Therefore, under the aspect of impartiality and equidistance, newsmaker recorded some very good results in this electoral campaign.

Unlike newsmaker.md, the news portal actualități.info ensured exclusive visibility to Igor Dodon, whom it most often quoted and presented in most cases in a positive or neutral context. At the same time, the acting president of the Republic of Moldova, Maia Sandu, was presented only in a negative context. Under a quantitative aspect, actualități.md published during the monitored period 82 news about 82 Igor Dodon, 68 about Maia Sandu and only 4 news about Renato Usatâi, all 4 placing him in a negative context. Also, we noticed a series of materials in which information was presented in a sensational context (an aspect visible from the headlines) and Dodon's opponents were mocked, the facts were unilaterally presented, we even noticed some discriminatory messages as well as some hate speech messages. For example, there were messages which emphasized the fact that Maia Sandu has a frail body, she has a certain age and she is still not able to have a family, the idea being that if she is not capable of managing her personal life, she will surely not be able to properly manage the country. We offer some examples of headlines: "Sandu's government covered a criminal Romanian deputy," "One of Maia Sandu's deputies involved in stealing the billion," "Maia Sandu used the image of a clergyman in the election campaign," "Maia Sandu is supported by a huge media network financed by Soros," "Sandu does not know the citizens of the Republic of Moldova or the Romanian language," "Maia SAndu is afraid: there will be no debates," "Renato Usatâi

betrayed his voters for the sake of Maia Sandu," "Nobody can stop Maia Sandu to falsify the elections, using "bags".

Speaking about the unimedia.info portal, Igor Dodon was most often presented in a positive context and Maia Sandu in a neutral context, being disadvantaged in a larger number of news than Igor Dodon. During the monitoring period, the unimedia.md portal published 144 materials about the electoral process. 7 of them presented Maia Sandu in a negative context and 3 of them presents Dodon in a negative context. All the other materials are equidistant and balanced.

Another aspect which, in our view, negatively influences the fair relationship between the press institution and its public refers to combining news with opinions. Here we do not refer to the opinions of experts, quoted in news, but in the subjective presentations of journalism in itself. Although it does no longer represent a premiere, the mixture between facts and opinions is unacceptable in news. Here the opinion of the journalist is completely missing, but he can express his personal opinions in opinion materials. As the media expert Petru Macovei also notices, "we have opinions instead of news or combinations between facts and opinions and therefore people can no longer realize what each information refers to. There are many attempts of presenting opponents in a negative context. In journalism, facts and opinions have to be presented separately. Opinions are also very important, but people have to be able to draw their own conclusions according to what they read, and not to what others try to put in their minds" (STIRI.MD, 2020).

In the above-mentioned context, the political views of the media institutions should not be reflected in the broadcasted journalistic material. Even if every press institution has its own political view, the journalist's code of ethics does not allow a subjective and bias reflection of information. It is not in vain that experts in the field qualify election campaigns as tests of democracy. The ones who write about politics have to possess a high political culture, they have to be able enough not to play the game of the different political forces and they should not represent some mere tools that can be guided by someone from behind. The paradigm of media

quality depends on the political culture of media institutions, the civic position, the professional training as well as on the moral qualities of the journalists working in the media institution.

References

CARNEGIE, D. (2017) *The Art of Public Speaking*. Mineola, New York: Dover Publications Inc.

COMAN, C. (2008) Voting behavior between rational and symbolic [in Romanian]. In: *Journal of Research and Social Intervention*. 21, pp.46-56.

CONSILIULDEPRESA (2019) *The deontological code of the journalist from the Republic of Moldova* [in Romanian]. Available from: https://www.consiliuldepresa.md/upload/codul-deontologic-al-jurnalistului-din-republica-moldova-2019pdf-5cdd488de6e4c.pdf [22 January 2021].

IPN (2020) *Ion Bunduchi, about the behavior of the press in the elections* [in Romanian]. Available at: https://www.ipn.md/ro/ion-bunduchi-despre-comportamentul-presei-in-alegeri-8004_1077207.html [22 January 2021].

MORARU, V. (1998) *The message and impact of information* [in Romanian]. Chişinău: CCRE „Presa".

PARLAMENT (1997) *Electoral Code of the Republic of Moldova no. 1381-XIII of 21.11.1997* [in Romanian]. Available from: http://parlament.md/CadrulLegal/Codulelectoral/tabid/153/language/ro-RO/Default.aspx [17 January 2021].

STIRI.MD (2020) *Petru Macovei: Most fakes are on social networks* [in Romanian]. Available at: https://www.ipn.md/ro/ion-bunduchi-despre-comportamentul-presei-in-alegeri-8004_1077207.html [17 January 2021].