

JOURNALISM EDUCATION IN TODAY'S FAST-PACED MEDIA ENVIRONMENT

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Abstract: Political and economic pressures in newsrooms, “fake news” and increasing lack of trust from the part of the audiences are some of the recurring problems professional journalists have to face today, closely linked to the “retreat” in democracy and to the fast-paced media environment pushed by technology advancement. How can journalism education adapt to the accelerated changes affecting the media landscape? Some of the provisional answers to this central question imply encouraging flexibility and adaptability in managing information across different platforms, struggling to highlight relevance and making the best of the up-to-date technological tools, while keeping in mind that “journalism’s first obligation is to the truth” and “its first loyalty is to citizens” (Kovach & Rosenstiel 2003). Entrepreneurial and technical skills should empower future journalists to master transmedia storytelling, crowdfunding and crowdsourcing, get used to the mobile status of the profession and envisage their own media business initiatives, as well as stay true to ethical values.

Keywords: Journalism education, fake news, media ethics, journalistic skills, media technology

1. Introduction

“Democracy in retreat” – this is how the Freedom House organization entitles its report on freedom in the world in 2019. After 13 years of recorded decline in political rights and civil liberties all over the world, the report identifies deteriorations in both consolidated democracies and in the “new” post-Cold War democratic countries (Freedom House 2019). Naturally, these issues are directly affecting journalists and how they practice their profession. A free press is intrinsically linked with a healthy democracy, as “journalism must provide a forum for public criticism and comment”, thus fostering the public debates that lie at the core of the democratic system (Kovach & Rosenstiel 2003, p. 135). Political and economic pressures in newsrooms, “fake news” and increasing lack of trust in media from the part of the audiences are some of the recurring problems professional journalists have to face today, closely linked to the “retreat” in democracy and to the fast-paced media environment pushed by technology advancement.

Although the end of the 20th century brought a wave of democratization in Eastern Europe, “a large share of countries that made progress during that time were unable to maintain it” (Freedom House 2019), leading to cases of political control of media institutions, attacks on fact-based journalism or judicial harassment of journalists. In the particular case of Romania, polarized newsrooms and the attempt of politicians to use media institutions as propaganda tools, but also increased tabloidization, represent the main reasons for dropping credibility in journalism from the part of the audiences.

How can journalism education adapt to these fast-paced changes affecting media landscape? How can it prepare students for facing the efforts put up by some politicians

to discredit media institutions, while also preventing the rampant invasion of “fake news” all across media platforms? What technical skills do future journalists need in order to be able to select and process information, but also to publish it and manage its distribution algorithms? What marketing and networking skills do they need to know in order to manage a career which is increasingly based on freelancing and entrepreneurship? What ethical skills are required in order to maintain the standards of the profession and continue to cater to the needs of the public, above all?

These are the main questions tackled throughout the current paper and some of the provisional answers imply encouraging flexibility and adaptability in managing information across different platforms, struggling to highlight relevance and making the best of the up-to-date technological tools, while keeping in mind that “journalism’s first obligation is to the truth” and “its first loyalty is to citizens” (Kovach & Rosenstiel 2003). Entrepreneurial and technical skills should empower students in mastering strategies related to transmedia storytelling, crowdfunding and crowdsourcing, get used to the mobile status of the profession and encourage them to envisage their own media business initiatives, as well as keep in mind ethical values.

2. Professional journalism in a challenging media landscape

A decline in press freedom can be registered all over the world regions which were traditionally considered as most representative for democratic media, i.e. Western Europe and North America, as the annual analysis of Reporters without borders concludes (RSF 2019). Political and economic pressures, as well as increasing judicial harassment of journalists are seen as the main obstacles preventing newsrooms to undergo thorough investigative reports. Moreover, the anti-media rhetoric of high profile politicians from the United States, Hungary, France or Poland contributes to the further erosion of media outlets’ credibility in the eyes of their audiences. In the particular case of Romania, the government’s lack of consideration for journalists and the media, the increasing trends of political censorship and self-censorship, corruption and lack of transparency in revealing funding mechanisms behind media institutions are seen as the main factors contributing to a decrease in media freedom and a tendency to use media channels as propaganda tools (RSF 2019).

The Romanian media watchdog organization, Activewatch, also concluded that 2018 was a year in which media became more and more obviously polarized according to political affiliations, thus serving as propaganda tools. The NGO observed that the governing party invested systematically into gaining the adherence of a few journalists and opinion leaders, who consequently managed to transfer topics from the party agenda onto the public agenda, as well as successfully label counter-opinions as “propaganda”. “Fake news” accusations were raised by both the pro- and the anti-government media. Paradoxically, the honest practice of journalism was sabotaged by former journalists, who have either officially joined the political race or were unofficially being financed by a party (Activewatch 2019).

The strong polarization of newsrooms and the ensuing lack of trust in the media were also among the main findings of the annual Reuters Institute report (2018). The study also acknowledged the increasingly important role of social media in general – and Facebook in particular – when it comes to shaping public opinion and finding alternatives

to traditional news media. Affordable Internet in Romania is now “more accessible than running water and sewage”, which explains why 66% of the population gather their news from smartphones, thus progressively challenging (or complementing) television as the traditional source of news. Facebook has become an arena for social debate and protest movements, as well as a fertile ground for growing independent journalistic initiatives focusing on investigation or social reporting, such as *RISE Project*, *Recorder.ro* or *Decât o revistă* (Reuters Institute 2018). A survey released by the European Commission at the end of 2015 revealed that even though television remains the main source of information for the largest part of Romanians, social networks are gaining wider audiences. Almost half of respondents cited social networks as their main source of information on political issues and as a good means of expressing their opinions (CE 2015). In what follows I discuss the impact of this increasing lack of credibility in traditional media by looking at how employment conditions are shifting for professional journalists and how “fake news” functions as a dominant threat.

2.1. Shifting employment conditions

Despite a steady growth of the Romanian media market in the past two years, noticeable in ad-spending on all platforms with the exception of print media – 7% in 2017 and 10% in 2018 (Media Factbook 2019) –, the financial prospects of the profession are not optimistic. Two of the largest TV groups – ProTV and Digi24 – have closed their local stations in 2018 and 2019, and local newsrooms everywhere are struggling. This leads to lay-offs, an increased personnel turnover and with many journalists leaving the profession to opt for officially joining political parties or unofficially getting paid for supporting a particular political organization (Activewatch 2019). At the same time, vlogging continues to be a growing niche, particularly in the area of entertainment – a trend whose ascension signals the audiences’ search for alternative sources of information.

The shrinking of media businesses has been documented as a worldwide trend in the past few years, its initial cause being linked to the advent of (mostly free) online media and the fact that online advertising rates have not yet succeeded in reaching offline rates in many countries. The impact was mostly visible in newsrooms, which started to receive less financing. As Lugmayr & Dal Zotto (2015) observe, media institutions gained more incentives to become “audience production plants” along with the shift onto the Internet. This is translated into targeting quantity not quality: “news needs to be sensational, spectacular and easy to understand, and not necessarily well-researched and balanced” (p. 83). In other words, “the Internet provides far worse circumstances for economically successful production of high quality journalistic content than traditional print markets” and “the more traditional print markets are substituted by online markets, the less likely mass media will be able to fulfill its functions in a democratic society” (p. 95).

What does this mean for professional journalists? Fewer revenues, job insecurity and a constant pressure to enhance their traditional skills and gain new ones, in line with the demands of the convergence era. The “Super Journalist” should not only possess high-quality writing, editing and networking skills, as well as be able to cover more areas and generally work more for less money than before, but also learn technical skills, such

as coding for example (p. 109). Despite the obvious benefits of media convergence, allowing people to be connected 24/7 to news and social networks, “the essence of journalism as described by traditional democratic theory is hardly enhanced”. In other words, “convergence is certainly proving an efficient strategy for media consolidation and sustainability, but in this process journalism as a profession and as practice is in decline” (p. 112).

Several recent studies on how the journalistic profession has evolved in recent decades show that the idea of having a secure job after obtaining a university degree in journalism, inside a large national media organization or the smaller newsroom of a local TV station, radio, newspaper, magazine or online newspaper, is gradually fading. An increasing number of professionals in the industry work as freelancers have short-term contracts with one or more media organizations or manage their own small businesses (Deuze 2017). Hence, educating future journalist should take this into account and provide students early on with entrepreneurial skills that will enable them to distinguish themselves on an overcrowded market of professionals.

2.2. Political pressures and “fake news”

In recent years, there have been a spreading number of accusations from the part of politicians to the media, and vice-versa, of disseminating “fake news”. In fact, this has become a buzz-word in the current analysis of the media phenomenon and, although the concept is obviously not new, many analysts believe the uncontrolled increase in “fake news” is intrinsically connected to the undermining of Western democracies. The reasons are simple: public debate represents the essence of democratic societies, as long as it makes use of reasonable / rational arguments and correct information. “Fake news”, however, promote the exact opposite.

The difficulty in controlling the rampant spread of “fake news” is partly connected to the ease of disseminating information in the digital age – and the gradual disappearance of the “gate keepers” from the print era – and partly to the various forms it can take. “Fake news” is usually defined as information that doesn’t “meet the threshold of verifiability and public interest”, as opposed to “real news”, and thus undermines the credibility of information (Ireton & Posetti, eds. 2018). But this definition may accommodate a great variety of media content, many of which might not be identified as “suspicious” at first sight. The latest UNESCO handbook on the topic distinguishes the following categories of “fake news”: (1) satire and parody, (2) false connection between text and visuals or clickbait headlines, (3) misleading content, including cropped photos or quotes taken out of context, (4) false context, such as an old piece of news published as if it happened recently, (5) imposter content, published under the name of particular journalists or media organizations that did not author it, (6) content genuinely manipulated in order to deceive, (7) fabricated articles or “news sites”, that contain information which is entirely fictitious, without specifying it (Ireton & Posetti, eds. 2018, p. 48-50).

“Fake news” is at the heart of an on-going war of accusations between politicians and the media. High-profile publications such as *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post* or *Le Monde* have published lists with alleged lies of politicians Donald Trump and Marine Le Pen (see Leonhardt & Thompson 2017, Kessler & Kelly 2018, Les Decodeurs

2017), while the US President accused CNN of spreading “fake news” and the Russian government maintains a website where it regularly “uncovers” Western media distributing false information about Russia (see Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation (ND)).

Moreover, fake news seems to be an organized trend fulfilling the need for profit of the failed media industry in some countries. As revealed by an investigation published by CNN, over 100 websites producing fake news that favored the Republican Party in the last part of the 2016 U.S. electoral campaign were tracked to a small town in Macedonia. Earning well above the average salary in their country, a group of young people trained by a businessman with experience in targeting American audiences specialized in click-baiting, creating and distributing false information on a large scale (CNN 2017).

Though spreading false information has long been associated with media influence, particularly in the case of war propaganda, the recent upsurge of fake news has a few causes connected to recent trends in media development. These include the shift in audiences from content receivers to potential content producers, made possible especially by social media, and the increasing lack of credibility of media institutions and of the “establishment” in general (including the political apparatus or even modern science). The spread of “fake news” or “alternative facts” is linked to the advent of the “post-truth” era, a notion deemed as “word of the year 2016” by Oxford Dictionary and defined as: “relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief”. As clearly suggested by its name, under the “post-truth” era, “the very value of facts, truth, information and knowledge – the bedrock of journalism and free societies – is under attack” (Goodman & Steyn 2017).

The role of journalism educators under these circumstances is to empower future journalists in practicing their profession by introducing them to more varied tools of research and the ability to distinguish between facts and fiction. Journalism, in its essence, “is a discipline of verification” (Kovach & Rosenstiel 2003, p. 12). Traditional values connected to studying documents and archives, observing events and interviewing sources should be connected to the undertaking of quality investigation across platforms, via social media and appealing to the community’s help. Checking the accuracy of facts should be at the core of practicing journalism, and an increasing number of independent projects are supporting this effort. At the end of 2017, there were 137 active fact-checking projects in 51 countries, including Factcheck.org (US), Full Fact (UK), Africa Check (South Africa, Senegal, Nigeria and Kenya), Les Décodeurs (France) etc. Moreover, students can use Google Reverse search to uncover manipulated images, check the credentials of pseudo-experts cited as “reliable sources”, look at methodology when it comes to statistical claims etc. Improving critical analysis skills and understanding examples of good practice in fact-checking should become an essential part of journalistic education (Ireton & Posetti, eds. 2018).

Perhaps the greatest challenge for today’s future journalists is the ability to report in an honest and transparent way, despite political and economic pressures, so as to reinstate credibility and demonstrate the value of journalism in the eyes of a distrustful audience. In what follows I will make a 6-point list of suggestions enabling journalism

educators to help students prepare for a profession whose values, standards and economic realities are experiencing a rapid process of change.

3. How to prepare journalists for a fast-paced media environment?

In a media environment characterized by constant change in the use of technology, fluid values and the permanent challenging of traditional methods connected to news production and reception, the core ability for success can only be flexibility and the power to adapt. Building collective capacity has long been presented as an effective strategy in dealing with educational reform, helping both students and teachers manage change better. While some researchers observed its role in preparing educators and school staff for operational transformation, others highlighted the importance of collective capacity building in structuring the teaching process, putting together professional learning communities (Harris 2011). For the purpose of the current research, I will use Michael Fullan's (2007) understanding of the concept, describing "collective capacity building with a focus on results" as an effective way of connecting "meaning" with "action" during the teaching process. Fullan defines capacity building as "a policy, strategy, or action taken that increases the collective efficacy of a group to improve student learning through new knowledge, enhanced resources and greater motivation on the part of people working individually and together" (p. 58). This covers the development of new skills and competencies, understanding the importance of gaining new knowledge and collaborating to achieve a particular goal, thus helping future professionals adapt better to real-life job requirements.

According to Hargreaves & Fullan (2012), the most successful teaching strategies included here involve: (i) reciprocal teaching, by which teachers allow students to lead parts of the learning process and encourage self-learning; (ii) individual feedback, implying case-by-case responses from the part of the educator; (iii) teaching students to ask themselves questions that motivate and facilitate learning; (iv) meta-cognition strategies, such as being aware of one's own thinking and knowledge acquiring process; and (v) problem-solving teaching. These strategies can be found under various forms in the list below, helping journalism educators use collective student capacity building to prepare students for a profession undergoing rapid and radical change.

- *Go back to the basis of fact-based journalism.* Most journalism students consume their political and social news from their Facebook feeds – a network whose commercially-driven algorithm is based on giving the reader what she wants and not confronting her with anything uncomfortable or that severely contradicts the worldview that dominates her "bubble". This has led to a prevalence of opinions over facts in delivering news and, in the absence of the print media's traditional "gate keepers", to an uncontrolled spread of false and speculative information. Reinstating the credibility of journalism in the eyes of a distrustful public can only be done by going back to the basic rules of fact-based journalism, of favoring quality investigation and balanced reporting (Richardson 2017), so journalism education should be based on a vast amount of best practice examples. In recent years in Romanian media we have often seen more fact-based reporting in the case of independent journalistic projects, such as

Recorder.ro or *RISE Project*, than in the case of large media channels which are more prone to political and economic pressures. Starting up such independent media businesses, that might have a better chance at reinstating credibility by investigating cases of corruption or administrative incompetence (Reuters 2018) often requires not just journalistic, but also entrepreneurial skills.

- *Develop entrepreneurial skills.* Although we live in the era of omnipresent media, where audiences receive a 24-hour flux of information on several media devices, the economic prospects of the journalistic profession are far from being optimistic. The annual reports of the Romanian media watchdog, Activewatch, show the steady decline in job security for journalism professionals, highlighting the increasing number of lay-offs registered by major media institutions starting from the 2008 economic crisis, as well as the agony of local media. The advertising market in Romania registered a slight increase in the past two years (Media Factbook 2019), but its impact in the newsroom is yet to be seen. The situation is far from being singular in Europe or throughout the Western world. As Mark Deuze observes, we are witnessing a paradox: “as people engage with media in an increasingly immersive, always-on, almost instantaneous, and interconnected way, the very people whose livelihood and sense of professional identity depend on delivering media content and experiences seem to be at a loss on how to come up with survival strategies” (2017). The industry is in a constant quest for discovering more effective business models, struggling to find entrepreneurial strategies to support the creative process implied by media activity. The traditional financing strategies transferred from print media to the online platforms, including subscription revenues, online ads or paywalls, are generally not sufficiently effective. Under these conditions, coupled with the fact that audiences seem to be more scattered online, crowdfunding is seen by many as an increasingly viable media business model (Bennett, Chin, Jones 2014). Helping students understand how this model works should support them in creating their own media business projects. This undertaking can include added value skills such as the ability to provide what Henry Jenkins called “transmedia storytelling” – constructing news stories using a variety of platforms and mediums (Deuze 2017). More added value skills that could contribute to the career success of future journalists will be discussed below.
- *Highlight strongly the importance of social networking.* Journalists cannot function outside the communities they are addressing to, so collective capacity building should not be limited to cooperation inside the group of students or between educators and students, but also be extended to nurturing social networks that facilitate the connection between future professionals and audiences. Students should be well prepared for the idea of contributing to the 24h flux of news and to constantly interacting with sources and expanding their social networks. Educators and students should establish from the very beginning a targeted audience community and help students identify potential sources inside it. Crowdfunding and crowdsourcing are gaining more and more ground as business and content management models for media institutions in recent years, so a well-developed connection with the audience can work in

solving – partially – both the problem of financing of young professionals and that of providing up-to-date content (Bennett, Chin, Jones 2014).

- *Mobile reporting as a central part of teaching journalism.* Educators can adapt to the unstable, mobile status of the profession by encouraging students to act independently in finding and developing stories, and by understanding that current ways to practice the profession go hand in hand with citizen journalism and mobile journalism (mojo). The physical newsroom where journalists have editorial meetings or come back to write and edit the news stories documented during fieldwork is a concept less and less likely to survive in the future. And so is the use of advanced technical equipment operated by specialists (professional camera, lights etc.). Students should be sent to do fieldwork using their own personal media devices (mobile phones, tablets), write and publish while on the road, in a permanent flux, using more social media and a variety of modes of communication: text, image, short video. They should get the practice of learning-by-doing, get the “sense of news” while documenting it during fieldwork, solve unexpected problems (including technical ones), improvise, constantly adapt. Creating temporary/virtual newsrooms, while on the road, is part of the process, as well as using social networks, both for posting and sharing content. In the end, students should gather and reflect on what they did well under the constraints of time and space (selection of information, angle, neutrality, validity of sources, quality of writing/recording), and what could be improved. Mobile devices function as “in-the-field tools”, that help students uncover stories and work on their development, as “social tools”, enabling them to disseminate their stories via Facebook, Twitter and other networks, and as “communication tools”, facilitating a virtual newsroom, that helps students and educators stay in touch and collaborate (Jones 2017).
- *Develop basic coding skills.* Computer programming is a set of skills increasingly relevant for communicators, helping them in acquiring information, analyzing data, shaping messages, polishing storytelling methods, understanding how distribution algorithms work, managing content better etc. Media and technology are in a process of continual melding, so in the future journalists will be asked to be more and more knowledgeable in the field of understanding computer programming. They will need to be able to comprehend the algorithms behind media platforms – the analytics, how users interact with content, the distribution mechanisms etc. –, be able to master interactive visual storytelling – presenting data in an attractive manner and facilitating interaction with users – and have the capacity to gather data from various databases. Coding skills will enable students to develop “problem-solving techniques and innovative approaches, like data analysis and agile methodology” – all of which will most likely prove applicable in the students’ future career (Royal 2017). Journalists should understand the mix of editorial skills and technical strategies that leads to the creation of a successful media product and be prepared to get more involved in all stages of news production, mastering data journalism tools and contributing to the elaboration of digital platforms. “Although business people and technologists have not traditionally been allowed to influence selection and filtering, this is changing”, with journalists collaborating at “developing editorial

products such as mobile news apps and blogging platforms” (Westlund & Lewis 2015).

- *Don't minimize core journalistic values.* As media outlets from all over the Western world are experiencing a decrease in credibility from their audiences, which leads to subsequent financial problems, the trend of focusing on technology, highlighted throughout the points above, should not lead to a minimization of core topics in teaching journalism, which essentially require “human” input. Such topics include genre differentiation and adaptable writing skills, triangulation, judging relevance, credibility and news value, considering ethical aspects etc. In order to continue fostering productive debates and nurturing democratic societies, journalists must essential remain obliged to telling the truth, stay loyal to citizens, thoroughly verify what they publish, maintain independence, serve as monitors of power, provide a forum for public criticism and strive to bring interesting and relevant info to their audiences (Kovach & Rosenstiel 2003).

4. Conclusions

Fake news, shifting business models and distrustful audiences are just some of the main challenges faced by media institutions today, intrinsically connected to what many analysts see as a degradation of democracies all over the world – from consolidated Western democracies to the younger democracies of the post-Cold War era. How can journalism schools prepare students for a profession going through fast-paced changes in terms of values, employment models and interaction with audiences? How can educators in this field help future journalists understand and maintain the press' vital role in a democratic society? The current paper explored several answers to these questions and to a few others that ensued from them.

The first section of the paper looked at some of the main challenges facing professional journalists today, including lack of credibility in the “post-truth” era, economic and political pressures in defining editorial policies and decreasing professional standards. Starting from these findings, in the second part of the paper I listed 6 suggestions that journalism educators can use to improve the preparation of students for working in today's fast-paced media environment. Tentative answers to my initial questions included the fostering of entrepreneurial skills, highlighting the importance of social networks for distributing and potentially financing news stories, using mobile devices as a core tool for teaching journalistic reporting, developing computer programming skills that would enable students to understand the algorithms behind media platforms and do more compelling visual and interactive storytelling. Finally, despite the obvious focus on better incorporation of the melding between media and technology in journalism education, I highlighted the importance of staying true to core ethical values connected to fact-based reporting, as they represent the only chance to reinstate credibility for this profession.

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