The Field of Local Journalism in Constanța: Profession as Metaphor

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Abstract: *The Romanian media sector was one of the first spheres of practice to go private after 1989, but as well one of the most hit by the economic crisis after 2008. In the early nineties, to be a journalist represented a great opportunity; to be a journalist now is at least problematic (Petre 2009; Surugiu 2013). The research aims to empirically analyse the journalistic field at the level of the city of Constanța, Romania in 2018-2019. The context of the local media is one of decline after a period of effervescence (Tocitu, 2019). The empirical evidence points to a rather limited professionalization of the field in terms of education. Most of decision-making positions are occupied by male journalists with unspecialised education, and most of entry positions by female journalists with specialised degrees. At the same time, the journalists under study are mainly under the age of fifty, thus not having had experienced communist newsrooms. The most important professional values, shared by most of those interviewed are objectivity and a good command of the Romanian language; while of less importance appear to be the sources of information. The internal fragmentation of the work conditions within the field of local media, with contracts ranging from permanent with no exclusivity clause, to copyright with exclusivity clause have the capacity to structure different power positions, and very different opportunities for action and professional autonomy*

Keywords: *field of journalism, local journalists, Constanța, media sphere, profession*

The Romanian media sector was the first private enterprise after 1989, but one of the most hit by the economic crisis as well. While the privatization has been explained by the newly gained opportunity to free expression, the issue of sustainability of professional journalistic practices has hardly been addressed. In the early nineties, to be a journalist represented a great opportunity; to be a journalist now is at least problematic (Petre 2009; Surugiu 2013).

Our research paper aims to empirically analyse journalists and theirs practices at the level of the local media field in the city of Constanța, Romania. The specific structuration of the Romanian journalistic field, as well as the commodification of mass cultural products represents the structural explanatory context of analysis (Benjamin 1955; Munteanu, Petre 2011). We aim to link the macro-structural dimension of transformation, to the current journalistic practices. We describe the structuration of the actors in the local journalistic field as explanatory factor for further analysis of the journalistic content. In this context, we explore the limits and opportunities for media content production at the level of the local media field. No less importantly, we problematize whether local journalists form a professional body or not, which aims at excellence and/or survival.

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The population of journalists under scrutiny is of manageable size, a little more than one hundred people making their living from journalism, allowing for an extensive approach. The area of newsgathering is most often than not regional. The structure of the research team, comprising an academic from the regional university and a student with prior experience as a journalist in the local media team, allowed for a hands-on approach. At the same time, our position within the field directs our attention in specific ways. From the academic position the sphere of praxis might be judged against a normative ideal type. From the field itself, the researcher might evaluate the practices in her own newsroom positively and the ones of other newsrooms as inappropriate. Moreover, the seasoned professional might positively evaluate legacy media, while the young one is enthusiastic about the new media. Nevertheless, the diverse positions make visible our prejudices, allowing proper cross-examination.

The theoretical backbone of this research is provided by several research traditions. Cultural studies inform us on the production, text and reception phenomena (du Gay 1998; Hesmondhalgh 2013; Hall 2013). The political economy of the media adds to the understanding of media production processes (Golding, Murdock 2005; McChesney, Pickard 2011). The post-structural tradition sheds light on the economy of symbolic goods (Bourdieu 1980, 1993; Benson, Neveu 2005), while neo-institutionalism brings in the issue of organizational analysis taking into account the ecological dimension of a sector of activity (DiMaggio 1977; Powell, DiMaggio 1991). The dynamic between structure and agency, as theorized by Anthony Giddens (1984), represents the key of further reading the dynamic between the sphere of practice and the professional actors in the field.

We use the concept of field (or champ) as institutionalised sphere of practice with specific rules, where the position of the actors carries explanatory power for the limits and opportunities of individual *habitus* (Bourdieu 1984, 1998). Another useful term is that of creative sphere. This concept has been developed within cultural studies and refers to those areas that produce texts whose utilitarian value is smaller than their symbolic value (Hesmondhalgh 2013). The journalistic output carries this double value, economic and symbolic; therefore, for the purpose of this research, journalism is considered as a creative sector. Neo-institutionalism uses sector-based terminology, shedding light on the institutional context where professional practices become institutionalised (Powell, DiMaggio 1991). In this project we use the attributes of field/sphere/sector in a cumulative way in order to make sense of the positions and relations between the journalists. The unit of analysis is the local media sector, and specifically the journalists that make it come true.

Professionalization is another concept that has explanatory value for the more or less autonomous processes of content production (Petre 2013), where the rules and control of work processes are set within the sphere of activity by means of peer-review evaluation (Abbott 1988; Curry 1990) rather than by means of

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external pressure (Petre 2015). We explore the processes of journalism de/structuration through the lens offered by the sociology of professions as it allows us to observe the degree of professionalization of the field under study.

The transformation of journalism in Romania

Within the Romanian journalistic field there have been substantive transformations. Before 1989 the journalists were firmly set under politics, the space of individual and professional autonomy being extremely limited (Petre 2012, 77-104). At the beginning of the nineties some of the journalists became owners of their means of production, a rare situation within the journalistic sphere (Hallin, Mancini 2004). Nevertheless, while some journalists were becoming owners, others were becoming employees in the private businesses of the new owners (Coman 2004, 2010; Petre 2012). Further on, many journalist-owners sold their means of production and became managers and editors in the media channels formerly owned.

In the early years of the twenty-first century fundamental changes happened to labour relations within the field of Romanian journalism, and not only. The changes led to the Labour Code of Romania in 2011, in the context of economic austerity that paved the way to precariousness of work conditions in the country. More specifically for our field of interest, journalists had their status changed from fully-fledged employees to copyright agreement-based collaborators. Theoretically the journalists have become freer in their relations with the media organizations and their income has slightly improved in the short run. Practically, the confidentiality agreements of their contracts do not allow them to work for other media platforms. At the same time, the responsibility for health, retirement and unemployment contributions has become individual, placing journalists in a very fragile social position (Rogozanu 2013).

Moreover, the 2008 crisis severely hit the Romanian media sector, reducing almost by half the number of active journalists and putting a serious strain on their labour conditions. At the same time, the undergoing processes of digitalisation determined major changes in the regime of media production, not necessarily to the journalists' benefit. New positions have become institutionalised within the media sector, in order to sustain the on-line versions of media channels. These are usually occupied by newcomers who sometimes are not paid. New forms of labour have emerged, like working from home in front of a laptop, a way of content production that does not link the young journalist to the newsroom and the organizational culture of the media outlet (Surugiu 2014).

The autonomy of the Romanian journalistic field is generally low. While under the authoritarian regime journalism was firmly situated under politics, at the moment the range of instrumentalisation has merely diversified, but not disappeared (Petre 2012). Except for the short *intermezzo* of the 1990s, when some of the journalists became as well owners of their means of production, the field of journalism has been dominated by the more powerful spheres, the political and

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lately the economic one as well. Pierre Bourdieu (1994) has perceptively remarked that it is more difficult for journalism than for other spheres to become autonomous, because it is not in control of an *esoteric* knowledge inaccessible to the lay others. The French sociologist provides the example of the sphere of mathematics or history, where only the knowledgeable have access. Journalism has a structurally lower capacity to control its borders because of the lack of a hermetic knowledge, but also because of the constant external scrutiny and evaluation by the audiences, which can sometimes be more powerful than the internal peer-review professional evaluations.

Besides the weak structuration of an autonomous professional body, the lack of economic sustainability of an emergent media market places the field of journalism in an even more fragile position. The American researcher Peter Gross was keen to observe that Romanian media is a "colossus with feet of clay" (1996). Moreover, at the moment, the market demand for quality journalism is not consolidated in Romania (Petre 2013). We aim to explore the position of the journalists in the local field given the unstable structuration of their sphere of practice.

The context of approaching journalism as subject and object of study

After 1989, much scholarship on a vaguely defined Central and Eastern Europe does not do justice to the national and regional elements of differentiation. In the Romanian public sphere, some of the approaches to journalism are normative, rather than explanatory; for example, that media is increasingly tabloid, while it should act as a watchdog.

Moreover, recent approaches to new media are sometimes triumphantly discussing digitalisation, convergence and new forms of journalism. These perspectives miss the point of the options of the real journalists, caught within these transformations. Last but not least, the Romanian journalistic field does not have an impressive record of reflexivity (Petre 2012).

There is an increasing body of quality scholarship on Romanian media and journalism, which we mention in our references. At the same time, we believe there is still insufficient empirical work on the link between the structural transformation of Romanian media and the current options and limitations that journalists face within the field of journalism. We believe the relation between professional practices and the quality of journalistic production in the context of the problematic sustainability of Romanian media deserves a stream of research of its own. The actual possibilities of acting as a watchdog, as well as the actual possibilities of producing quality output need to be understood before passing normative judgements.

Journalism practice is in a fragile condition at the moment, but it is still the only profession that has as legitimate mission watching over power and informing public opinion. We aim to contribute to a better understanding of the opportunities,

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but as well of the limits of publicly aimed content production. Moreover, we wish to bring more reflexivity to a sector that is constantly under time pressure.

Methodological considerations

We try to determine to what extent regional journalism manages to professionalise or not. What are the current career stages within the field? How does the position within the field determine the professional practices and the self-evaluation of the actors in the field? Do local journalists have at heart professional values, and thus believe to work in the public interest? What is the relative importance of cultural, economic and social capital for the dynamic of the sphere of local practice of journalism? What is the perception of journalists about their role?

The project proposes a combination of research methods that allows for an extended approach of the subject. The unit of analysis is the local media sector, namely journalists in charge with content production covering all types of media channels, from print to new media. We do not deal with media workers responsible with technical support, nor with the personnel in charge with presenting content, but not producing it. Moreover, we do not count as relevant platforms that merely aggregate content, but not produce it.

We selected the corpus of journalists considering the content producers that are paid and make a living from journalism. We did not include the content producers that do it as a hobby, or that are occasional contributors to various platforms. One hundred journalists from all local media were approached, and more than half of them filled agreed to take part in the survey. The rate of response is slightly higher than fifty percentage.

The questionnaire got shaped into 14 items, from which six open-ended questions and six close-ended ones. The first part of the questionnaire allowed us to build the socio-demographic profile of the interviewees, as well as to describe various positions in the field according to gender, age, professional education (or lack of it), and income. In the second part of the questionnaire we are able to make sense of the symbolic position towards the profession and professional practices, as well as of the attitudes regarding the abstract professional norms versus the concrete organizational practices. The aggregation of data is descriptive, and takes the graphic form of distributions of various variables by a set of others, but not necessarily because of them.

The research is set under qualitative auspices, for it aims to explore and get a sense of the field under study. At the same time, a quantitative tool has been designed to aggregate data as well, for the sake of being able to have a view that covers all walks of the local media field. Thus, the survey combines qualitative research methods: in-situ observation, open interviews, and the open-ended questions of the interview guide, with quantitative instruments: the quantified close-ended answers to the questionnaire. In principle, the combination of quantitative and qualitative methodology is a methodological optimum.

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Direct observation allows us to access the strategies and decision-making procedures in real life situations at the workplace (Tunstall 1971, 2001; Schelssinger 1978). We observed the dynamic of interaction among the journalists, between the journalists and their sources, between the journalists and their editors, but as well the interaction between journalists and the financers, journalists and media users. The semi-structured interviews clarify aspects related to the professional trajectories, the values and motivations of the journalists. In this stage of the research we got a preliminary view of the professional and non-professional networks that journalists are part of and identify with. We analyse the way the journalists' discourse about the profession gets shaped, what are the most powerful voices and who has the actual power to shape discourse (Foucault 1971, 1972; Fairclough 2013).

The main risk of our research is represented by the availability of the regional journalists to become objects of research. We build trust via cooperation. We believe that a rate of cooperation of more than fifty is satisfactory. Another risk refers to the validity and accuracy of information. Anthropological scholarship has warned researchers about the way people change their behaviour when observed. During the interviews we run the risk of receiving answers that conform to social expectations. Nevertheless, the diversity of research methods allows for cross-verification and reduces the risk of major errors. Data obtained via the various methodological instruments are triangulated, making visible the inaccuracies.

The local media landscape

After the fall of the communist regime in 1989, there has been a period of rapid transformations in the media at the level of Dobrogea region (which comprises Tulcea and Constanța counties). Adelina Tocitu (2019) points out that in the interval 1990-2013 there were launched fourteen television stations in the region, from which some with national reach. As of 2019, according to the same author, there are only seven channels still operating. From these, three are operating in the city of Constanța. There are other two television channels in the city, but they are branches of national television operators.

The print media has undergone an even more severe crisis, as the readership has constantly declined and most of the publications have moved their operations on-line. The most known print titles, *Telegraf* and *Cuget liber* still have print versions, but they have both distribution points and dedicated pages for announcements that provide them with additional means for sustainability. Various new media platforms, blogs and lately vlogs have reduced the size of the market for traditional media even further, and the print sector has been the most severely hit.

The radio local landscape has been equally dynamic. There are several commercial radio stations that offer editorial content just because it is required by

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law, but that, in practice, prioritise advertising over news.[1] The results of recent research that the main author of this article has conducted together with students of Journalism point to less than 4% editorial content, and more than 96% music and advertising at the level of commercial local radio stations. The public service radio is a notable exception, with almost ten percent editorial content, and covering a large diversity of journalistic genres: news, interviews, reportage, and talk-show. It produces its own content that is cross-referenced. Radio Constanța is the largest, most diverse, and richest from the informational point of view. It is actually the only public service channel operating in Constanța. At the same time, in Romania, there is a trust issue related to public service media, as people believe it is a state channel. The distinction between the two has never been properly conceptualised after the fall of communism (Petre 2018). There is no public service television and the print sector has never enjoyed dedicated public support or regulation. The local commercial radio stations mainly process information for short newscasts.

Empirical findings

The population of local journalists under study is relatively young. Only six of the fifty respondents are older than fifty. The interviewees have generally started their careers in journalism after 1989. Thus, we talk about a population that had not practised journalism under communism. We believe the fact that the journalists are young has explanatory power for the type of structuration of the field of local practice.

In terms of gender, there are more women than men in the population under study, namely 29 females and 21 males. At the same time, six of the male journalists occupy decision-making positions, and only three of the female journalists are in positions of decision. Of the men in decision-making positions, four are young adults, aged 31 to 40, while the female decision-makers are uniformly distributed by age. This distribution shows a classical patriarchal distribution of roles, with many females in the lower strata, and many men in ruling positions. We believe this is not the case only for journalism, but we find it interesting because at a discursive level journalism considers itself a progressive force, while in structural sociological terms we observe a very classical distribution of positions.

In terms of education, most of the journalists in the sample have a university degree, 46 out of the 50 respondents. Of the remaining four, two are still undergraduate students. Eight among the interviewees have graduate degrees, besides the college degree. We can say that these journalists are generally educated people.

[1] See the autoetnographic research of Mădălina Sîrghi on Kiss Fm Constanța, UOC, Constanța, 2019.

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When it comes to the field of study, we notice a large diversity, pointing to a rather low degree of professionalization in terms of specialised education. From the fifty respondents, twenty have a degree in Journalism and two more have degrees in the larger field of Communication Studies. The rest of twenty-eight interviewees come from heterogeneous academic backgrounds. There are graduates from fields as diverse as International Relations, History, Navigation, Letters, Engineering, and Political Sciences. Arguably, we cannot as yet speak of a unification of the field of journalism around a common academic background, which would further enhance the institutionalisation of an *esprit de corps*, as Bourdieu conceptualised the phenomenon (1989). From the point of view of education, at the Constanța level we can say that journalism is more of an occupation, rather than a profession (Abbott 1988).

At the same time, most of the ones that have degrees in Journalism are young, pointing to a phenomenon of convergence of education at the entry level of the field. Nevertheless, at the moment, the heterogeneity of the field does not provide common representations of the specialised, hermetic or *esoteric* knowledge of the field.

From the respondents over forty years of age, only four have specialised degrees. This distribution is explained by the scarcity of specialised education in Journalism immediately after the fall of communism. Under communism, journalism was a tightly controlled sub-field of politics, in the understanding provided by Lenin; the press was supposed to be the "armed arm of power". The only way to get journalism credentials back then was via the party schools.

The field of journalism started to become differentiated from the political field after 1989, and the emergence of Journalism programs in various universities was part of this process. The Journalism programme at Ovidius University of Constanța was opened in 2001; a program in a private local university was available a few years earlier; while the University of Bucharest had paved the way in this process since the early 1990s.

The younger journalists bring more specialised education to the local field of media. At the same time, their academic credentials are commonly downplayed within the field of practice. The majority of the ones younger than forty have degrees in Journalism. This can either indicate a process of institutionalization of education as a means of consecration in the field, or show that the ones with a degree in Journalism were more likely to take part in the survey.

Nevertheless, this type of structuration sheds light on a specific problem within this field, namely the ones without a specialised degree are more likely to be in a decision-making position than those with a specialised degree. The decisions of the ones with backgrounds other than Journalism are consequential for the opportunities of the newcomers, and range from editorial priorities to hiring and firing. We argue that this structuration places in a rather uncomfortable position the ones with a formal degree in Journalism, but equally the decision-makers. Anyway,

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it is plausible to state that the older the journalists, the less likely they are to have a specialised degree, and the younger the more likely to have a diploma in Journalism.

In terms of income, most of the respondents answered that theirs is medium to high. At the same time, it is noteworthy that the distribution of the income of the journalists in decision-making positions shows a high degree of dispersion, ranging from the minimum salary to higher than the medium salary. It looks as if having a decision-making position does not differentiate the journalists from the rest of the cohort. In other words, the ones in decision-making position do not seem to make more money than the others; thus, it is not clear whether having a decision-making position pays-off. We are not really sure how to interpret this similarity in the distribution of income among the interviewees. The journalists were not asked about the precise income, but were given options ranging from minimum income to higher than the medium salary. Thus, this dimension is a subjective perception, rather than an objective measurement.

At the same time, it is interesting to observe that none of the respondents with specialised studies occupy the lower range of income. There are five respondents that are paid with the minimum income, but they did not graduate in Journalism or Communication Studies. It might be hypothesised that the specialised studies are used as bargain argument when it comes to salary, but this to be further explored. Most of the graduates firmly occupy the middle range of self-declared income in the distribution.

In the realm of perception, we integrated questions about the priorities in the field, ranging from objectivity to style and expressivity. This part of the questionnaire contained multiple-option items and was operationalised based on the concurrent understandings of journalism in Romania. It is useful to problematise at this point what journalism is, according to the institutionalisation of this craft in the Romanian territories (Petre 2017). At the beginning of this occupation, in the nineteenth century, the main understanding was that of forming opinions and shaping a national identity. Under communism, journalism was an arm of power. After 1989, the pre-war understandings of opinion makers merged with the newer liberal American definitions of objective, information craft. In this context, it is noteworthy that in our survey *objectivity* received most appreciations, 47 out of 50. It was followed by *good command of Romanian* with 43 appreciations, and *moral integrity* valued by 42 of the 50 respondents. *Good management of information* received 41 appreciations, while *style and expressivity* received 36 appreciations. At the same time, *working with sources* was valued by fewer respondents, 33 out of 50; thus, 17 of the journalists do not consider this as especially valuable. It might be the case that within the field the rather French understanding of journalism as high-expression meets American fact-based journalism. We noticed in the distributions that those with a degree in Journalism slightly lean towards the journalism of facts, but not impressively so.

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We further aimed to understand whether the journalists symbolically gather around the generic professional principles, or around the more concrete organizational cultures. In order to achieve this aim, we operationalised the two. At the level of the professional principles we synthetized the items: *professional rules*, *professional techniques*, and the *quality of sources*. At the level of organizational cultures, we proposed the indicators: the *rules of the newsroom*, *technologies*, and *relations within the team*. Here again, it was a multiple-choice system. It was interesting to observe a better self-declared coagulation around the professional values, with 65% of the answers, and a lighter adherence for the organizational culture items, with 35% of the answers. This can mean that journalists identify first with the profession, and only secondly with the organization. At the same time, it is to be further explored whether there is a poor atmosphere in journalistic workplaces, or whether there are journalists that work from home more than in a newsroom.

Last but not least, we wanted to understand the legal type of bonding at the level of the local journalistic field. In this vain, we structured an item about the type of contract and exclusivity clause. We found 19 journalists that do not have an exclusivity clause in their contract. Of these, 15 have a work contracts, and 4 copyright agreements. At the same time, 27 of the 50 journalists who participated in the survey have an exclusivity clause in their contract. Of these, 19 have the clause integrated in their work contracts. It is puzzling to notice that eight of the journalists have this clause added to their copyright agreements. I believe this situation requires a discussion. Theoretically, a copyright agreement brings in more flexibility in the relation of the creator with various media organizations that he/she contributes to. Practically, some media organizations, by adding the clause, keep the journalist blocked from contributing anywhere else, but without providing the social security benefits. Moreover, the journalist enters under the regulation of the Commercial Law in case of litigation, and not under the protection of the Work Code. This type of structuration makes the journalists especially weak in his/her relation with the 'employer', because the copyright, 'independent' journalist is considered to be on an equal footing with the media organization. At the same time, when the journalist has a work contract, it is the organization that has to prove that it did not wrong the journalist. We believe that in this case we witness a win-lose situation, where the winner is the media organization and the loser the captive journalist. We believe that the structural inequities that the changes in the Work Code of Romania have brought to the media field since 2011 have been severely underproblematised.

It is equally interesting to observe the internal fragmentation of the work conditions within the field of local media, with contracts ranging from permanent with no exclusivity clause, to copyright with exclusivity clause added. These differences have the capacity to structure different power positions, and very different opportunities for action and professional autonomy.

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