

## UNDERMINING MEDIA CREDIBILITY, A THREAT TO NATIONAL SECURITY

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**Abstract:** *In recent years, the Romanian media has been facing a decline in credibility, a situation that has a negative impact not only on media institutions, but on the entire Romanian society. Freedom of expression is a constitutional right for every citizen of the state and, at the same time, an essential principle of democracy. However, to a very large extent, over the last few years the media in Romania has come to the attention of international organizations for excessive politicization, corrupt funding mechanisms and editorial policies subordinated to various interest groups, political parties or foreign entities. Therefore, transformed into a lucrative business and without a rigorous legislation to regulate journalistic activity in Romania, media institutions represent a vulnerability to democracy and state security. International organizations specialized in monitoring human rights have referred in their reports of recent years to serious lapses in media activity in Romania. The present article aims to analyze, on the one hand, the levers that have led to the undermining of the credibility of Romanian media and, on the other hand, how this phenomenon has turned into a threat to national security. The purpose of the article is to identify ways to reduce the exposure of Romanian society to misinformation and manipulation and to reconsider the legislative framework regulating journalistic activity in Romania. The conclusions of the article refer to increasing social responsibility towards the sources of information which are used and the return of the media to its primary role of informing, to the detriment of current manipulative practices*

**Keywords:** *credibility; media; security; threats*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The politicization of the media has become a real threat to the freedom and pluralism of press institutions not only in Romania, but also at the European level. The scourge that tends to increasingly threaten the "fourth power in the state" has generated concern even within the European Council, which, in March 2024, adopted the *European Media Freedom Act*. This

establishes a common framework for media services in the EU internal market and introduces measures to protect journalists and media service providers from political interference while facilitating their work beyond the EU's internal borders (EC, 2024).

Designed as a protective measure for journalists and their sources, the beneficial effects of the law, in its adopted form will, however, also be felt by the general public consuming journalistic products. Political interference in the editorial decisions of both private and public media service providers, combined with the reinterpretation of the economic dimension of the media system by

the journalistic product providers themselves, have led in recent years to a departure from the main functions of the media, as defined in the literature. As numerous reports of international organizations show, the politicization of the media system has been the main slippage that has led over time to compromising the credibility of the media outlets. An example of this is the situation in Romania during the 2024 election year, when the forced imposition of controversial figures as models in the public space, validated by financial availability and not by intellectual and professional potential, culminated in an electoral Potemkin spectacle, pushing the population into a real spiral of silence, in the purest sense of the concept theorized by the German researcher Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann.

This has created a vacuum of trust around the media, and consumers have turned to the alternative of social networks, where every user can become an opinion former, disseminate unverified information and, implicitly, manipulate masses of people. In 2024, according to the Digital News Report, the largest academic study of news audiences in the world, coordinated by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism at the

University of Oxford, Romania recorded the lowest level of trust in the press in eight years, at 27%, compared to 32% in the previous year (Reuters Institute, 2025). The loss of contact of official communicators with the masses, along with the questioning of their authority due to the media's deontological slippages are creating security breaches and jeopardizing the very credibility of the state in the eyes of its own citizens. We will therefore approach the subject proposed for this article, from a theoretical perspective, considering two aspects: the media and national security; the human being and the state will be reference points for both of them.

## 2. THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS ON THE ROLE AND TYPOLOGIES OF THE MEDIA

Taking as precursors of what we call today the media cave paintings and inscriptions on stones, considered to be the first levers for disseminating information to large groups of people, press historians define as a decisive moment in the evolution of this field the emergence of the printing press in the 15th century, created by the German inventor Johannes Gutenberg, a moment to which the first printing presses are linked. The evolution of the media has been a constant process over time, from the first periodicals in the 17th century to the advent of the telephone and the telegraph in the 19th century, culminating today with the digital revolution and the emergence of social networks.

The simplest definition of media refers to the totality of technical means of mass communication of information (radio, television, cinema, publications, etc.). As for the functions of the media, these are, in a broad form accepted by current theories, information, persuasion, motivation and interpretation, education and transmission of social and cultural heritage, socialization, leisure and entertainment. In relation to the role of the media in society, many scholars have oscillated over the years between different configurations of media models. For this article, we have chosen the most simplified approach, namely the two major philosophical paradigms - the liberal model and the authoritarian model - an approach advocated by R.E. Hiebert, D.F. Ungurait and T.W. Bohn, as presented in Professor Mihai Coman's paper *Introduction to the Media System*:

A liberal political philosophy will hold that the individual is the most important entity in society;

the state, the government, and the press exist to serve the needs of the individual. If they (the institutions - n. M.C.) do not respond to those needs, the individual can change them. An authoritarian political philosophy will argue that there is a higher order that exercises authority over individuals. This higher order may be represented by the church, the state, a political leader, a teacher or a parent. In an authoritarian society, the individual exists only to serve the needs of these higher instances" (R. Hiebert *et alii*, 1991, p. 589).

In Professor Coman's opinion, the benchmark for presenting the social role of the press remains, however, the typology proposed by Siebert Peterson and Schramm, which assumes the authoritarian model, the communist model, the liberal model and the public service model, an extended approach of the paradigm advocated by R.E. Hiebert, D.F. Ungurait and T.W. Bohn. Both the liberal model and the public service model, to which we also refer to the Romanian media, are centered on the individual, the man, the consumer of journalistic products. The relationship between the press and the institutions of Power boils down to the support that the latter should provide to the media in order to inform the public as objectively as possible, without interfering in editorial policies.

In close connection with the topic addressed in this article, we will further dwell on the theoretical considerations regarding the typology of press institutions. According to Professor Mihai Coman, they can be categorized according to their purpose, i.e. commercial press institutions, profit-oriented, and non-profit, public service institutions, depending on their political position, i.e. neutral or partisan, and depending on the medium through which they disseminate their messages, divided into two broad categories, the written press and audiovisual. In the light of Professor Coman's theory, the independence of commercial press institutions must be understood in relative terms. These institutions are not financially dependent on state authorities or political groupings, but they do depend on the "reactions and whims of the public", which may require them to promote certain ideologies or trends. The influence of the public is thus exercised directly, with institutions responding to the needs of the individual.

In a democratic society, the media outlets play an essential role in the public space. Whether we think of them as the "fourth estate" or the "watchdog of democracy", at least in theory, they are the benchmark for accurate information for the population and, at the same time, the agora of the people.

### 3. FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION AND THE RIGHT TO INFORMATION. CONSTITUTIONAL PROVISIONS

From a legislative point of view, even if in Romania media activity requires a more elaborate set of provisions to protect both media institutions and their beneficiaries (the population), freedom of expression and the right to information, which were won after 1989, are mentioned in the Constitution, which provides the premises for legislative initiatives in this respect.

According to the Romanian Constitution, freedom of expression is an inviolable right, censorship is forbidden, freedom of the press also implies the freedom to establish publications and no publication may be suppressed. At the same time, in order to prevent slippages and interference by state or non-state, national or foreign entities in the activity of press institutions, the Constitution also stipulates that "the law may impose on the mass media the obligation to make public the source of their funding", an important aspect which is not, however, taken into account in practice.

With regard to the right to information, Romanian citizens can have access to any information of public interest, public authorities are obliged to ensure that citizens are correctly informed about public affairs and matters of personal interest, and public and private media are obliged to ensure that public opinion is correctly informed. Public radio and television services are guaranteed autonomy by the Constitution. An important aspect laid down in the Romanian Constitution, which links with the next chapter of this article, is that "the right to information must not prejudice measures for the protection of young people or national security".

The media are, therefore, not only a benchmark of correct information, but also an essential lever for strengthening or, as the case may be, a means of weakening national security.

### 4. SECURITY. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Whether approached sequentially or as a whole, in academic or political circles, by researchers or policy-makers, security still endures numerous definitions and interpretations, but all of them share a common denominator: it continues to be one of the most fundamental problems facing humanity. Commonly associated with military and political factors during the Cold War, security has subsequently been approached in new ways. The pragmatism of the studies and of the many

definitions that scholars have tried over the years has been strongly challenged by the empirical context which has forced the emergence and acceptance of new perspectives on the dimensions of security. The military and political dimensions have thus been complemented by the economic, environmental and societal dimensions, with the new scholarly approach to security belonging to the renowned international relations professor Barry Buzan and the Copenhagen School. However, Prof. Buzan argues that, in general, the concept of "security" has remained a fluid, "incompletely developed", immature concept in the field of modern science, and from this perspective he offers a number of explanations for its continued conceptual underdevelopment, including the complexity of the term, the partial overlap of the conceptual areas of the terms "security" and "power", the revolts against "realist orthodoxy", "the nature of Strategic Studies which as a sub-domain has produced a large body of empirical literature in military policy issues" (Buzan, 1991/2017:46-47) and the internal rationales for maintaining the symbolic ambiguity of the concept:

The term itself is in general use in international relations and other disciplines and seems to be accepted as a central organizing concept by practitioners and academics alike. But the literature on it is very uneven. A large amount of work is on the empirical side, dealing with contemporary national security problems and solutions. Most come from the sub-domain of strategic studies, where security is a central normative focus. The foreign, military and economic policies of states, their intersection in areas of exchange and dispute, as well as the structure of relations they create, are all analyzed as aspirations for ensuring national and/or international security (Buzan, 1991/2017:39-40).

As with the notion of security, the element of reference is also carefully and intensely debated. "Whose security?" asks Buzan in his book *People, States and Fear*. The reference point can be defined in terms of different variables. We are talking about both individual security and national security, but without overlooking a universally accepted reality: the interconnectedness of the two. As, regardless of the debates that any empirical or theoretical approach to security generates, the basic assumption from which they start is that security refers to the "absence of threats" (Arnold Wolfers, *apud* Buzan, 1991/2017:54), to "the absence of armed attack and coercion, the absence of internal subversion, and the absence of erosion

of political, economic and social values that are essential to quality of life” (National Defence College, Canada, *apud* Buzan, 1991/2017:54). The point of reference may therefore be the individual (the individual entity) or the state, but each may at some point pose a threat to the security of the other. The state guarantees to individuals “their lives, liberties and property”, but as it gains power it can itself become a threat to the individual, as Buzan points out. However, research shows that no matter how powerful the state becomes as a source of threat, the individual perceives any threat from the state as considerably less strong than threats that occur in the absence of the state.

The individual remains, however, the core around which the concept of security is built, a concept that extrapolates to national and international levels, also because it is based on the needs of individuals. And the need for security felt by the individual can be, as Buzan recalls by invoking the dictionary definitions of security, protection from danger, the feeling of security, the absence of any doubt (Buzan, 2017:73). It is no less true, however, that the individual himself can pose a threat to national security. We are talking about the constitution of groups of individuals whose beliefs (political, cultural, religious, identity) exceed social norms, and endanger other individuals and implicitly the state. Such individuals are transformed into a vulnerability which, depending on the (in)capacity of the state to manage it, may arouse the interest of other (state or non-state) organizations outside their borders, which share their beliefs or wish to take advantage of the uncertainty and vulnerability of the state of

reference and whose influence may lead to the spread of insecurity this time on a much wider scale. The slippages of such individuals can thus be exploited, encouraged and harnessed to the detriment of the national security of the state from which the individual originates.

The exponential increase in the danger that these individuals present is done in the public space, promoting their beliefs through the media or, more recently, on social networks. The responsibility of the media industry is even greater in such situations, as media outlets, journalists, have a duty to filter information, analyze messages and communicators and not to harm national security.

### 5. ROMANIAN MEDIA, BETWEEN DUTY TO PUBLIC OPINION AND POLITICAL REGIMENTATION

In 2024, Romania reported its lowest level of trust in the press in eight years, according to the annual Digital News Report survey coordinated by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism at the University of Oxford. Also in the 2024 election year, numerous journalistic surveys have revealed increased pressure from political parties on newsrooms and a non-transparent funding mechanism for media outlets, often from public money. “Lack of transparency in media funding, especially by the state, and market difficulties undermine the reliability of information and trust in the media,” says the “Reporters Without Borders” report in the chapter on Romania.

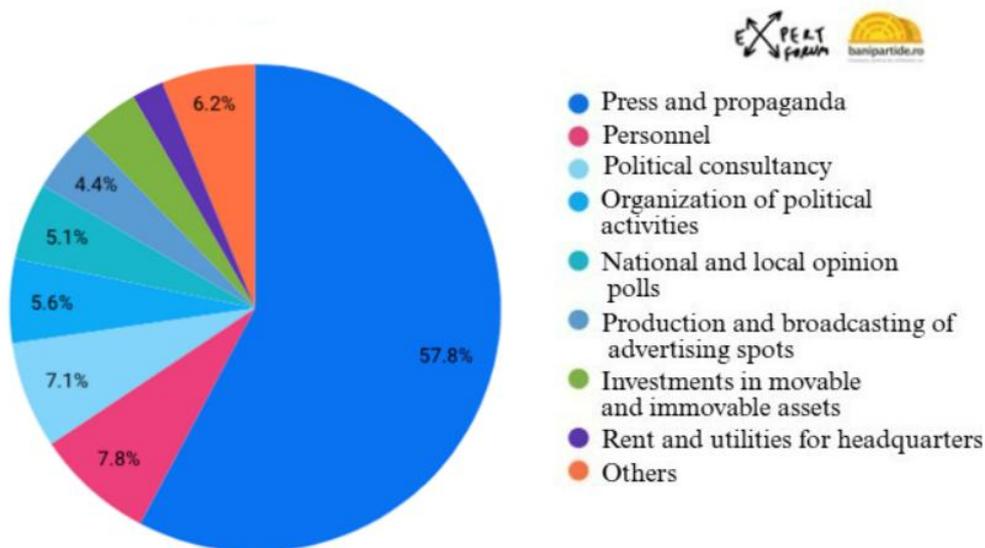


Fig. 1 The state funding, *apud* Expert Forum

The state funding referred to in numerous reports represents, in fact, the money that reaches the media from political parties. According to a report by Expert Forum, the Permanent Electoral Authority transferred 386 million lei (about 77 million euros) to political parties in 2024, of which 371 million lei was spent in the first 11 months of the year. As the Expert Forum's analysis shows, the largest sums were spent on press and propaganda, amounting to no less than 214 million lei (about 44 million euros, or 57.8% of total spending).

The lack of transparency on the part of both political parties and media outlets, however, prevents the public from finding out the truth about this mechanism of funding the media with public money, a mechanism criticized by the same media in other cases with other beneficiaries. In an attempt to document the financing of the electoral campaign for the 2024 European Parliament elections, the non-governmental organization ActiveWatch and the investigative publication Snoop have requested information from Antena 3 CNN, România TV, Realitatea Plus and Digi24 on the costs of broadcasting interviews and debates with candidates of the main political forces in Romania (PSD-PNL Alliance, AUR Alliance and United Right Alliance). All four media outlets refused to answer ActiveWatch's questions, the only one that was transparent was Prima News, who confirmed that the cost of broadcasting an interview with a candidate conducted by a journalist amounted to more than €80,000. Political parties have not been more transparent in this case either. PSD, PNL and AUR have refused to officially respond to Snoop journalists' requests regarding the election campaign expenses for the above-mentioned news channels. However, Snoop's journalists got an unofficial answer from AUR, according to which the party has concluded a promotion contract for that campaign only with Realitatea Plus, worth about 2 million euros.

ActiveWatch and Snoop's analysis concluded that

the opacity of most major parties and most TV news broadcasters in terms of how public money is spent on election campaigns impacts the health of the media ecosystem and at the same time affects the right to accurate information for citizens (ActiveWatch, 2024).

The transfer of journalists' image capital to politicians/candidates/political parties in fake

journalistic products, not properly branded as election advertising implicitly leads not only to the discrediting of the media institution, but also of the journalist.

From a security point of view, these media slippages are reflected in the public's reluctance to receive any information of public interest transmitted through these channels and the population's tendency to turn to other sources of information, to other state or non-state actors whose interests do not converge with the official ones. Also, the creation of a parallel agenda to the one supported by the media can generate chaos in the public space, an example of this being the presidential elections of 2024, a dangerous precedent from all points of view and, for the time being, unsatisfactory officially argued to make the media institutions aware of the role they played in generating the situation and to convince public opinion of the danger of losing the two essential values provided for by the supreme law of the country: freedom of expression and the right to information.

## 6. CONCLUSIONS

In 2024, Romania reported its lowest level of trust in the press in eight years, according to the annual Digital News Report survey coordinated by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism at the University of Oxford. Also in the 2024 election year, numerous journalistic surveys have revealed increased pressure from political parties on newsrooms and a non-transparent funding mechanism for media outlets, often from public money. "Lack of transparency in media funding, especially by the state, and market difficulties undermine the reliability of information and trust in the media," says the "Reporters Without Borders" report in the chapter on Romania.

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