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Anchors in the Drift of time: The Power and Lure of Encyclopedic Dictionaries

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Abstract: This article offers a retrospective theoretical reflection on three encyclopedic dictionaries of a non-linguistic nature compiled by the author in post-communist Romania: two documenting the regional media landscape and one mapping the political and civic life of Timiș County between 1989 and 2000. Drawing on Bourdieu's field theory, Foucault's archaeology of knowledge, Tarp's function-driven lexicography, and Appadurai's concept of the archive as aspiration, the article argues that these works - designed as operative ready-reference tools for journalists and policy practitioners in conditions of information scarcity - have undergone archivalization, acquiring retrospective value as primary sources for the study of post-communist field formation, elite sociology, minority politics, and regional civil society. Actor-oriented, exhaustive within their defined geographical and temporal frames, and documentary rather than evaluative in their design logic, they constitute what Foucault would recognize as monuments: objects whose internal regularities make them archaeologically legible to future researchers.

Keywords: encyclopedic dictionary, metalexicography, archive, memory, field formation, future-proof value

1. Introduction

This article starts with a confession: as a student in philology, I was fascinated by Yeats's verse, "Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold; / Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world." I understood it fully in 1989, when the pre-established order did fall apart in Romania as it did previously in so many other East and Central-European countries, and my career had an incredible turn, towards communication sciences. I became a journalist, later – analyst, researcher and professor. Nothing remained stable for long. We were all caught in the vortex such as the Avant-gardists had described so well in their art and manifestos, but none of us had expected to inhabit.

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The first decade after that 'big bang' moment was characterized by a simultaneously terrifying and exhilarating energy – the energy of an unknown future rushing in to take the place of the still, stale flow of public and private lives under communism. As a journalist at the time, I felt like a chronicler of the modern era and I resonated with the frenzy of the eighteenth-century French revolutionaries, who wanted to signal their rejection of the past so emphatically, that they abolished even the Gregorian calendar altogether, starting history anew from Year 1, renaming the months of the year and replacing the week with the decade. That gesture of radical temporal rupture - the insistence that *now* is so different from *before* that it requires new instruments of measurement - captures something essential about the post-1989 moment in Romania.

I felt part of the making of history; but I also felt, acutely, that my everyday work as a journalist needed some reliable anchors. With little institutional concern for documentation and no reference materials covering what was actually happening at the regional level, I set out to create such instruments not only for myself, but for public use. My formation as a philologist had internalized the tradition of learners' dictionaries and taught me to identify and select the key concepts needed to navigate a given domain. But I had equally formative help from a truly experienced lexicographer, Professor Marin Buca, my father, whose capacity to eliminate trivia and maintain a detached, rigorous view on complex material was the beacon that guided the methodology behind each of these first endeavors.

Three books fall under this category, the first two being co-authored with Professor Marin Buca: *Mass media din Timișoara postdecembristă* [Mass media in Timișoara after December 1989] and *Dicționarul vieții publice timișene postdecembriste 1989–2000. Partide, organizații, personalități* [Dictionary of Timiș County public life 1989–2000: Parties, organizations, personalities]. The third, *Universul mediatic timișean* [Timiș County media universe, 1989–2009], extended and updated the earlier documentation. I subsequently moved to other types of lexicographic work, monolingual Romanian dictionaries, continuing the collaboration with Professor Marin Buca, and bilingual English-Romanian and Romanian-English dictionaries, with other collaborators, but those belong to a different chapter of my professional trajectory and will not be discussed here.

The present article is a retrospective metalexicographic reflection on these encyclopedic dictionaries as a distinct category: on the intellectual frames that shaped them, the methodological dilemmas they raised, the operative value they held at the time of their making, and the future-proof value they maintain after their operational usefulness expired.

2. From chronicle to cartography: context and methodology

The last decade of the twentieth century was dynamic, exciting, and dramatic for the former communist countries, Romania included. Major transformations penetrated practically all areas of life, both public and private. In lieu of a single, at least apparently coherent public sphere, a hyper-pluralization of public spheres emerged. With the tight

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gatekeepers of freedom abolished, a myriad of media outlets appeared and the public space filled with a vast variety of voices: some claiming continuity with pre-communist times, some arguing that there was a legacy worth preserving even from the immediate past, some declaring affiliation with Western European models, and some boasting entirely original and creative ideas. In Romania, the case I know from first-hand experience, the period is marked by a dual attitude toward memory and its preservation: on one hand, the traditional paths of archiving, including the systematic cataloguing and collection of newspapers, were broken or disregarded. On the other, a revalorization of personal archives emerged - systematic or spontaneously crafted, in the form of diaries, documents, photographs, and oral testimonies - as described by Appadurai (2003) in his reflections on memory and the modern age. In place of a coherent collective memory, what emerged was what Hoskins (2018) calls a 'memory of multitude' - a proliferation of uncoordinated, competing memory practices that preceded and in many ways anticipated the digital reordering of the past through '(re)ordering of the past by and through multiple connectivities of times, actors, and events.

Caught in this maze as a journalist, I set out to map the territory - first my own, in the media environment I was working in, and then the territory I was covering as a journalist: politics, public administration, and the major players shaping public life and discourse, including politically affiliated or otherwise influential NGOs. I approached this cartographic endeavor with journalistic tools: written documents, mostly private archives, questionnaire-based interviews, direct observation, and institutional documents and public records. I applied the classic 5 W's of journalism - who, what, where, when, and how - though my student readings of Plato were always in the background, reminding me that the first available answer to any question is rarely the most revealing one.

In examining the two adjacent fields, media and political life respectively, I found that the core logic of each is sustained by relevant tributaries, necessary for a complex understanding of field dynamics. For the media field, I included alongside the outlets themselves: the higher education institutions offering journalism programs (the sites of field reproduction, where new agents are trained and legitimized), the professional organizations and foundations (the institutions that define the field's internal rules and hierarchies), and a prosopographic section documenting the individual agents who produce media and their trajectories within the field (Charle 2001; Verboven et al. 2007). With the more analytical eyes of a mature researcher, I recognize this as an early record of a proto-field in the process of constituting itself, the moment before a field has established its own doxa, before the rules have been internalized, before the distinction between dominant and dominated positions has solidified (Bourdieu 1993).

A parallel structure governs the dictionary of public life. Using Bourdieu's terminology, it covers parties and coalitions (the dominant agents competing for political capital), NGOs of ethnic minorities (agents occupying a specific structural position at the intersection of the political field and the field of ethnic identity),

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organizations of 1989 Revolution participants (agents whose capital derives from a specific historical event - what Bourdieu calls *capital symbolique* of a particular kind), trade unions (agents at the intersection of the political field and the economic field), and civic and human rights NGOs (agents whose position is defined by their relative autonomy from political capital - what Bourdieu calls the *pôle autonome* of a field). The prosopographic section maps the individual agents and their accumulation and conversion of capital across the field. Both dictionaries are, in this sense, records of fields in the act of constituting themselves.

This documentary ambition resonates with Appadurai's observation that "we should begin to see all documentation as intention, and all archiving as part of some sort of collective project. Rather than being the tomb of the trace, the archive is more frequently the product of the anticipation of collective memory. Thus the archive is itself an aspiration rather than a recollection" (Appadurai 2003, p. 16). With the combined arsenal of the cartographer, the lexicographer and the chronicler of contemporary times at hand, I proceeded to compile the encyclopedic dictionaries with what Appadurai calls documentation as intervention: not the accidental accumulation of traces, but a deliberate meta-intervention in the conditions under which a regional public sphere could be known and remembered (Appadurai 2003, p. 24). Appadurai himself points toward Foucault as the theorist who *"destroyed the innocence of the archive"* by forcing us to ask about the designs through which all traces are produced (p. 16). It is precisely in this Foucauldian spirit that the described dictionaries can be examined: their standardized entry structures, their aspiration to unity and balance, their triangulation of sources are in Foucault's terms ([1969] 2002) the regularities that a future archaeologist of these works would examine. The structure of that value as independent artefacts, and their future-proof dimensions, are examined in the sections that follow.

3. Inside the archive: structure, entries, and the logic of inclusion

Encyclopedic dictionary organization follows the internal logic, taxonomy, and conceptual frameworks of their specific subject fields, shifting from basic linguistic definitions to structured domain knowledge. Compilers, however, still need to decide whether their choices are actor-driven, concept-driven or chronologically driven in organizing the selected content. For the dictionaries presented in this article the actor-driven approach felt most appropriate, since both types of works aspired to be exhaustive for the local/regional dimensions they covered, within the timespan specified even in the subtitles, 1989-2000, 1989-2009 respectively. These works are also structurally bound by a unified methodological blueprint. To analyze these texts is to witness an in-depth understanding of the epistemological demands of a post-communist sub-state level in transition. Rather than forcing a chaotic decade of regional turmoil into rigid, detached conceptual categories, I chose to adopt what Hartmann & James (1998) define as a highly specialized organizational 'perspective', one where the active agents of history take precedence over abstract theory. This perspective is translated into the physical architecture of the texts via a macrostructure that treats

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media outlets, journalistic programs, political alliances and actors in the political and administrative spheres as the primary nodes of knowledge (Hausmann & Wiegand 1989). When these structural nodes culminate in their respective prosopographic sections, the dictionaries move beyond mere alphabetical registries; they become a unified methodological testament to the fact that in periods of profound institutional fluidity, the 'field' (Bourdieu) and its emerging 'discursive formations' (Foucault) can only be accurately mapped by tracking the human networks wielding capital within them. The prosopographic sections of both dictionary types follow the tradition of collective biography as defined by Stone (1971) and systematized by Verboven et al. (2007): a structured, standardized investigation of the common characteristics of a defined group of historical actors. The methodological particularity of these sections, however, lies in their primary source: biographical data was collected through questionnaires distributed to the subjects themselves, making the entries simultaneously a record of careers and trajectories and a primary source for the study of how political and journalistic actors chose to present themselves at a specific moment in post-communist Romanian history.

The self-reported character of the data is both a methodological asset, capturing self-understanding that no external reconstruction could replicate, and a limitation that future researchers should weigh: the entries reflect what subjects chose to disclose, shaped by the norms and strategic considerations of the moment. For the media dictionary, some of the prominent acting journalists chose not to be present in the book, so the omission is not an oversight of the compilers but an understanding that public image depends also on the choices made by living subjects. In both the first media dictionary and in the political life one, the prosopographic *Personalia* section was authored specifically by Marin Bucă, reflecting a deliberate division of labor between the institutional documentation, compiled by the journalist-researcher familiar with the political field, and the biographical compilation, entrusted to the experienced lexicographer whose editorial precision and capacity for detached scientific judgment ensured that the collected data are accurately reflected in the printed books. Finally, a remark on the entry length is due here: it varies from one headword to another due to the availability and richness of the primary data, but efforts were made to document as much information as possible.

In discussing how lexicography plays at the border between knowledge and non-knowledge, Tarp (2008) emphasizes the user-needs driven approach to dictionaries and their high cognitive function. Because the post-communist transition is fluid, the dictionaries did not assume the reader already understood the landscape. This is why the **cognitive load** of these works is high, since the user can see *how* the fragmented, apparently disjunctive pieces fit together, acting as a conceptual map for the two most valued human freedoms: the freedom of expression and information, and the freedom of association (leading to political representation via free and fair elections). Tarp wonderfully remarks that ‘dictionaries were probably the most successful literary genre in history’ with over 4000 years of history behind. And while they do not earn any compiler a Nobel prize, they are ‘a system of knowledge growing out of social practice’

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and help preserve, transmit and develop knowledge for contemporary and future societal use (Tarp 2008, p. 1). The three encyclopedic dictionaries analyzed here aim to reach such a status, of thesaurus building instruments, ready to open windows into the near past.

Beyond these shared structural principles, the two dictionary types diverge in their motivations, field logics and specific architectural choices, differences that deserve explicit treatment. The motivations behind them were epistemologically distinct, and that distinction is legible in their respective field logics. The media dictionary emerged from a conservational impulse: as a journalist with a forming professional identity (Ibarra 2003), a professor of journalism, and an early member of the Association of Romanian Media History, I recognized that information about short-lived media outlets was fading irreversibly, and that no institutional mechanism existed to preserve it. The field logic is therefore primarily archival - an anticipation of collective memory, in Appadurai's terms, before the community recognized the need.

The hard core of the post-communist Timișoara media dictionary is organized around the three major (and classical) peaks of production and distribution in analog times: print, radio, and television broadcast stations. Within each of these technological pillars, the macrostructure follows a strict alphabetical ordering of headlines. Each entry operates under a highly systematic microstructural template (Hausmann & Wiegand 1989), mapping identical data categories: title, date of first appearance, tradition (including prior titles), coverage, type (general or specialized), language (capturing minority language outlets crucial to sub-state dynamics and specific for the region), main achievements, editors-in-chief, and physical address. By tracking titles, language shifts, and institutional permanence, these entry-level data types function as what Foucault would describe as the cataloging of a new discursive formation, documenting exactly when, where, and in what language new public statements became possible. The dictionary recognizes also that a media field cannot be defined solely by its physical distribution channels. In a highly volatile post-communist regional context, the formal field is heavily augmented by what can be termed as 'structural tributaries', the very forces fueling its consolidation. Therefore, the macrostructural register is expanded to include higher education journalistic programs, professional associations, and foundations. These entries map the institutionalization of the field's specific capital (Bourdieu), showing how professional norms and networks were consolidated during the decade of turmoil. This entire architecture reaches its culmination in the final prosopographic section, titled 'Personalia'. By deliberately ending with this directory, the dictionary fully embraces Hartmann & James's (1998) actor-driven 'perspective.' It looks beneath the formal institutional facades to reveal the actual human agents, the specific editors, reporters, and directors who gave physical shape, voice, and direction to the post-communist media landscape in the city.

The second dictionary covering the Timiș county media expanded the view to a larger region and its communicative-information needs but gave up the prosopographic section in favor of new occurrences in the field: emerging online media outlets, either as an extension of existing media, or as independent endeavors. Also, the

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euroregional dimension is captured, one that spills over the national border and tries to create and encourage a new community aggregation, beyond the increasingly more porous borders via newspapers, journals or online productions co-authored by journalists from the contacting administrative entities in Romania, Hungary and Serbia. Finally, the dictionary is accompanied by a chronological presentation of the dynamics of media development, revealing the frenzy of expression that characterized the almost two decades after the fall of communism. Information contained in these dictionaries was later offered as entries for the specified period and region in a major encyclopedic endeavor coordinated by Professor Marian Petcu, *Istoria jurnalismului din România în date – enciclopedie cronologică* [History of Romanian journalism in data: a chronological encyclopedia] (Polirom 2012).

By contrast to the media dictionaries, the dictionary of public life emerged from an operative impulse: daily coverage of the political field had made the difficulty of referencing and verification viscerally apparent, both to the compiler and to colleagues working the same beat. The field logic here is primarily utilitarian, even if the conservational layer is still present, oriented toward the creation of a ready-reference instrument for practitioners navigating a complex and rapidly changing public sphere.

Typical encyclopedic dictionaries covering such topics operate on a national or even continental level, as the Rowman & Littlefield Historical Dictionaries series demonstrates (1994 - present). For the Romanian national level, political life after 1989 generated several encyclopedic reference works such as Alexandrescu et al. (1995), Scurtu (2003), and Stoica (2001), that documented political parties and formations at the state scale. However, where the national works cover formations that achieved parliamentary representation or national visibility, the county-level dictionary captures the full ecology of political life at the sub-state level, including the approximately eighty parties active in the first post-totalitarian year, the civil society formations, the ethnic minority organizations, and the local political class that national encyclopedias render invisible by design. Also, the dictionary of public life does more than the above-mentioned reference books, by including in coverage trade unions that influenced public policies and occasionally endorsed political parties or alliances, local/regional alliances, politically affiliated NGOs and associations of participants in the 1989 Revolution in Timișoara. The dictionary presents also the componence of the elected bodies at the county level and ends with a synthetic table of results of local and national elections, extracted from the official data of the National Electoral Authority, accounting for the success of each player in the regional area. Thus, the standard format of such dictionary types, chronology, introductory essay, A–Z entries covering persons, institutions, and formations, and electoral data becomes a 360-degree overview of public (political, civic and administrative) life of a region during transformational years.

It is worth highlighting that unique feature of the covered region, with its multiethnic and multilingual character. Ten ethnic groups represented in a variety of elected bodies, minority-language media, ethnic minority organizations are documented in detail absent from any national-level comparator. Future researchers

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working on minority politics, multilingual media, or regional civil society may find these particularly valuable.

To sum up, the presented dictionaries are outcome-sensitive. The primary unit of analysis is the agent, i.e. the media outlet, the political party, the NGO, the individual journalist or public figure. The criterion of inclusion is presence and activity within the defined geographical and temporal frame, regardless of longevity or significance. The field is mapped in its entirety, including its dominated, ephemeral, and failed positions. The supplementary apparatus - electoral results for the political dictionary, chronology and active media list for the media dictionary - introduces an outcome dimension that registers society's own measurement of each actor's capital: votes cast, audiences reached, institutional survival. Crucially, this outcome dimension is documentary rather than evaluative: the data is presented without commentary or value hierarchy, allowing future researchers to draw their own analytical conclusions from the distribution of field outcomes across the documented period. The absence of a value hierarchy is a stated editorial principle rather than a claim to objectivity: any selection is inevitably shaped by the compiler's position within the fields being documented and by the epistemic conditions of the moment of compilation. As a journalist, I aspired to objectivity, only to recognize later that any selection is inevitably marked by subjective choice. Thus, what the exhaustiveness criterion and the standardized entry structure provide is not neutrality in the absolute sense but a principled constraint on arbitrariness, what Foucault ([1969] 2002) would recognize as the imposition of regularities that make the work archaeologically legible and methodologically accountable to future scrutiny.

At the time of their publication, the dictionaries could have as main function an operational, reference-work dimension. In perspective, they underwent archivalization (Ketelaar 2001), offering a structured documentary counterweight to the dispersal of memory into uncoordinated 'memories of multitudes' (Hoskins 2018), the very condition that made systematic documentation urgent in the first place.

4. The second life of ephemeral knowledge

The presented encyclopedic dictionaries were born of urgency and have survived into utility of a different kind, no longer the utility of the practitioner reaching for a desk reference, but the utility of the historian, the sociologist, and the researcher of post-communist civil society reaching for primary documentation that exists nowhere else, at least not in a systematic, organized, archival form. All the information was used to fuel the entries in chronological histories of the region (Dudaș et al. 2010; Cernicova 2012). Future research finds ready-to use datasets to investigate the Brownian, multidirectional search for political and administrative expression in transition societies, field formation dynamics, professional trajectory studies and/or the sociological features of new elites. All three books are anchors that keep the covered period anchored and attached to the (dis)continuum of the regional and national evolution of Romania at the border between centuries, puzzling events and multitudes of possible futures. They are not only repositories of data (Ketelaar 2001), but elements

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ready to re-constitute genealogies of movements and ideas, to reorganize, select, reinterpret contexts to minute, grassroot level of detail for a region rich in heritage, bold in experimenting and courageous to embrace the unknown. In the perspective of time, I look back at these dictionaries with the eyes of Horace and cannot help but recollect his wonderful verse: *Exegi monumentum aere perennius - I have raised a monument more lasting than bronze* (Horace *Odes* III.30). Words are enduring, dictionaries are, in their unobtrusive, quiet ways, organizing meanings, contexts and epochs.

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