NEW MEDIA AND THE CHANGES IN THE COMMUNICATION PARADIGM

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Abstract: The emergence of the new digital platforms, a diversified number of approaches and providers cannot damage too much a rather crowded info sphere. What may come as a general challenge is the "performance" amateurs who have the devices, the will but not the skills to become reliable communicators. Good training and an expanded concern for the accuracy of messages should distinguish between fact and fiction and between information and opinion. The smart phone, the iPod, the lap top or the tablet have expanded the means of communication. They have also diversified the types of messages circulated. The traditional main stream media outlets are facing a mounting competition from the social networks populated with the folk journalists, albeit, non-professionals. Basic training of all those willing to come into the communication ring and regulations that may concern not only the professionals but also the amateurs, may be ways to get over what seems to be a deadlock.

Key words: produsers, communication, digital platforms, folk journalism

1.1. The emergence of social networks

It is hard to tell, nowadays, whether journalistic production is developing faster than ever, since a standard rhythm of change does not exist for the rather short journey of journalism compared to the long human experience through time.

It is obvious, nevertheless, that change is bulldozing what has seemed, until recently, well-set patterns of rules of communication through the media. In the new environment of urgency, of breaking news and news alerts the media, and television in particular, had to adjust, to respond to new challenges. The pace of novelties and the growing demands of an audience already familiar with many of the television conventions pressed producers and reporters to act quickly and to maintain the interest for their products at the highest level. Unfortunately, professional performance has not always been the rule of the day, especially when accountants had to come in first and wave their reports in front of the media outlets owners.

A first and major change in the communication paradigm was the emergence of social networks that expanded at a dazzling pace, once the new digital platforms could connect anyone, anywhere. Their accessibility and their power of penetration into every group or community, of broadcasting the most interesting messages has been an accomplishment never dreamt of before even by the most imaginative sci-fi writers.

The info sphere has been flooded with new communicators who have the devices to spread their messages world wide, be they truthful or biased, opinions or information.

The main stream media had to follow suit and to react quickly to the unexpected challenge. Millions of picture-taking devices mushroomed out of the blue, and almost

any event from any unexpected place was being circulated on the Internet with the speed of light, outside the professional ring of picture gatherers and recorders.

Quite possibly, things will not stay as hectic as they look now for very much time. Rigor and order may come sooner or later to set things straight in the huge amount of information brought into the public sphere by professionals and amateurs, alike.

1.2. New media or new platforms?

There still remains a matter of concern and that is the way paradigmatic changes are viewed by users, and, mainly, by researchers. And here comes first the terminology developed from the new facts of life, primarily the so-called new media. So-called, because the term started to be circulated in the late 1980s to describe means, rather than meanings. In 1988 Williams, Rice and Rogers pointed out, from the very first page of their research, that what had already been adapted as mew media did not replace the older media, supplementing the latter by providing communication services, where and when they were most needed by the public.

> "When we use the term <<new media>>, we are referring to technologies of telecommunication and computing, new user devices (e.g. videodisc machines) and their practical applications in office, home, business, health, or educational environments"(Williams, 1988 : XI.).

Two things come to the forefront in a definition issued more than two decades ago: a connection of the term "new media" to technology that was about to take off with the new digital signal and to abandon the analogue one. Such a huge jump ahead on the engineering scale has definitely transformed communication techniques and has given a new meaning to messages conveyed in print, via audio or audio-video devices.

Second comes the very accurate description of the new media devices as tools that could not and will not change the message itself. They improved dramatically the speed and expanded the reception area of news and opinions, but in no way did they alter the essence of the message or the idea that originated it.

1.3. Ideas versus tools

We come to the point where a distinction must be made between ideas contained and conveyed by old and new devices, ideas that do not change with the shift from analogue to digital, and the tools professional and amateur citizen journalists have at the tips of their fingers once iPods, lap tops, tablets and smart phones are more and more accessible to more and more people.

Now new practices and procedures fall with unpredictable outcome over different media soils and they adapt or are rejected, according to local cultures and communicational habits. That has been a major concern ever since optic fiber, satellites and the new digital platforms started to facilitate instant communication links among almost all humans.

As Servaes and Malikhao remarked,

"modern mass media and alternative or parallel network of folk media or interpersonal communication channels are not usually exclusive by definition… They are more effective if appropriately used in an integrated fashion, according to the needs and constraints of the local context. The modern mass media having been mechanically transplanted from abroad into Third World societies enjoy varying and limited rates of penetration"(Servaes and Malikhao, 2004: 10).

At this stage, a major paradigm change should be highlighted, and that is the parallel networks. Some distinctions come out as self-defining. For one thing, the main stream media provide and follow their own routines, their set of rules and their professional values.

1.4. Mimetic practices in Romanian television production

In Romania, there are at least 15 national television channels. Three of them are public, while all the others are private and commercial. The only television programmes provider operating under a specific law is the national public television, Televiziunea Română, TVR (The Romanian Television), the only Romanian television station that is also a member of the Eurovision. Its management is rated as a service of public interest accountable to the national Parliament, which must endorse the annual financial and editorial report during a joint session of thee two chambers. In case the report is repealed, a new managerial team and a new administration board are selected along political guidelines.

Statesmen and leaders from the left and the right political parties were aware of the importance the public television had, following the "live coverage of the Romanian revolution" at the end of December 1989. Henceforth, a number of provisions, decrees and orders were produced in the attempt to establish its legal status as a public service. First came a populist decree no. 109 in 1990 that set out higher payment levels for journalists and all the other employees, followed by a decree-law 139 of the same year, which stated emphatically that

"the activity of the Romanian Radio television (the two institutions merged for a while, but went separate ways from 1991 onwards) is protected by law against any interference from the state power and administration, from any influence of any [political] party, any socio-political groups, national or foreign groups of pressure"(Damian, 2004: 240).

The new organic law, adopted in 1994 to enforce the principles and the functions of the public television service, stated in Article 3 the autonomy of the Romanian Television. The good and bad thing, at the same time, was that it was an organic law and any changes or its complete overhaul had to be supported by at least two thirds of all the parliament members. The new Act proclaimed that,

"by its entire activity [the Romanian Television] has the obligation to ensure pluralism, the freedom of expression, of ideas and opinions, the free flow of information for the public opinion"(Law 41, 1999: 20).

This did not mean, in the least, that it was free from interference and political bias, mainly under the pressure from the governing party. Once censorship officially abolished, it was usually up to the management of the company and of the news

department to interpret the provisions of the law to fit best the interests of those in power. Some political cleansing was performed by the centre right coalition that won the elections at the end of 1996, although many of the Western governments had initially hailed its victory at the polls as the first democratic, peaceful change of guard since the fall of communism.

1.5. Commercial versus public television stations

Things were a bit different for the commercial stations. Their owners and financiers had more or less obvious connections to the circle of political power and played their cars accordingly, serving the interests of their own kin and criticizing their opponents. Otherwise it was business as usual. Every now and then, a programme may have been sanctioned for inaccurate or improper storytelling by the National Council for Audio-visual, but that did not amount to too much. Fact is that, in the private television business, there were and still are no definite laws to protect reporters, producers and engineers and their jobs as there are no regulations for editorial, financial or artistic operations of such stations.

Under such asymmetrical constraints, public channels have to face a mounting competition from the commercial ones, without the major financial resources that the latter draw from abundant advertising.

Yet, private and public channels in Romania jumped at the opportunities offered by the new digital platforms and they focused mainly on the interactivity between producers and the audience. A dramatic lack of experience led commercial channels to borrow or even copy the format of successful foreign programmes, starting with the breaking news and ending with infotainment. A mechanical transplant of popular shows like "Who wants to be a millionaire?" enjoyed some audience for a while, to end up in oblivion after a season or less.

A lack of perspective and of an original input for the news programmes has led to a similar approach for the topics of great public interest where, paradoxically, the dailies steered the pack in finding interesting and relevant stories, while television reporters and correspondents only followed up on printed stories that seemed promising.

1.6. Professional and non-professional news providers

One reason for such a state of things is the editing huge gap between licensed journalists and the requirements and the actual performance of the newly hired graduates from university journalism departments. While the public channels still had the will and scope to offer newcomers training and opportunities on the job, commercial channels recruited new arrivals to perform to the best of their ability from day one. Producers and directors did not seem to have the time or the will to coach promising beginners into becoming fully fledged professionals in two, three or even more years. The newly hired had to deliver form their first hour on the job.

A lack of practice-oriented university training has become more and more evident in cases of the anchor people. A handful of good-looking, prompter readers travel from one station to the next, drawn mainly by the promise of higher wages, not a vain

temptation in a country that suffers from political bickering and from poor economy performance.

Training new anchor persons in the university requires more than just long litanies of "that's how it should be done" and no hands-on experience. Tedious working hours under the guidance of experienced people, fewer and fewer by the day, could be one way out of the deadlock. Sheer misperception of anchoring has pushed employers and producers to promote on the screen nice-looking young people with little or no journalistic experience. The consequence is that much of the public migrates from one channel to the next, always returning to the public broadcaster, regarded as more reliable and less biased (Melinescu, 2013: 61). That is the outcome of an overwhelming amount of dramatic, violent, abusive stories which deter viewers from watching the news programmes persistently showing striking and even graphic pictures of accidents, robberies and attacks. The Romanian philosopher Andrei Pleşu noticed that and abundant, indiscriminate stories lead to confusion and dilute attention.

> "We witness, henceforth, a '*cooling*' of hot news. Too much bad information ends up in a loss of interest. Sensationalism dies out, the excitement is gone. The public finally reaches a state of malaise, of a cynical apathy and the attitude of a mere on-looker" (Pleşu 2012: 20).

1.7. Facts and fiction, information and opinion

The second major paradigm change has been introduced by the folk media, or the citizen journalism. This novelty of the communication market has been generated by:

- a higher standard of education. People are better trained, more open-minded, more curious and willing to know, to find out what is happening in the outer world;
- an easier access to digital platforms and to Internet connections. Lower prices for such devices have definitely encouraged to connect more and more people, especially the young ones;
- abundant local sources of information, PR campaigns, promotions and a growing passion to communicate.

The current trend, beneficial as it may look, hides some pitfalls. The major shortcoming is that most people criss-crossing the info sphere have little or no notion at all about communication, as such. Even if they should be welcomed for the breath of fresh air they may bring (and that that is quite doubtful), with or without their awareness, they also bring mystification. More often than not, their messages have no identifiable sources; they do not discriminate between fact and fiction, between information and opinion. The so-called folk media may be the first on the spot for the simple reason that someone with a digital-camcorder or a smart phone just happened to be there ahead of a professional reporter. What are such persons' skills in gathering, processing and disseminating news through the Internet. The simple fact that someone witnessed an event happening and the mere chance of recording it on a platform is just excitement or even fun in case of an unexpected appearance of a movie star or a rock idol. That is not enough for quality reporting. What is such persons' credibility, what are their skills in actual evaluation of the significance and the effect of one event or the other for a smaller or a larger community?

Research, so far, has had very few answers in the case of the Romanian public journalism. Only further thorough, costly research can assert what is good or bad in such a paradigmatic change. One thing is certain, though. It exists!

So far, messages have circulated and they deepened the uncertainty of any projection meant to sieve through the facts of life that might contain ways and means for prognosis.

The Romanian University professor Constantin Schifirneţ identified the threat of manipulation through the on-line messengers, and he attempted to imagine the portrait of a typical contributor to civic journalism.

"It is quite obvious that we face an individual who is addicted to the Internet information and, therefore this is an introvert character, a secluded person who does not communicate much in the public environment. Such a person's behaviour and life style relies completely on the Internet. When contributing to a forum he or she intends to appear as an expert, free to pass on judgments, solutions and strategies to anyone, beginning with the emperor, the king, the prince or the president and ending with members of academies and university staff, to all those curious or willing to receive his/her messages"(Schifirneţ, 2008: 244).

1.8. Basic requirements: training and regulation

It is not the Internet the cause of confusion. True enough, the Internet has changed the production news, the way journalists perform both in print and in the audio-video media. At least they are trained for it and have developed and improved their skills while technology developed.

"At present, most journalists continue to work for organizations that distribute news — news organizations — it is not clear how long that will continue to be the case. While the public television service quoted before does play a significant role in decoding what news programmes are shown, the commercial channels in Romania and elsewhere must have an eye on profit. In fact, while news operations used to be considered a non profit public service, in the new economics, news departments and programmes are expected to make money, and they do" (Becker and Vlad 2009: 59).

Mention should be made that one of the far-reaching paradigm changes occurred when advertising barged inside the news shows on the cable channels: once Romania witnessed the mushrooming of commercial stations, the practice was taken over stock and barrel.

The mixed professional journalism and the folk media' raised the question about who's who in the current communication process. It is also uncertain who is gate watching understood as a

"process of identifying and posting interesting stories, a core practice in citizen journalism news, and who is gate keeping, the main stay of conventional, professional industrial journalism for the past century or more"(Shapiro 2011: 7).

Gate keeping developed and was the first to be overruled by technology, in general, and by digitalization, in particular, as news gathering and selection routines were taken out of the journalists' hands. Mainstream media lost its monopoly of the

one-way message broadcasting once produsers, quoted by Citizenjournalism (2011), populated a net of producers and users. The emergence of networks enabled almost everyone to communicate with a large numbered of people living at the other end of the world.

> "In a traditional media environment the journalist selects a relatively limited number of stories for dissemination and rejects the rest, seeing to it that the community shall hear as a fact only those events which newsmen, as the representatives of their culture, believe to be true" (Bruns 2008: 182)

That was the case of a media-centred communication paradigm. Once anybody has the tools to circulate virtually anything, the very concept of "gates", meant to select information passed on for public consumption ceases

> "to be a useful conceptualization of how news reaches the public — and if there are no gates, there can be no gate keepers"(White 1953: 389).

A rearrangement of players in the communication field populated now with professionals (main stream media personnel) and amateurs (citizen journalists) may confuse the media's role as agenda setters because the audience becomes fragmented while news providers multiply enormously by the hour. Main stream journalism attempts to stick to fundamental values, such as professional independence, while networked information challenges the very core of the news industry.

Romanian media, television channels in particular, understood quickly agenda setting as a process that allowed them to present certain issues as essential to the public sphere. Consequently, both the state and society placed some events above others because the more media outlets covered them, the more important those particular events could rank among the audience (Williams 2001).

Soon Romanian reporters, correspondents and producers realized that issues the media focused on became matters as important for the public, too. They passed on to the next, higher level and looked at the way issues of public interest come to the attention of their audience and, equally, to the attention of decision makers. That has become the point where the general term of media no longer covered the diverse and disunited professional congregation. Political parties' interests, group or individual interests interfered with the agenda setting process. Up to a point, this split led to a sort of reporting diversity, which, finally, fell into the digital divide as non –professionals started to air amalgamated, unreliable scraps of facts under the title of news, a discouraging concoction of unreliable, unidentified sources and personal feelings.

2. Conclusion

These shifts do not represent, we think, a tragic dead end. Education and regulation may take non-professional communicators out of the precipice of obscurity. Essential communication abilities can be taught, practiced and improved. Citizen journalism may contribute to a better public information process only if it is performed with accuracy, in good faith and in the respect of a true free flow of information.

Training can be provided by technical tutorials, together with the teaching people receive about how to use efficiently their lap tops, iPods, tablets and the Internet.

Sooner or later, access to social good sites will no longer be free of charge. Payment will very likely be accompanied by a stricter identification of the user both as a receiver and a producer of messages. Electronic stamps will, therefore, require an honest demarcation between fact and fiction, between information and opinion.

Together with vocational education of produsers, regulation comes as the second nature. Main stream media has been striving for decades to reach a unitary code of professional standards. Legislation has helped too. It is now the turn of the amateurs to follow guidelines that will help to integrate them into the wide world communication networks.

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