



The Role of the Local Press in the Production of Regional Image

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Abstract. The paper examines the question: what are the chances of the agents of the local media who take part in shaping the image of the region in the rural area examined by me, namely the Ciuc basin. Through their content messages the press materials become active parts of a local-scale ethnic self-representation. The paper argues for the fact that the conditions are given for the local media to recognise the role of the media which, beyond local and ethnic self-representation, is also a partner in regional self-definition. Time is ripe for the cultural turn, and, consequently, the region would display its cultural conditions in a wider sense, besides, it would become aware of its own role in the construction of the regional image. In this way it could be an important factor in the discourse production about the region.

Keywords: regional image, local media, minority media, regional discourses

1. Introduction

One of the consequences of joining the European Union is regionalisation. The macro and micro regions enter the competition for various resources, and in this competition the creation of self-definition and of the image is pivotal. Besides the traditional description and analysis of macro-structural changes, the regional researches with a new approach deal with the interdisciplinary research of other elements of regional reality (e.g. the representation of the region, questions of

power, network analysis). Raising the questions of discourse and representation in regional researches, Pierre Bourdieu (1985) or Marc Mormont (1987) expound: the question is not what region is, but how region is perceived, how the various participants interpret region and what this reveals about the social division and power relations of society (Mormont qtd. in Csité 1999). This is called the cultural turn of regional researches.

The post-structuralist regional sociology, related to Imre Kovách's name in Hungary, the discursive concept of creating the region can be compared to the approach of cultural sciences. Examining the evolution of the concept of the region, Kovách states that several concepts and images of the region circulate in the representation of the region both in social science and in public discourse. A discursive competition takes place for the definition of the region, since the contest for consumers and development resources is settled by proper discursive strategies and by images formed about the respective products, regions and rural settlements. The regional images have a great role in obtaining the development resources, since the political decision-makers bring decisions both on development policies and concrete projects based on plans and images (Kovách 2007).

Four types of regional discourses can be distinguished (Jones 1995 qtd. in Csurgó 2007), according to who produces the discourse, who disposes of the authority to fix whether it is valuable or valueless, whether it is competitive or not, and what the consequences of all these are. These are the following:

1. Lay discourse, the communication among the people populating and inhabiting the region;
2. Popular discourse, in which the region is constructed through cultural products (literature, media, art, etc.);
3. Professional discourse, regional discourse of political and administrative decision-makers;
4. Scientific discourse, region constructs of regional researchers.

The revaluation of discursive strategies is also a consequence of the rural development policy of the EU. The regional development system of the EU, as well as the post-productive age have resulted in radically new rural development techniques and strategies both on the part of the developers and that of the users. The role of the formation of new local identities, of the local cultural tradition, of local development resources, of local knowledge increases, the role of local cultural heritage is revaluated, the traditional cuisine and food, the local sights, museums, archaeological sites, natural sights, buildings, folk customs and traditions are reconstructed in accordance with the viewpoints of development (in compliance with the plans and systems of the EU) (Csité-Kovách 2002).

My question refers to what the role of the local press is in the formation of the image of the region.

The local press can be regarded as an element that plays a role in the creation of regional image, as a mediator which thematises the local cultural events, represents and encodes them in various ways, and returns them to the public. This is primarily why I consider it important to raise the questions: how do the local media carry out the act of thematisation, what kind of meaning constitution takes place in local publicity, and how is all this determined by the role conception of the agents of media?

The examined target group consists of the journalists of two regional daily papers of the Ciuc basin, of the *Hargita Népe* county daily and of the *Csiki Hírlap* daily. I made structured interviews with 6 local journalists; the main guideline of the interviews consisted of questions referring to the knowledge of the local journalist community, to the role of the local and minority media, and to the selection of news.

I start from two statements:

1. Regional researches emphasise that, although in the period following the change of regime several media were established, no Hungarian speaking publicity has been formed at a country level, however, several local and regional press organs have been formed, within which the printed local press has a special role (Papp Z. 2005).

2. Researches draw attention to the noteworthy presence of local cultural events in the local Hungarian printed press, to the special role of the media in presenting the events, in the display of ethnic and local self-representation (Bodó 1999).

2. The minority and local journalist

Based on the interviews made with the journalists of the two local papers, in the following I would like to summarise the more significant themes which are relevant to my topic. I think we can search for the answers by approaching the topic from the conception of the journalists' role. I made interviews with journalists dealing with local cultural topics. The questions of the half-structured interviews refer to how the interviewee regards the role of local media, and within it, his/her own place, how s/he sees the readers, how s/he is informed of the news of the event, and how news selection works.

My questions are relevant in a local context, and it is in the conditions deriving from this situation that I try to outline the role of the minority and local journalist. The system of relations of the local journalist consists of the readers, the events organizers, the editorial staff s/he belongs to, as well as the journalist of the competing editorial office. Most of them also report for one of the national media at the same time, some of them are employed by Duna Television. Thus, their work is determined by different editorial expectations, and, from time to time, by a different reading public. During the analysis of the interviews with the journalists, I

formed the following topic groups: professional socialisation / qualification, popularity / relations, (minority and local) role conception, indication of topic / selection of news, opinions formed about cultural contents, access to news.

3. Professional socialisation

As compared to the state of the change of regime, we can see that the generation change has taken place: whereas at the end of the 1990s elderly and male journalists were predominant (Papp Z. 2005), the journalists have been replaced by now, the local circle of journalists got younger and renewed. Their professional qualification took place at the academic specialisations of journalism, social sciences and philology, already in the years following the change of regime. These profiles had not functioned before, so the start of the Hungarian-language academic specialisations is spectacular and dynamic after 1989. The training of the journalists was done in three different ways: at the university in Cluj, at the press college in Oradea, as well as in the form of courses held by professionals from Hungary. There are examples for each of the three among my interviewees. “I graduated journalism at Babeş-Bolyai University in Cluj in 2003. I could say that I have been a journalist ever since, but this also works like obtaining the driving licence and driving ... At first I was working in the editorial office of a Catholic weekly and periodical, I was getting used to the work around editing, to making interviews, but I was aware that the daily and the rush around it would mean the thick of the profession” (A.).

The journalist can also get socialised in the editorial office, relying on his/her professional knowledge which derives from his/her qualification: “I acquired the profession from the elder colleagues, there was a real intellectual workshop in the editorial office of the *Hargita* at the time, then at the *Hargita Népe* after the change of regime. After 1990, when the Association of Hungarian Journalists from Romania (*Magyar Újságírók Romániai Egyesülete, MÚRE*), and its adult training workshops were formed respectively, I took part in several courses and professional trainings led by professionals from Hungary, most of them teaching at the Bálint György Journalist School of the National Association of Hungarian Journalists (*Magyar Újságírók Országos Szövetsége, MÚOSZ*)” (S.).

“I was thinking, well, let’s see, I moved to Miercurea Ciuc in 1996, I applied for the job at the Antena 1 in 1998. I remember, it was also then that a job at the town library was announced. Since I also had the qualification of a librarian, I thought, I could still be a librarian, but not a journalist. Earlier I had been working for the *Udvarhelyi Híradó* as a proofreader, printer’s reader, I also edited the first calendar. In the meantime, I attended a crash course on journalism in Odorhei in 1991, it was held by professionals from Hungary, I obtained a certificate, I have my authorisation as an undertaker registered based on that, too.” (D.)

4. Popularity

One might as well say, one of the most specific traits of the local journalist is his/her popularity. It makes the situation of the journalist dealing with local topics easier and more difficult at the same time. "So I have a certificate, but I practically do not use it, I show it twice or three times a year, maximum." (Sz.)

Popularity also occurs as compared to practising journalism in a big city: "if... you see what I mean, here the personal relations count more, and people rather want to make use of it. There is also pressure, but it is rather personal. However, for me..., my principle is always to provide at least a short piece of news about any kind of cultural event, or whatever we might call it." (Sz.)

"It is more important to be a local journalist. It is in vain that I worked for the Duna [Television], nobody knows who you are. Your name is known better." (D.)

5. The regional role of the local press

Every journalist states that the role of the local press organs, just like that of the national ones, is to inform people on a daily basis, authentically, about the fields of public, economic, sports and cultural life, to announce approaching events, as well as to reflect on those which have already taken place. This is the field which is mostly covered by articles written in an objective tone. Besides, they highlight the importance of subjective writings, reflecting opinions, such as editorials, notes, feuilletons and squibs. "A local paper will only fulfil its task if it works with a team of journalists which can represent both genres." (A.)

The journalists of *Csiki Hírlap* connect their role to locality more explicitly. According to them, it is also an important task of the local newspapers to reinforce communities, to form values. A local paper does not have to deal primarily with the events of the so-called high politics, but rather with questions related to the respective region, since they are about local events for local people. A local press organ also has to provide information on an event which is important in the life of the given community, but which may not have the value of an item of news in a national paper.

The journalists of the *Hargita* highlight the importance of providing a high standard piece of reading, respect for the traditions of the Hungarian press, and raise their voice against the tabloid tendency and superficiality.

6. The regional role of the local journalist

The editors of the *Hargita* identify the role of the local journalist with that of "the journalist," they make no difference from a professional point of view and they also emphasise it. Being a journalist means professional devotion, sense of

vocation, professionalism and humbleness towards the profession. They also make reference to the tabloid media discrediting the honour of the profession, because of which the readers unanimously label both the profession of journalism and the journalist negatively.

Certainly, the role achievement of the local journalist is dependent on their personality. I would call the type below the practical-participant one, being committed to certain local matters, issues.

“It depends on what one wishes to do. Maybe you do not solve more (locally, as in other places, ed.). Maybe you can influence culture at a local level. This is my purpose most of the time. Yes, I often write the article with the expressed purpose that things should change. I want to teach a lesson, I touch on sensitive points.” (D.)

Another example is the objective attitude, saying that this is what happened, and its most frequent representation technique is a quotation or reference to the subject. “Well, the article reports on the event, as well as on what is said. Well, that they ... of course, nobody will interpret an event negatively, but a journalist does not write down his/her opinion most of the time. Thus, political essays, notes are exceptions, but at other times the journalist reports on the event, and then, s/he includes in the article one part of what the participants in the event say ..., arranges the article to be a whole, having a beginning, a middle and an end, to be readable and concise. Thus, in this case there is no attitude expressed, either a positive or a negative one, so that ... in this case we do not express our attitude.” (Sz.)

The journalists agree upon the fact that as compared to the national press, the journalist of a smaller region is in a better situation, since s/he can form a personal system of relations with the institution leaders and with people counted as key figures in his/her domain, in this way his/her work becomes more humane. His/her work is facilitated by the fact that s/he knows who s/he addresses. The reading public of a local paper can be delimited more clearly; by living in the respective community the journalists know the expectations better, it is easier to form relationships, and, last but not least, a local journalist is more “accessible” for the reader, which may also be a burden. This is formulated by the journalists of both papers: “... the organisers of every tiny event lay claim to the presence of the press, to the press reaction, and the excuses are unpleasant if the elaboration of certain topics is not motivated. Still, they call on the journalist and demand an explanation of why the respective event has not appeared in the paper, in this way the role of a local journalist also implies facing offendedness and dissatisfaction. The larger the region a press organ covers, the more the organiser of the event understands that it does not necessarily deserve publicity.” (A.)

7. The role of a minority journalist

It turns out from the interviews what the journalists of the two papers think about the duty and role of the minority journalist. The journalists say that the status of the minority journalist implies a surplus of responsibility. They primarily mention the professional requirements (authentic information and generic variety). His task is to form and teach the claim to correct Hungarian language, to proper speaking and writing. Besides, he has to be aware of the fact that due to the power of the printed word the journalist is a considerable factor in influencing public opinion, and one must not abuse of this situation.

“It is a delicate matter, a special situation. I have already read that there is only good and bad journalism, but if we live in minority, then there also surely is minority journalism. In our case, of course, it means taking on the case of the Hungarians in Transylvania, dealing with issues, topics touching upon the community. In the field of topic selection and elaboration, certainly, another role is incumbent upon a minority journalist. As a minority journalist we can be committed to the public interest within the limits of goodwill, however, we must not avoid talking about the problems within the community by any means. Unfortunately, there are examples to this, it is rather the principle of ‘others hurt us, at least we should not hurt those belonging to our nation’ that prevails.” (B.)

8. Topic selection

The issue of what becomes the material of a daily paper, what individual and editorial filters it goes through, what kind of offered and accepted or unaccepted interpretations come to light, and where the stress is laid is a very complex question. It is only one part of this complex question what the journalists think, experience, and how they solve this problem themselves.

The journalists compete with time, it represents a difficulty for them if events are organised in the region simultaneously. It occurs in the interviews that in their opinion what is important is the role of educational events and drawing attention to values. However, it cannot be said that topic selection works in accordance with any kind of strategy, beyond the fact that events have to be reported on a daily basis.

“I would already break with daily newspaper writing with pleasure, I do not wish to pursue the daily activity with the Duna Television, I am not interested in a lot of things. I would be interested in more profound topics, in dealing with one single topic for two weeks. I do not have time, because if I write about something, it is true one day, and the other day it is no longer true ... several times we report on things which are only the products of imagination, and then it is not achieved, we do not even demand an account of them ...” (D.)

Tradition is one of the most thematised elements, concepts of media. The concept of tradition has always taken part successfully in the practice of minority identity formation, additionally, it is successfully run by the media as part of the image shown and produced about the region, it is the obligatory recurring feature of self-definition, what is more, in the global discourse high hopes can be attached to it related to heritage creation and the afferent tourism.

“I used to be a member of the *MÚRE* (Association of Hungarian Journalists from Romania), but I am no longer, I am no longer preoccupied with it. I am preoccupied with preserving tradition, with national survival, because I am such a person. If I were a member of the majority, the very same things would preoccupy me, namely, our language, the preservation of our traditional costume.” (D.)

The endeavour to systematically present the values of the region cannot be pointed out in the interviews.

It is an interesting question what the relationship between the minority topic and the local topic is. Whereas in his/her relation with the local public the journalist sets himself/herself the target of making known the local programmes for an ever wider public, it can be seen that the image of the region “ordered” from the outside sticks to continuously supporting and reinforcing the image created by itself.

“From the viewpoint of politics, I was interested in expressed minority topics as long as I was reporting for Duna Television: they are very boring ... For example, the Csángó topic always appeared. We reported on it a lot, but somehow it was too much for me. There were events which were ordered year by year. To report on the same issues every year, the Peril from Siculeni ... I earned my living from that, but I did not understand why [Duna Television] was interested in this particular topic and not other ... more serious problems. I included in the topic preview of the religious programme that the Catholic population decreased in number, and the speaker presented the reasons for this, such as the appearance of new religions..., however, it was not included in the programme, because we do not report on negative things. This was my case with thousands of things ... with old topic previews, which were not ordered. And I did not want to present programmes only on the minority topic.” (D.)

9. Summary

In my paper I have examined the question of the chances the agents of the local media have, who take part in shaping the image of the region in the rural area examined by me, namely the Ciuc basin. Regional research states that after the change of regime the local publicity has been reinforced, characteristically, it consists of insular entities, its authority, objectives and concerns are related to particular regions, where the everyday problems of people get into focus. Within

the Hungarian-language daily papers, it is the reading of the “local daily” that is one of the most infiltrated, ingrained habits of the Hungarian community from Transylvania (Magyari 2000: 2003).

Along with the analysis of the interviews made with journalists I delimited the following topic groups: professional socialisation / qualification, popularity / relations, (minority and local) role conception, topic indication / news selection, opinions formed on cultural contents, access to news. The role of the local and minority journalist gets shape along these lines. It turns out from the interviews what the journalists of the two examined papers think of the role of the minority journalist. The journalists consider that the status of the minority journalist implies a surplus of responsibility. They primarily mention the professional requirements (authentic information and generic variety). It is part of this role to form and teach the claim to correct Hungarian language and to proper speaking. Researches underline that the legitimising role of media materials can be detected in the practice according to which more reports are published afterwards than before, with an informative character. Through the content messages the press materials become active parts of a local-scale ethnic self-representation, and at the same time it is through this that the mental/symbolic adjustment to the ethnic “whole” takes place (Bodó 1999).

It is a very important statement of regional researches that the series of events organised after the change of regime and the participation of the media in them use up the forces shaping society, what is more, it may conceal the possibility of other presentational endeavours in which it would also be possible to use the media successfully. Viewing from the specific concerns of the region it can be seen that the conditions are given for the local media to recognise the media role, which, beyond local and ethnic self-representation, is also a partner in regional self-definition. Time is ripe for the cultural turn. Consequently the region would display its cultural conditions in a wider sense, besides, it would become aware of its own role in the construction of the regional image, in this way it could be an important factor in the discourse production about the region.

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