

# The Internet and Changes in the Written Press

## - Summary -

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This paper aims at analysing the ways in which the existence and popularity of the internet has influenced written press.

I began working on the present thesis at a time when both Romania and the United States were confronted with the first effects of the financial crisis. As I went deeper into the details of the documents I was studying, the research and events on the media market, and, especially, on the written press market directed me towards a completely different course than I had initially set for my paper. Written media was caught up in the tangled web of budget cuts (a natural effect of significantly decreasing advertising investments), which in turn led to lower quality, to decreased sales and income, and then back to budget cuts. This crisis of the written press made the utter optimism that we had experience when we thought of how the internet might assist the written press turn into pessimism and suspiciousness.

I attempted to find the rationale behind the effect of the internet on the written press, as well as what additional benefits the former brought to the media environment and what parts of journalism were either enriched or deprived by the increased number of internet users.

Moreover, I was concerned with the way in which paper had reacted before when confronted with interfering technologies (telegraph, radio, television). The reaction of the written press to these instances was likely to provide a clue for the current state of today's papers.

In order to better emphasize a possible connection between the existence of the internet and its influence on the way editors wrote their columns and chose their subjects, we picked four national newspapers (**Adevărul**, **Cotidianul**, **Evenimentul Zilei** and **Ziua**) and analysed their printed editions from 1995, 2003 and 2010 (for 2010 only the printed versions of **Adevărul** and

**Evenimentul Zilei** were analysed, as the other two had stopped printing in 2009) and their online editions from 2003 and 2010 (as a warning about the disadvantages of digital editions, I must mention that the archives of the 2003 articles published online in **Ziua** and **Cotidianul** were missing during my research and I was unable to obtain the access I needed to study them).

## General Framework

Newspapers and broadcasting networks were too long accustomed to direct the public agenda. Having this traditional self-importance (we might even call it omnipotence) in the media environment, journalists and owners of media conglomerates thought that nothing and no one can threaten their dominion. When the internet appeared, power shifts took place between mass-media and public opinion, and the use of the professional journalist was questioned. It is true that papers, televisions, and radio stations readily colonized this new means of communication, but for a long time they seemed unable to grasp its peculiarities, so that their websites were rather an insignificant extension and were treated as such (the materials printed here were copy-pasted from their printed editions or television shows). The change, nonetheless, was profound. Gradually, both newspapers and broadcasting networks realized they were no longer the only sources of daily information. Traditional press organizations started investing – shyly, at first, but soon after, significantly – financial, material, and human resources in the development of their online editions. As income from online advertising increased, organizations that published exclusively online started to grab the attention of more and more readers. Blogs and social networks crowded the information jungle even more, while finding information became difficult not because of its scarcity, but due to its abundance. It is here that the vicious circle closes: in order to detangle this web of information, we need people who have a trained eye for sorting out large amounts of information and extracting only what is relevant, important, and interesting, in a balanced and nonbiased way. *Id est* the very definition of the journalist.

The internet clearly brings a lot of benefits in the field of journalism. However, this new means of mass communication, that tends to gradually comprise all the others, also brings the threat of the disappearance of the written press as we know it. Such a threat is all the more important because it is doubled by a time of economic and financial crisis in the Western world. Even if, at this time, only the printed press seems to go through issues that question their existence, it is

highly likely that television and radio stations will be confronted with the same problems once there is a shift of preferences among media consumers.

The fact that the number of news editors decreased, that quite a lot of newspapers disappeared or went bankrupt brings much concern to the world of journalism, because most fieldwork that leads to the discovery of potentially interesting stories is still done by written press organizations; these stories, found by newspaper reporters, are the basis of most of the journalism that the other mass media (television, radio, websites, blogs, forums) broadcast. The crisis of the written press questions the ability of journalism of maintaining its social role.

## **Structure of the Paper**

In the first part of this paper I briefly introduced the information revolution that made the internet possible. The way in which technology shapes the development of human societies is fascinating; understanding the way in which information is stored, transmitted, or manipulated, is crucial for an accurate analysis of the evolution of civilization. Computer mediated communication brings along an information technology similar to the creation of the printing press in Europe in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries. This new form of communication significantly influences the centuries-long relationship between journalist and public.

The second part of the paper is dedicated to an introduction to online journalism, its particularities and to the difference it bears from traditional journalism and written press, especially. Online journalism started as a pastiche of written press, but evolved and continues to evolve, under public pressure, economic and journalistic demands, into a new and more diverse, which shamelessly borrows traits from all the other mass media.

The third part of my paper represents legislation, ethics and deontology applied in online journalism. The internet is based on technological developments that evolve continuously and rapidly. The immense speed at which everything changes on the internet leads to legal conundrums, issues of acceptable behaviour and norms that should guide the online press. The way in which online journalism will evolve depends largely on the way in which all these issues will be addressed.

In the fourth part of this thesis I analysed the root causes of the crisis that the written press is going through – a crisis nourished both by the internet and by the economic recession. The economic and editorial system on which newspapers relied for hundreds of years are no longer viable for most publications in the developed states, while the search for alternate ways through which journalism can reach its audience and can maintain its role in society is merely at the beginning.

The part of the paper dedicated to research wants to see whether the internet and the crisis had any influence on the quality of national Romanian journalism. My research aims at finding the effects by using sociological methods and tools, such as the analysis of articles published both in the written as well as in the online version of the same papers. The reason I included online version in my research was that, on the one hand, even though Romania rates last on the list of internet users in the European Union, it is among the first when it comes to speed of the network connections: in urban areas over 60% of the population has an internet connection. Moreover, two of the papers analysed gave up their printed version and went exclusively online, which offered me the possibility to analyse the changes that published works go through once they go exclusively online.

## **Computer-Mediated Communication**

Since computer-mediated communication and the internet appeared, human kind is going through a new information revolution. People's ability to store and distribute information grew to level that were hard to imagine a couple of decades ago. This triggered changes in all fields. People succeed much easier to get information, compare costs, characteristics and performance, to take part in virtual communities build around an idea, a passion, or a common interest. Computer-mediated Communication (CMC) helps borders between countries become obsolete and brings people closer despite geographic distances or obstacles.

One of the fields that were affected the most by these changes is the press, especially the written press. I will emphasize the most important changes in the current information environment, created and expanded daily by CMC and the internet. The newspapers, accustomed to holding a quasi-monopoly on quality information, must now adapt to a situation which no longer allow them to be the main source of information, but just one of the many. On this adaptability depends

the future of the press as we know it. The debate regarding the future of the printed press is far from over. Opinions vary, from authors who think that journalism will not go through fundamental changes, but will merely incorporate multimedia elements facilitated by computers and the internet, to researchers who believe that technology is not yet understood and integrated by the press organizations. There are also supporters of the rearrangement of the whole media environment, once information is produced and distributed in a democratic way.

I will also present the main concepts and working models in the field of computer-mediated communication, with a view to showing why it does not only apply to personal computers, but also to a variety of electronic devices (mobile phones, tablets mp3 players, TVs, game consoles) which are present into every aspects of our daily lives.

Computer mediated communication brought about a lot of changes in various fields. Large industrial projects, such as building Airbus airplanes, became economically feasible once teams that produced different parts were able to communicate in real time and to work simultaneously on the same data bases. People abroad, away from their families, discovered a new, simple, fast, and cheap way of communication via internet, so that they were able to maintain their relationship with their families or communities regardless of their physical location. Academic collaboration – one of the original purposes of the design of the first computer networks, namely ARPANET, the predecessor of the internet, has become a lot easier, because both communication between researchers and the publication of the research results are significantly simplified by modern networks of communication, especially the internet (see the large number of online data bases that bring together articles from academic and scientific magazines, most of which were published exclusively online).

Journalism too, and especially the written press, was confronted with the changes brought about by this new type of communication. When they colonized the internet, newspapers discovered a huge potential target audience, and along with it, the fact that they still held the monopoly of information, with which they had been accustomed for decades. They realized that they could do even more with images and text on the internet than they could ever do on print, but also that the internet would bring down their centuries old economic system. They gradually understood that they could make use of the new power of the masses, namely the power of every person that owned a phone or a camera to become a potential reporter, and also that the internet offered

readers the opportunity to choose what articles to read – thus breaking the traditional pattern that allowed the most widely read columns (sports, lifestyle) to gain additional funds for extended research or foreign staff.

The press is at a crossroads. If news people will be able to design new economic models and to make consumers enjoy quality writing, profound analyses, and extended investigations, while overcoming the issues caused by anonymity and loss of monopoly in certain geographical areas, the written press will survive and thrive. However, should these issues prove too overwhelming, newspapers as we know them will gradually disappear, and people will be forced to look for and invent other instruments that can fill the gaps left at society level.

Newsrooms and printed press owners should change their mindset regarding the result of their work. It should not be the printed newspaper, but the information, regardless of its means of distribution. The fact that newspapers are distributed ineffectively, that the cost per paper is high, and that the public is changing its preferences for acquiring information – in the United States the internet surpassed newspapers as main source of current information; in the case of up-to-30 year-olds, it even comes first, before television<sup>1</sup> – will inevitably lead to a significant decrease of printed press readers. Nevertheless, there still is hope, but, ironically, it is linked to that same technology (the *e-paper*, cheap and easy broadband access) that could optimize the advantages of both online and printed media and bring them together to form a new product. The next few years will show us if this idea will turn into reality.

## **Legislation, Ethics, and Deontology**

The internet, as a new information medium, took users by storm, with no instructions, no specific rules of use, and no central authority to separate right from wrong. Information became available to all almost overnight, and mostly at no cost. Behaviours accepted by society and refined for hundreds of years could be tossed to the recycle bin thanks to the anonymity provided by a nickname on a forum. We are currently leaving in the Wild West period of the internet. Even

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<sup>1</sup> The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, *Internet Overtakes Newspapers As News Outlet*, <http://people-press.org/report/479/internet-overtakes-newspapers-as-news-source> (last accessed on April 20, 2009)

though for us surfing buffs the internet seems to have been here forever, the truth is that this global network has just grown out of childhood.

Regulations on how we can use the internet appeared in time. States eventually reacted and started to create the necessary legislation, users in different communities designed their own sets of rules of accepted behaviour in the virtual space, while our object of study – online newspapers, started to decide what was and what was not acceptable regarding online work.

Essentially, online journalists face pretty much the same issues as their peers that work for the written press or audio-visual media. After a wilder starting period, relevant laws have been designed and adapted for internet usage. Courts of law increasingly see the internet as an evolution of the other information media and take decisions which create the necessary precedents and framework to effectively apply the law for online publications as well.

Nonetheless, this evolution does not mean that laws are not liable for interpretation when it comes to the internet. Its seeming omnipresence, the ease with which we can access information, the fact that information can appear and disappear almost instantaneously create new legal and ethical predicaments.

Deontological codes, judicial laws and practices must be adapted to a new mass medium. This adaptability in itself would not be anything new, as the same happened when the radio and television appeared. The difference is the now global audience, the speed, and the fluidity of the online medium. In a matter of just 15 years, papers have crossed the line from static printed editions to blogs, collaborative journalism, online broadcasting networks, continuous media coverage, rss flux, media convergence, and endless apocalyptic discussions around the death of the written press. The environment is continuously changing, and judicial practices and deontological codes, created and enforced over a longer time-frame, are try hard to adapt to continuous change as it goes.

Furthermore, these modifications in legislation and deontology must be for the first time created in the context of an audience that surpasses national borders. The potentially global audience of a site or blog entails unforeseen problems for legislators and deontologists, who must design laws and regulations that can be apply where jurisdiction is unclear. These difficulties are also acknowledged by the main actors of this new means of communication (bloggers, online journalists), who attempt to self-regulate their environment.

We cannot foresee the direction that these legislative and ethical attempts will take, just as we cannot anticipate the direction in which the internet will develop. Those who take part in this debate and try to create instruments of regulation resemble surfers who, although on top of a wave, cannot control it or predict where it will take them. There is only one thing we can be sure of: this wave of media changes brought about by the explosion of the internet, will not slow down its ascent.

## **Changes in the Press Caused by the Internet**

Going from an industrial to an information society has fundamentally altered the way in which information reaches people. The newspaper (**Cotidianul** especially) was the perfect instrument to deliver information to a large number of readers in a reasonable amount of time. It appeared together with the industrial revolution and it borrowed from the attributes of mass production: its content was preset (the same for everybody), it was multiplied in a huge number of copies which were delivered via a complex distribution network throughout a state like area. This type of creation and distribution of the newspaper (the only one available in that period) has led to several of the „unchangeable” rules of journalism (like *deadlines* or the need to fit texts in a limited amount of space). These rules established hundreds of years ago, are still followed by the printed press because, essentially, nothing has changed in the way information is wrapped and delivered to the readers since 200 years ago. The product (article, newspaper) had to be finished in order to be printed and dispatched.

Radio and Television have taken on mostly the same pattern, dreaded *deadline* and all, because they are also one directional channels of information transmission, almost never interactive. In the end, a coverage needs to be finalized before it is aired.

The internet is the first information outlet, following the ancient Greek Agora, which profits off of interactivity. One of the main characteristic of Internet – the fact that it’s online, that it’s available at all times, that it’s always connected – makes the *deadline* obsolete. The pressure of first publication increases enormously. What this means is that the new disseminators of information (bloggers especially) do not consider their articles finished, and journalism (if we can agree that at least a part of blogs are media) becomes a process which does not deliver a finished good but engages a debate. The process is in this case is the product that bloggers



publish, and this process is improved by the contributions of those who participate in the debate. In this case the one writing the article supplies the contextual information, the available data and explains what is unknown, by relying on the contributions of the community in order to improve the material. The easiness with which, we can update and complete an article, online, is essential in order for this system to work. Printed newspapers do not have this luxury; once the article is printed it cannot be altered (unless we are in the dystopia society that George Orwell imagined in 1984).

We may say that traditional journalists see their product as finished while a lot of online bloggers and journalists consider their materials perpetually beta. One problem of this transformation is that for thousands of years people have been engaged in seeing a newspaper article as the final version. This habit is applied to articles appeared in online papers or blogs. Kicking that habit will take time.

The arrival of the printed newspaper led to institutionalizing distribution, for it was expensive. Press institutions built a capital of trust, which was different from their main means of achieving and maintaining audience. Once distribution was almost free of charge, because of the internet, a new model of journalism appears, the cooperative one, where trust could be placed not only in an institution, like the *New York Times*), but in the process that allowed the information to be published and verified. There is no blog that can compete against the *New York Times*, but a group of blogs together with a list of people on *Twitter*, can do so.

Printed newspapers in developed countries have to deal with a series of complicated issues which threaten their mere existence. From all means of mass communication, newspapers have the largest number of reporters, discover the most original topics and have the largest influence when it comes to deciding what is important for public opinion. A research study<sup>2</sup> of *Pew Center for Excellence in Journalism* shows that in a large city such as Baltimore, the two major newspaper agencies (one general and the other specialized in economy and justice) are still responsible for 61% of new journalistic topics. TV stations have 28%, radio stations 7% and New-media brings a mere 4% of new topics.

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<sup>2</sup> Pew Center for Excellence for Journalism, *How News Happens: A Study of the News Ecosystem of One American City*, 2010, pp. 1-3.

Next to the domination of newspapers in finding topics worth being discussed, a study conducted by Klaus Schönbach, Ester de Waal and Edmund Lauf<sup>3</sup> shows that if compared to online journals, printed newspapers are more effective in opening horizons for those who read them, in familiarizing them with topics or events which would not have interested them otherwise. This quality of printed press is added to that of censorship and critique of power (administrative, political, and commercial) and it shows us the importance of the role that newspapers have built in democratic societies in the last four centuries.

## The Research

Choosing the criteria for the evaluation of the newspapers under analysis was one of the most difficult tasks I have undertaken in this research study. Due to the chosen method of research (document analysis) I was limited to the evaluation of certain intrinsic variables of „the journalistic product”. Further research may complete this painting by using extrinsic variables (like the quantity of written content of a journalist or the type of organization of the editorial office).

The journalistic quality is not determined by consumer preference<sup>4</sup>. The distinction between a tabloid (which, according to Oxford Dictionary, is a newspaper which contains especially sensational articles, with lots of images and graphic elements) and a *quality* newspaper (again according to which Oxford Dictionary says is a newspaper which discusses serious matters seriously and has high editorial standards) is based mainly on quality, quality of the articles as well as the entire newspaper.

The monitored variables are:

1. The page where the article is printed (only for printed editions)
2. Presence or absence of images
3. Type of material (News, Report, Editorial, Commentary, Feature, Reportage, Investigation, Interview)

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<sup>3</sup> Klaus Schönbach, Ester de Waal and Edmund Lauf, *Online and Print Newspapers: Their Impact on the Extent of the Perceived Public Agenda*, in *European Journal of Communication*, 20 (2005), pp. 245-258.

<sup>4</sup> Martin A. Leroy și Christian M. Wellbrock, *Saving newspapers with public grants – The effects of press subsidies on the provision of journalistic quality*, în *Information Economics and Policy*, 23, 2011, p. 281.

4. The source of the information (primary, secondary – press agency, other newspapers/sites /TV channels)
5. Location (national or international)
6. Editorialisation (the term may be replaced with objectiveness)
7. Homogeneity (the term may be replaced with balance)

In order to achieve a unified evaluation of the newspapers and to see the evolution of quality over time, I have attempted to come up with a formula which could encompass the analyzed variables. While developing this formula, it became plainly obvious that there was a need to separate article quality from overall newspaper quality. In order to achieve this, I have conceived two formulas actually, the second referring to the quality of the publication.

For article quality the variables I have used were the source of information, editorialisation and homogeneity (analyzed slightly different depending on the type of article).

In regards to the overall quality of the newspaper, I have used as part of the formula, elements like the type of material used in the first four pages, the proportion of quality articles and reports, the number of articles with images and the number of international materials compared to the total number of articles.

## **Results**

Our intention, with the present research study, was to see the stages of evolution of four daily newspapers in Romania between 1995 and 2010.

The starting questions for this research were:

1. Journalistically speaking, has the quality of Romanian national daily newspapers dropped once Internet appeared and later on spread, as the new means of mass communication?
2. Is there a significant difference between the journalistic quality of printed press as opposed to the online editions of those same newspapers?
3. Does the passage from a printed publication to one exclusively online, influence in any way the journalistic quality?

The answer to the first question is not clear cut. In order to run an analysis we have split the quality of a publication in two: the quality of articles and the quality of the newspaper itself.

The analysis of the quality of the articles has revealed a differentiated evolution for the four newspapers we have monitored. The only newspaper with a constant decrease in quality was **Ziua. Cotidianul** and **Evenimentul Zilei** demonstrated an increase in article quality in 2003 but have regressed in 2010. The case of **Adevarul** was exactly the opposite. It experienced a decrease in quality in 2003 and an increase in 2010.

In regards to the overall quality of the newspapers, this has generally increased, but this increase, for three of the four newspapers (**Adevărul**, **Cotidianul** and **Ziua**) was connected to the systematic use of graphic elements. On the other hand the editorial quality of the newspapers (image excluded) has systematically decreased between 2003 and 2010 to all the newspapers except **Evenimentul Zilei**.

The second question we searched an answer for was if there is a significant difference between the quality found in the online editions as opposed to the printed editions of the same newspaper.

The archives for the year 2003 for two of the newspapers we have studied (**Cotidianul** and **Ziua**) disappeared; therefore the answer is not a definitive one. This answer relies on the analysis made on the other two daily newspapers **Adevărul** and **Evenimentul Zilei**. In the case of these two newspapers, the quality of the online articles gradually increased as opposed to the printed ones. The articles in the online editions were generally more balanced, had more sources, and presented events from several angles. The differences are not that high, it's true, but they do exist.

In regards to the overall quality of the newspapers, both daily newspapers had better results in 2010 as opposed to 2003. But if in the case of **Evenimentul Zilei** this increase was based on improving several parameters (the percentage of articles with substance, the higher number of articles with international topics, the systematic use of graphic elements in order to support articles), with **Adevărul** the better result is owed exclusively to using images in order to strengthen the published material – in regards to the other elements in the formula, the result of **Adevărul** decreased between 2003 and 2010).

The third and last question formulated at the beginning of the research was whether eliminating the printed edition and moving to an exclusively online edition has any bearing on the quality of the newspaper. To support this, I have chosen to analyze, from the beginning, two newspapers which have made this transition at the end of 2009 (**Cotidianul** and **Ziua**).

The result of my research showed that eliminating the printed edition and holding on exclusively to the online editions, leads to a decrease of the quality of materials and editorial content; but at the same time an increase in the number of articles based on detailing the topic in the text as well as images and graphic elements.