SPACES OF JOURNALISTIC *PRAXIS*: ON EUROPEAN LEGACIES AND THE ROMANIAN LANDS

Raluca Petre
"Ovidius" University of Constanța

***Abstract**: One of the least explored issues in the present context of deep transformations in Romanian society is how the journalistic sphere of action has been shaped to take the forms and tensions it is witnessing nowadays. What are the main legacies and the main agents that have left a mark and acted as building bricks of this occupation? How can the present understandings be addressed in their genealogy and what are some of the main articulations of the its transformations of journalism to the present shapes and shades? In this paper the area of exploration will be the European journalistic praxis in historical perspective, which can help illuminate the Romanian developments in the field. The most challenging task that this work is set to address is the clarification of the main aspects of the field that emerged from different cultural models in the nineteenth century, and that came to be relevant to the Romanian understanding of journalism praxis.*

***Keywords**: journalism, legacy, Europe, Romanian lands, praxis, nineteenth century, elite, development, 'yellow journalism'*

Spaces of journalistic *praxis*

The main premise of this paper is that the Romanian understandings of the journalistic practice are derived from a plurality of sources, mainly in Europe, but lately in the United States as well, which concern developments and changes in societies facing modernisation and producing the new field called journalism. In the first instance, I refer to the European, especially French and German, practices of journalism that were the most important sources of inspiration in the early days of Romanian journalism; and also because European journalism it re-emerges as relevant in the new context of European Union convergence. I try to shed light on the Russian model, in order to understand the setting where communist understandings emerged in order to be later imposed on a whole region. Last but not least, the American model is the most prominent after communism, sometimes silencing other understandings or local legacies. I do not consider communism as a hiatus in Romanian history, but as just one of the legacies that has to the understood. Likewise, I try to avoid normative judgments on the present American influences, regarded as stressing democracy and the ideology of objectivity as the only possible way of conceptualizing the practice of journalism. I regard the American way as a new shaping influence on the Romanian journalistic definitions. I do not regret past literary European legacies that sprang in the nineteenth century, influencing the first developments of journalism in Romania. I try to identify the main lines of path-dependency that are present and that shape the emerging realities.

BDD-A27709 © 2017 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.25 (2026-09-15 06:18:28 UTC)

I do pursue the call of Daniel Hallin and Paolo Mancini, who argue that when it comes to the profession of journalism, "its differential development in different societies needs to be explained" (36). It is useful to review these influential models because, unlike the United States of America, for example, a large and isolated spatial structure, Romania has developed as a small society in a continental context, characterised by big powers modelling the shapes of European journalism. This has occurred in a specific general context of a society that has passed from nation building efforts, to communism, to find in the last three decades the realities of capitalism and economic priorities.

Romanian academic efforts towards making sense of journalism have been driven either by Francophile high-culture accounts or, lately, by Anglo-American normative positions. I believe that a consistent sociological effort should move beyond normativity, and towards considering these models in their explanatory power for the Romanian system in itself. The point is not to long for one model or another, as idealised standards in the development of the Romanian one, but to take a sober look on phenomena as they unfold.

The comparative diachronic look is a sure cure against common-sense assumptions and against perceiving the Romanian model as 'natural'. In taking this approach, I have taken my cue from Hallin and Mancini, who rightly argue that, "Because it 'denaturalizes' a media system that is so familiar to us, comparison forces us to conceptualize more clearly what aspects of that system actually require explanation" (2).

European legacies of journalism

In the present context, the discussion on the European model of journalism refers mainly to the understandings of this occupation as it emerged in the eighteenth century and took shape in the nineteenth century. Williams argues that "it is possible to identify a European model which is more literary, political and intellectual in its approach" (62), one that "places greater emphasis on the interpretation and analysis of events and issues (…), journalism somewhere between literature and politics" (63). Hallin and Mancini argue that political journalism was one of the determinants of political diversity in Europe, unlike in the USA, where journalism and its core of 'objectivity' cemented around the consensus of liberalism and free market priorities (see Hamilton).

These definitions highlight the specific tasks that journalism would traditionally perform in Europe, namely expressing ideas and political stands, forming opinions, and guiding the audience towards forming opinions. This type of approach is possible due to the Enlightenment, which "had established well the idea of ideas, (…) that there was not one true factual answer to everything based upon religion, but that there were things to be discovered by observation, and upon which opinions might legitimately differ" (de Burgh 29-30). In this philosophical framework that aimed to free people from dogma, "French journalism has always been more a journalism of expression than a journalism of observation. It gives precedence to the chronicle and the commentary over summary and reportage" (Albert, qtd. in Hallin, Mancini 98).

Besides journalists, there are other actors that had been present and active in the field even before the emergence of journalism *per se*, namely owners and printers. Hallin and Mancini rightfully argue that one can speak of the profession of journalist in Europe when "the first hired reporters enter the picture, and the occupation of journalist thus begins to become differentiated from that of printer or politician/owner" (35).

BDD-A27709 © 2017 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.25 (2026-09-15 06:18:28 UTC)

European journalistic practice from North to South

The European understandings of doing journalism take a North–South dimension. Thus, "in countries such as Italy, France, Spain, Portugal and Greece the failure of the press to attain a sufficient level of financial independence made it more difficult for journalism to develop as a profession and establish its autonomy from the state and political groupings" (Hallin, Papathanassopoulos 183) In the Northern and Central parts of Europe more consistent processes of journalism institutionalization would occur, in the context of rational-legal authority systems (see Hallin, Mancini).

At the high end of the spectrum, "for most of the nineteenth century, working for a newspaper was a stepping stone for a 'real career' in literature or politics" (Neveu, qtd. in Williams 63). This fits the understanding of the emerging field as performed by the educated elites to forge opinions in the less educated audiences. At the low end of the spectrum we find the 'pariah' in search for dirty subjects and eager to blackmail, should the occasion emerge. "In 1918 Max Weber described journalists as belonging to 'a sort of pariah caste' (…). For most of the nineteenth century journalism was treated with disdain and fear, a lowly occupation which no one with any ability would willingly enter (…), open to bribery and political patronage" (Lee, qtd. in Williams 65). We can safely infer that at the time journalism was not quite a profession with norms, boundaries and criteria for access. At the same time, it did provoke fear, for it could be a powerful tool. The individualistic nature of the elite and the dubious moral stands of the practitioners of yellow journalism make it rather difficult to imagine that these two worlds would agree upon binding norms and professionalization.

The tasks of the profession represent the answer to the question of what people in this field do, and the preliminary answers range from enlightening the population to blackmailing the powerful of the day. Thus, there is no uniformity in the definition of the tasks pertaining to this occupation in nineteenth-century Europe. Journalists in the nineteenth-century European sense of the term were either literati, elite categories, that would assume this role considering their superior knowledge, or representatives of low morals. Journalism has to do with power, and it is for this reason that other fields are expressing interest in circumscribing and controlling it, the economic and political spaces being relevant examples in this respect (see Bourdieu).

The formal definitions of the profession, along with the normative stands on it, eventually emerged in Europe by the end of the nineteenth century. "In France at this time the 'job of the journalist' was no longer dismissed as 'suitable only for vagabonds and men without any means of support,' and differences dimmed between *ecrivains* and *journalists*" (McReynolds 145). The first forms of institutions created by journalists were started, trade unions as well as professional organizations. "Journalists' unions emerged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries [in Northern Europe] to play an important role in establishing rules and regulations and thus facilitated the emergence of a journalistic culture which transcended political affiliation" (Hallin, Mancini 177). At the same time, while Northern Europe was leading the way, Southern Europe was traditionally lagging behind, as Williams agues: "Professional organizations and journalists' unions are generally weaker in the Mediterranean countries" (66).

Universities started to offer courses or full programs in journalism, such as at the University of Zurich, with professor Wettstein heading the Department (Ghibu, in Petcu 209). Economist Karl Bucher, around the year 1892, announced his seminar of journalism at the University of Leipzig, a step that was considered a scandal at the time, when this occupation was not highly esteemed. Among the precepts of this course were the notions that documentation is important, that "journalism was born out of the need of people to feel the

BDD-A27709 © 2017 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.25 (2026-09-15 06:18:28 UTC)

rhythm of the modern world; that journalists should reflect society in its various developments; that a journalist should not have deep knowledge on all subjects, for he is not a scientist. Nevertheless, he should be aware of the things that happen on a daily basis. The journalist should be as well an enthusiast, but one that has the rare quality of free-thinking" (Radulescu-Motru, qtd. in Petcu 207-9).

Thus, various forms of institutions did emerge, more so in Northern Europe than in Southern Europe, but the occupation was still not shaped as a distinct sphere of action at the turn of the century, least so in Southern Europe. In terms of public service commitment, it is indeed visible in the high-culture approach of writing for the press, and was actually one of the strongest legitimating elements when engaging in writing for the press. For the elites, writing was enlightening the others.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, journalism started to be increasingly defined as based in specialized training, mainly in the workplace and less so in schools, as well as entailing commitment to an ideal of public service. This was the case especially in the context of the growing notion of a 'public good' along the institutionalization of the state and the emergence of 'society'. Reality was no longer just the 'immediate' but could be conceived as something larger – media representing the link and the cement of this social imagination (see Benedict). At the same time, the ethos of public service differentiated this writing from others but did not make a profession and did not carry the premises for institutionalizing one.

European journalistic practice from West to East

By the end of the nineteenth century European journalism in its most Eastern part, in Russia, was getting new attributes as well, and some people even call this period the 'era of journalism'. "The triumph of the new journalism in the 1890s caused the decade to be recorded in the West as the 'age of the reporter' because (…) reporting had become 'a new and important calling'. (…) Russian reporters faced an especially challenging situation because journalism still provided the most meaningful forum from which they could launch opposition to autocracy" (McReynolds 145). In the last decades of the nineteenth century, journalism emerged as one of the most important sites of resistance against autocracy in Russia, with influential elites participating in this forum. Writing for the press was not necessarily a way of making a living, but an instance of making a point and of shaping opinions. "Russia's reporters drew from the legacy of the importance of the writer to society that they had inherited from the intelligentsia (…); they wanted the respect and occupational control associated with professionalization (…); they wanted the prestige enjoyed by the generations of intellectuals whom many reporters revered as role models" (McReynolds 147-8). From this point of view, Russian practices of journalism resembled the other European ones; on the other hand, the social vocation would place it in an original position. One of the main aims of journalism in Russia was that of improving society, of seeing it developing. The public vocation of this occupation was one of its paramount features in the nineteenth century. The notion that the journalists were serving public good and that they were illuminating the others was strong. Their driving force was the aspiration to development and civilization. This was one of the specificities of Russian journalism.

Russian journalism in the nineteenth century did not develop in the direction of depoliticization, despite commercial constraints similar to the ones encountered in USA: "The emphasis on facts and objectivity accorded with the commercial needs of the Anglo-American press. By presenting the facts and allowing readers to draw their opinion of them, newspapers were able to sell to more people, across a broad range of political views and attitudes"

BDD-A27709 © 2017 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.25 (2026-09-15 06:18:28 UTC)

(Williams 63). The Russian journalists managed to deal with the contradiction between the political orientations of various newspapers, by selling the same fact-oriented material to newspapers of various political orientations. This flexibility allowed the political orientation of the publication not to fade away (see McReynolds), and thus external pluralism could be carried on. It is under these circumstances that Russian journalism, like most European journalisms, entered the twentieth century with a strong political journalism.

The almost missionary vocation of Russian journalism placed it at the forefront of larger efforts for development and change at the level of the whole society, providing Russian journalists with a greater aim than that of regular people, making them not just employees in press outlets, but heralds of a possible new order. The reportage, usually from remote places in the Russian territories, was one of the ways of creating the imagination of social issues: "News provided vital empirical data from which readers could construct society; they saw themselves as social scientists and reiterated the importance of accurate and objective reporting" (McReynolds 147). The most famous representatives of the occupation were the ones dealing with investigative journalism, the ones covering remote places and acute problems deep in the lands of Russia.

At the same time, 'yellow journalism', with special accents of religious and missionary characteristics, driven by commercial developments, did exist and flourish in the Russian territories in the nineteenth century as well. There always existed the paradox between the noble intentions of the intelligentsia, no longer financially independent as the first noblemen who wrote for the press, and commercial constraints: "the mass circulation daily was fundamentally a commercial institution, and serving its readers entailed giving them what they wanted, not just what the writers believed they needed (…); they tried to harmonise the potentially contradictory notions of commercialisation and public service" (McReynolds 146). Famous journalists were trying to strike a balance between their missionary work and social duty, on the one hand, and commercial constraints, on the other. One of the ways to deal with it was working as free-lancers and selling the same subject to more than one journal.

The pedagogical vocation of the press was one of the central notions, consistent with the acknowledgement of the need for the development of society. In later years, "Lenin called for a Soviet press that would concentrate on the 'economic education' of the masses (…), eschewing the evils of capitalist media (advertising and sensationalism)" (Goban-Klas 27-28). The new ideology was dismissing 'yellow press' and commercial rationalities, which, it was claimed, would undermine public morality and the ideal drive towards public education. Envisaging the press thus was to have deep influences on the Romanian understanding of media during the communist decades. Sensationalist press was one of the first to be eliminated when the communist regime took over Romania after the Second World War. At the same time, the political and ideological press was the one to dominate the Romanian landscape for fifty years.

European understandings of journalism in the Romanian lands

The way European models of journalism influenced the Romanian ones is the main issue of this section of the paper. Journalism as an occupation did not exist in the Ottoman Empire, the system that had been the most influential in three[1] of the four[2] Romanian provinces until the second part of the nineteenth century. One of the directions from which this occupation could

[1] Moldavia, Wallachia, and Dobrogea.
[2] The fourth is Transylvania.

BDD-A27709 © 2017 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.25 (2026-09-15 06:18:28 UTC)

enter the imagination of the Romanian population as emerging nation was from the West. "German influence on Romania is traditional being, together with the French one, one of the two important sources of direct modernity for the Romanian society, starting from the second half of the nineteenth century" (Abraham 211). My argument is that this influence was possible through the agency of the emerging Romanian elites that would come into contact with the developments in Western Europe and subsequently emulate them. The second possible direction was the East, Russia, but this was to become the most influential one only in the second part of the twentieth century. According to Constantin Antip, "by the 1920s, there were 1090 publications, and by the mid-1930 approximatively 2300, among them 118 dailies, over 1200 weeklies and about 950 other publications" (in Gross 27).

The European understandings of *culturalization* of the masses was brought in the Romanian lands by members of the elites, representatives of the noble classes, in their drive towards emancipation and nation building, and responsive to "the plights of the Romanians still living under the heels of the Russian, Ottoman, and Austro-Hungarian empires" (Gross 28). The agency of the people engaged in this process is of outmost importance, as writing to enlighten was a notion brought from the West, mainly from France, or from Central Europe, from German or Austro-Hungarian big cities. Peter Gross (28) notes "Romanians attending journalism courses abroad, in Leipzig, Germany, and Zurich, Switzerland, as early as 1882."

The literary and political orientations of the first *literati* writing in the press have a clear inspiration in the European ways of doing journalism. Moreover, the fact that, in the Romanian space, the first opinion makers to write in magazines were teachers and clergymen is quite telling. Dem Teodorescu argues that "school and the gazette were born at the same time; from the same needs. With the same people (…). It was the first book of the nation" (qtd. in Petcu 205) The pedagogical drive of the press is in line with the *literati*'s understanding of their duty of illuminating the masses, as well in the specific context of building the nation, which became a priority in the Romanian lands in the nineteenth century. "The common approach was national networks, formed of local scholars and meant to lead to differentiation and legitimate historical places in Europe for their respective countries" (Petre, "Orientalized Europeanism" 217).

Around the same period, 'yellow journalism' emerged as well, out of the desire of the population, the few literate ones, to be aware of the world, of scandals and sensational news abroad. Moreover, content was developed in response to the religious beliefs and fears of the population, reporting on asteroids and other 'supernatural' happenings. In the Romanian lands, the sensational press was quick to develop and to report about the spectacular events that would occur in the Romanian speaking provinces. The subject matter of this press ranged from floods and earthquakes to presentations of royal weddings and noblemen's initiatives. One interesting observation when reading the press of the time is reverence towards the authorities and noblemen, lack of criticism and praising the status quo of the ruling classes (see Cubleșan 105-111). This type of coverage has something of an oriental and Byzantium flavour.[3] Moreover, it recalls 'protocol journalism' (as some African types of covering society came to be known), characterized by deep reverence towards the authority and uncritical praise of all actions related to it, or "the notion that authority is beyond critique" (Tomaselli 427).

It should be stated that there was not a very clear separation in the Romanian lands between 'yellow journalism' and 'broad-sheet journalism'. It was not the case that different newspapers emerged that would serve two very different purposes, as was the case in Great

[3] For a detailed explanation of the various oriental and occidental influences on the Romanian lands in the eighteenth century, see Pompiliu Eliade.

BDD-A27709 © 2017 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.25 (2026-09-15 06:18:28 UTC)

Britain, for example. The two practices of journalism would coexist in the same newspaper, even when the legitimating idea would be that of culture and science. On the frontispiece of one of the first and most popular Romanian journals was written: 'gazette of culture and science'. Many journals, in subsequent years, used this terminology to describe their ethos and drive, even when the yellow content was somehow contradicting these statements.

It is worth mentioning that even if the sources of modernity were countries with a strong tradition of rational-legal authority, journalism was to be implanted in a space characterized by a passive political culture, with strong roots in the feudal order. In terms of the occupation and its distinctive marks, I would argue that, in the Romanian case, being a journalist was a way of making a living already in the nineteenth century, even if as a secondary occupation, besides the one of writer, poet or state clerk. Thus, a prospective writer would engage in journalistic activities, including fierce political debates, according to the publication and the patronage of the press institution. The Romanian national poet, Mihai Eminescu, epitomizes this type of practicing journalism. Like his European counterparts, Eminescu was aiming towards a literary career, yet at the same time, given the necessity of making a living, he was an active journalist for a conservative party. His aim was not necessarily that of joining a trade union, but rather that of attaining the fame as a gifted poet. Meanwhile, and this is the case with many other writers who would practice journalism for a while, he occupied several state positions, as a clerk. It was not an unusual trajectory in the latter half of the nineteenth century (Petre, "On Journalism in Romania") .

Under these circumstances, the premises for the professionalization of journalism were quite low. It was not a permanent occupation, but rather a transitory one until the moment of reaching literary, political or a state funded position. The general aim of the journalist throughout the nineteenth century in Europe was not that of developing inside the journalistic field, but that of moving up the social ladder in the specific context of expressing cherished political ideas. The general context was that of political and social emancipation from the empires' domination, a considerable task for the emerging Romanian society.

Traditionally, "opinion and intellectual analysis are central to the more literary inclinations of European journalism" (Williams 64). Romanian journalism, as shown above, has emerged out of the European models and practices, through the direct agency of local elites studying abroad, in Western and Central Europe, and bringing new ideas to the Romanian territories. "The local elite had faced in the nineteenth century the cultural shock of meeting the Western ideas, most of the time articulated into systems and coherent doctrines (…). The progressive factions in the emerging nations were looking to the West and wished emancipation for their own nations" (Petre, "Orientalized Europeanism" 217).

Well into the twentieth century, intellectually driven literary inclinations did not fade away; nevertheless, they changed shape starting in the thirties, even before communism arrived, during the domestic right-wing dictatorial regimes. "The press became highly censored and many publications were banned, first under the royal dictatorship and then under General Ion Antonescu's dictatorship, which also used the rationing of newsprint as a weapon against newspapers that displeased the fascist regime" (Gross 28). Under these circumstances, journalism came to be closely monitored and to serve the unique and authoritarian power.

Thus, "the 'normal' tendency for government interference in and control of the press and its freedom was an authoritarian legacy that paved the way for the transition to totalitarianism" (Gross 28). I argue in this context that the legacies of literary expression continued, while political pluralism was eliminated, the press becoming subservient to the unique and authoritarian power. External pluralism was no longer possible given the fact that officially there was only one legitimate political formation, the one in power. This structuring was to last up to the end of the twentieth century.

BDD-A27709 © 2017 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.25 (2026-09-15 06:18:28 UTC)

WORKS CITED

Abraham, Florin. *Transformarea României 1989-2006; rolul factorilor externi*. Bucureşti: Academia Română / Institutul pentru studiul totalitarismului, 2006.

Almond, A. Gabriel, Sidney Verba. *Civic Culture: Political Attitudes and Democracy in Five Nations*. London: Sage, 1989.

Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities* (1983). New York: Verso, 1991.

Bourdieu, Pierre. *Sur la télévision*. Paris: Raisons D'Agir, 1998.

de Burgh, Hugo. "Emergence of Investigative Journalism." *Investigative Journalism: Context and Practice*. Ed. Hugo de Burgh. London: Routledge, 2000: 26-47.

Cubleşan, Constantin. "Faptul divers în presa românească din prima jumătate a secolului al XX-lea." *Secvenţe din istoria presei Româneaşti*. Ed. Ilie Rad. Cluj-Napoca: Tribuna, 2007.

Eliade, Pompiliu. *Influenţa franceză asupra spiritului public în România* (*The French Influence on the Romanian Public Spirit*). Iaşi: Institutul European, 2000.

Gross, Peter. "Trumpeting Disaster. Media and the Establishment of Communism in Romania." *Revista română de istoria presei* 1.1 (2007): 27-34.

Hallin, Daniel, Stylianos Papathanassopoulos. "Political clientelism and the media: southern Europe and Latin America in comparative perspective." *Media, Culture and Society* 24 (2002): 175-195.

Hallin C. Daniel, Paolo Mancini. *Comparing Media Systems: Three Models of Media and Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.

Hamilton, T. James. *All the News That's Fit to Sell: How the Market Transforms Information into News*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004.

Goban-Klas, Tomasz. *The Orchestration of the Media: The Politics of Mass Communication in Communist Poland and the Aftermath*. Boulder: Westview Press, 1994.

McReynolds, Louise. *The News under Russia's Old Regime*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1991.

Petcu, Marian. "Contribuţii la istoria învăţământului jurnalistic din România." *Schimbări în Europa. Schimbări în mass-media*. Cluj-Napoca: Limes, 2004. 205-230.

Petre, Raluca. "Orientalized Europeanism of Eastern Europe in a Diachronic Perspective." *Balkan Cultural Identities*. Ed. Adina Ciugureanu, Mihaela Irimia, Eduard Vlad. Constanţa: Ovidius University Press, 2006. 213-227.

Petre, Raluca. "On Journalism in Romania." *Revista Română de Istoria Presei*, 1.1 (2007): 39-41.

Tomaselli, G. Keyan. "'Our culture' vs. 'Foreign Culture': An Essay on Ontological and Professional Issues in African Journalism." *Gazette: The International Journal for Communication Studies*, 65.6 (2003): 427-441.

Weber, Max. "Politics as a Vocation" (1946). Reprinted in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*. Ed. H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills. New York: Oxford University Press, 1991.

Williams, Kevin. *European Media Studies*. New York: Hodder Arnold, 2005.

BDD-A27709 © 2017 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.25 (2026-09-15 06:18:28 UTC)