



Bloggers, Journalists and Epistemic Responsibility. A Particular Type of Self-Regulation in the Romanian Online Media¹

PAGE | 110

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Abstract

The passage from traditional press to digital media requires from professional journalists not only an improvement of their technological skills, but also a special kind of awareness of the new deontological challenges. Our attempt is to identify the novel dimensions of responsibility, accuracy and truthfulness in digital journalism and the “intellectual virtues” that online journalists should embody. We will identify these virtues starting from the criticism brought by Romanian bloggers (many of whom are or used to be journalists) to the lack of professionalism of online media journalists. Additionally, we will try to identify a particular type of “regulation” for the Romanian digital media, founded upon a collective critique developed in the blogosphere and focused on the inappropriate practices of the journalists that lack digital literacy and accuracy.

Introduction: “bloggers vs. journalists”, a fake problem

“Once they have been roused from their comfortable routine, Romanian journalists are at first confused (they don’t have a clue what’s going on with the blasted Internet), then they become downright aggressive only to give up in the end or quit their jobs”, the blogger “Zoso” (Vali Petcu) recently wrote in an analysis of the local online press². The author of the best Romanian media blog in 2007³ criticizes the journalists’ lack of *savoir faire*, underlining that these journalists post online materials which barely fit in the overly-crowded pages, use non-copyrighted photos and sign articles that plagiarize the content of other blogs – not to mention the lack of links to the sources, which is one of the capital mistakes of inexperienced online journalists: “Linking to the source story is actually not a bad thing because, even if I go to *FemaleFirst.co.uk*, I’m not going to stay there, because I am still one of *Mediafax.ro*’s readers”.

Zoso’s opinions are not singular and they have been reiterated by several other Romanian bloggers, some of whom previously worked as journalists. On the other hand, current journalists, especially those who got most of their experience before the days of the Internet, continue to stand their ground. They refuse from the very beginning to be compared to bloggers. The value of the topics that bloggers broach can be described as “substandard”, according to one of the veterans of Romanian

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² Zoso, “The State of Romanian Online Journalism”, 22 June 2011, <http://www.zoso.ro/starea-jurnalismului-online-romanesc-2011/> (all the Internet pages quoted below were accessed before 30 November, 2012).

³ The prize was awarded at the 2007 edition of RoBlogFest (<http://www.zoso.ro/about-me/>). In December 2012, Zoso had the traffic rank of 105 out of the Romanian sites (Alexa.com).



print media, Cornel Nistorescu, who is the current owner of the online newspaper *Cotidianul.ro*⁴. The blogosphere, he says, “concentrates on trifles such as this guy has left this party, that politician’s wife has affairs or the like”. Very often, such topics are not only irrelevant, but also undocumented, Nistorescu points out. For him, a blog is just a personal diary, lacking any kind of news value or critical relevance.

It is however unfair to envisage the blogosphere as a bundle of superfluous information or simply as a new competitor to the traditional media. It is true that several of these personal sites, together with socializing networks (*Facebook*) and alternative information platforms (*IndyMedia*) have become instruments promoting civic responsibility, social criticism and alternative information, competing with the traditional press, which has a hard time adapting to the new wave of “citizen journalism”.⁵ However, the heights reached by citizen journalism (and here we have in mind especially the blogosphere centring on social, political and even media themes) should not be regarded as a threat to the classic or traditional media, but rather as a complement to those media. Thus, we should see blogging as “supplementing and interconnecting the work of professional journalists” while bloggers distribute and comment on the articles from the traditional media, broadening its audience⁶.

Without falling into the trap of the fierce dispute between bloggers and journalists and without succumbing to apocalyptic predictions such as “The Internet is going to kill all print newspapers”, we shall start from the premise that the digital media channels and platforms should be seen as a way of challenging the classic press to take the next step towards the 2.0 Web interactive culture⁷. Judging from the perspective of media changes and technological convergence, as is explained by Roger Fidler, the newspapers, the magazines, the TV and the radio will not be superseded by the new media, but reintegrated in the digital space. The identity of the source, its credibility and its editors’ brand name will continue to matter in the virtual space⁸. No matter what publication medium the future news journals will belong to, their core duties remain the same – the responsible information of the public, the strong reaction to abuses and liberties- or life-threats, and the support of opinion exchanges and public discourses⁹. At the same time, digital journalists will have to pay increased attention to the values specific of interactive journalism, in order to be able to make a genuine difference in the realm of the alternative sources of information (blogs, advocacy and citizen journalism sites, news aggregators).

⁴ Cornel Nistorescu, “România, între bloggeri și jurnaliști”, in *Cotidianul.ro*, 27 April 2010 (<http://www.cotidianul.ro/romania-intre-bloggeri-si-jurnalisti-113321>).

⁵ In a standard definition, “citizen journalism” refers to „any contribution to discussion in the public sphere, whether in the form of simple information, syntheses, reporting, or opinion” (Lewis Friedland and Nakho Kim, “Citizen Journalism”, in Christopher H. Sterling, ed., *Encyclopedia of Journalism*, Los Angeles, Sage Publications, 2009, p. 297).

⁶ Stephen D. Reese et alii, “Mapping the Blogosphere. Professional and Citizen-Based Media in the Global News Arena”, *Journalism*, vol. 8(3), 2007, p. 258.

⁷ Forged by Tim O’Reilly, the concept of Web 2.0 “includes a social element where users generate and distribute content, often with freedom to share and reuse”, such as in YouTube or Wikipedia (Glen Creeber and Royston Martin, “Introduction” in idem, eds., *Digital Cultures. Understanding New Media*, New York: Open University Press, p. 3).

⁸ Roger Fidler, *Mediamorphosis. Understanding New Media*, Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge Press: 1997, p. 257-258.

⁹ *Ibidem*.



In order to understand what the new ethical and professional points of reference in online journalism are and how can these be instilled into media professionals, our article will attempt to solve two interrelated themes: A) the significance of “intellectual virtues” in online journalism and B) the importance of the Romanian blogosphere as a watchdog of professional journalism.

A) Our first hypothesis is that the digital journalist’s values/virtues are guided by truth, transparency and credibility in front of the public. Thus, we will show that the professionalization in the online media involves increased emphasis on the intellectual virtues (accuracy, curiosity and perseverance, digital literacy), which can be subsumed by the concept of “epistemic responsibility”, understood as the “central [intellectual] virtue from which all others radiate”¹⁰. The current emphasis on the aforementioned virtues is due precisely to the fact that, among those standards of excellence that are inherited from the classic press (good writing, depth inquiry, care for the public interest), those that center on accuracy¹¹ and reliability¹² are the most threatened in the context of the business pressures and of the fierce competition among online newspapers which tend to reciprocally “cannibalize” their genuine content¹³.

B) Our second hypothesis is that, in Romania, the highlighting of the “intellectual virtues” of digital journalists is due especially to the criticism made by the local blogosphere. While one cannot talk about moral-philosophical conceptualizations made by these Romanian bloggers, the critical remarks that these bloggers direct against the errors in online journalism can be seen as an unprecedented kind of “self-regulation” in the Romanian media. Thus, the adaptation of journalists to the ecology of digital communication and their professional growth could be encouraged and, partly, facilitated by the much-criticized bloggers¹⁴. Being often a useful mirror for journalists, the bloggers play an unprecedented function of regulation within the online medium, adopting “the role of watchdogs of the more mainstream, established news media”¹⁵. While it is not an obvious high-impact trend, this critical initiative of the new watchdogs of the trust press is useful in the Romanian

¹⁰ Lorraine Code, “Toward a ‘Responsibilist’ Epistemology”, in *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, vol. 45, no 1, Sept. 1984, p. 34.

¹¹ Commenting on the standards for excellence (the “virtues”) in online journalism, David A. Craig underlines the importance of speed and accuracy in breaking news: “When online writers and editors work quickly to produce multiple stories per day in multiple forms while holding strictly to accuracy and seeking depth, they achieve a kind of newness that raises the bar for what immediate reporting can provide for an audience” (David A. Craig, *Excellence in Online Journalism*, Thousand Oaks, Ca.: Sage, 2011, p. 34).

¹² The lax verification or even the conflict of interests are very dangerous dimensions at a time when journalism “requires higher standards of intellectual reliability to shore up its credibility and to compensate for organizational pressures to dilute its standards” (Sandra L. Borden, *Journalism as Practice: MacIntyre, Virtue Ethics and Press*, Hampshire: Ashgate, 2007, p. 86).

¹³ Cf. Angela Phillips, “Old Sources: New Bottles”, in Natalie Fenton (ed.), *New Media, Old News. Journalism & Democracy in the Digital Age*, Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2010, p. 96.

¹⁴ The journalists’ disparagement of bloggers is also present in Western countries, where professional journalists claim that blogs are badly-written, egocentric, subjective and amateurish - cf. Joyce Y.M. Nip, “Exploring the second phase of public journalism”, in *Journalism Studies*, 7(2), 2006, p. 212-236.

¹⁵ Laura Hendrickson, “Press Protection in Blogosphere: Applying a Functional Definition of ‘Press’ to News Web Logs”, in Mark Tremayne (ed.), *Blogging, Citizenship and Future of Media*, New York: Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group, 2007, p. 187.



environment, where the written press has long lacked an enforcement of deontological rules¹⁶.

These two hypotheses will be addressed concomitantly, only to be reprised separately in the final section. Besides an attempt to sum up the opinions on the media of the most widely read bloggers in Romania, our article will rely on the application of virtue ethics to the media (D.A. Craig, S.L. Borden), on the observations in virtue epistemology regarding the “intellectual/epistemic virtues” (L. Code), and on the analyses centring on the professional environment of the digital journalism in Romania¹⁷.

The Development of the Blogosphere: From “Rough” Information to a Debate Space

The terrorist attacks of 9/11 are often seen as a breakthrough moment concerning the evolution of new media. Those who witnessed the collapse of the Twin Towers posted terrifying images online shortly after, images which were later used as first-hand sources by newspapers and TV networks. Live information and moving sequences were offered at a rapid pace, sometimes as minute-by-minute news bulletins. The terrifying American tragedy „led to the emergence of an alternative space of communication, especially since the traditional media were unable to fulfil the global need of information”¹⁸. This alternate information channels rose „rapidly offering correct and credible information” on several subsequent tragedies – the Katrina Hurricane, the Asian *tsunami* and the London or Spain terrorist attacks¹⁹. Moreover, besides their informative values, the blogs became arenas of debate on the responsibility and possible solutions on the consequences of those tragedies. Although an important part of the alternative news media has been appropriated by „consumerism” (advertising and branding), the Internet contributes, at the same time, to the democratization of information and to a widening of the public debate arena. New media allows the creation of a dialogue space through forums and discussion groups and accelerates the mobilization of different opinions²⁰.

A similar development took place in the Romanian blogosphere²¹. Born on September 16, 2001, with a note on the disastrous situation of Romanian roads (on troni.blogspot.com), blogging will be taken seriously only in 2003, when it is tested by several local pioneers coming either from journalism (Brăduț Ulmanu, with *Jurnalismonline.ro*) or from the entrepreneurial site (Bogdan “Bobby” Voicu, who will subsequently become *Community Manager* for *Yahoo!Romania*). From 2005, there is

¹⁶ Cristian Ghinea and Alina Mungiu-Pippidi, “The case of Romania”, in the Mediadem Consortium report *Media policies and regulatory practices in a selected set of European countries, The EU and the Council of Europe*, October 2010, p. 327.

¹⁷ See Natalia Vasilendiuc and Peter Gross, “New Technology, new professional practices: A study on Romanian new media”, in *Comunicación Y Sociedad*, vol. XXV, num 1, 2012, p. 59-83; Marius Dragomir and Mark Thompson (eds.), *Mapping Digital Media: Romania*, London: Open Society Foundation, 2010; Romina Surugiu and Raluca Radu, “Introducing New Technologies in Media Companies from Romania, Portugal and Cyprus. A Comparative Approach”, in *Revista Română de Jurnalism și Comunicare*, 3(4), 2009, p. 93-102.

¹⁸ Dorina Guțu-Tudor, *New Media*, second edition, Bucharest: Tritonic, 2008, p. 39.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 40.

²⁰ Rémy Rieffel, *Sociologie des médias*, Paris: Ellipses Publishing, 2001.

²¹ Our short history is based on the synthesis the media analyst Iulian Comănescu makes in his book *Cum să devii un Nimeni. Mecanismele notorietății, branduri personale și piața media din România* (Bucharest: Humanitas, 2009, pp. 135-136) and in his article “Articolul colectiv despre primul blog” (*Dilema veche*, 15 December 2007: <http://www.dilemaveche.ro/sectiune/mass-comedia/articol/articol-colectiv-despre-primul-blog>). Comănescu is also blogger and editor-in-chief of *The Industry* media magazine.



a significant rise of those blogs written by young people who are inexperienced writers, followed in 2006 by the online presence of veterans in the fields of journalism, technology or publicity. Thus, blogging became a trend, "sparking debate over whether blogs would replace traditional media"²². In this manner, the specialized blogs are born, which will bring credible information and will represent an essential alternative to the traditional media that lean more and more towards the tabloid genre, which is devoid of responsibility. The new media became a considerable force and a regulating principle of society in an age where "the classic media have remained somewhat aimless – not only in Romania – because of the opulence that suppresses the concern for the public interest and the future of the public who crave for entertainment"²³.

The alternative media (blogs, socializing networks, discussion forums) thus represent more than a bunch of diary impressions, accompanied by food recipes and amateur photos. Since the private life elements and the "rough" information on public events moved mainly to the socializing networks (Facebook, Twitter), the blogosphere offered more room for debate, for social criticism and alternative information, necessary ingredients of the democratic public sphere, of a dialogue space which is not dominated by economic interests and the lobbies of the media trusts²⁴. In the same manner abroad, in Romania too, the blogs no longer place emphasis on a diary dimension but on that of debate, evaluation and comment²⁵.

The Internet Generation and the "Antibody-Blogs"

"We don't like to watch the news on TV", the Internet-savvy young people say; the digitally-educated generation has been fed, from a very early age, on publicity and marketing ads and has thus learned to be suspicious of the messages laced with tabloid exaggeration or economic interests. "Honesty, transparency and authenticity are crucial if you want to get through the Net Generation"²⁶. This is the context in which independent blogs sometimes come to enjoy as much credibility as traditional media, which are now more often than not met with "the suspicion of corporate control"²⁷.

More and more people choose alternative sources of information, often preferring a blog or an online local newspaper to the national journals, which must have lost some of its relevance and credibility.²⁸ Moreover, the blogosphere hosts an

²² C. Ghinea and A. Mungiu-Pippidi, *op. cit.*, p. 320.

²³ I. Comănescu, *Cum să devii un Nimeni*, p. 147.

²⁴ David Beers, "The Public Sphere of Online, Independent Journalism", in *Canadian Journal of Education*, 2006, pp. 109-130.

²⁵ One has to notice that, if in 2009, only 35% of the Romanians read online newspapers (while in the US and Germany, there were twice as much such readers) and only 15% read blogs weekly, in 2012, the Romanian online audience increased significantly by up to 73% (see Sorin Adam Matei, "50% din români ajunge pe Net. Mircea Badea îi întâmpină", published on *Pagini.com*, 8 September 2009, at <http://www.pagini.com/blog/2009/09/08/romanii-ajung-pe-net-din-ce-in-ce-mai-des-unde-ii-asteapta-mircea-badea/>, and Eurostat report "Internet Access and Use in 2012", at http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/cache/ITY_PUBLIC/4-18122012-AP/EN/4-18122012-AP-EN.PDF).

²⁶ Don Tapscott, *Grown Up Digital: How the Net Generation is Changing your World*, New York: McGraw Hill, 2008, p. 285.

²⁷ Deni Elliott, "Essential Shared Values and 21st Century Journalism", in Lee Wilkins and Clifford G. Christians (eds.) *The Handbook of Mass Media Ethics*, New York / London, Routledge, 2009, p. 36.

²⁸ Reading blogs is also a part of the new "monitorial" reading style: people „scan all kinds of news and information sources – newspapers, magazines, TV shows, blogs, online and offline social networks, and so on – for the topics that matter to their personality” (Mark Deuze, „Journalism, Citizenship, and Digital



increasing number of specialists coming from various areas, who do not seek notoriety, but only want to counteract the distortions of the truth often perpetrated by the press. Bloggers with legal training often correct the tabloid news referring to laws and penalties, medical experts (for example PharmaGossip) fight against the publicity campaigns of the pharmaceuticals industry, while other blogs often try to give a clearer picture of the local administration's activity (MayorWatch, for example, is centered on the London administration)²⁹. When asked why they have chosen this form of "citizen journalism", the authors of this type of blogs invariably answer that they only want to "correct" the classic press information. "There would not be a need for bloggers like me if the journalists did their job properly", says an administrator of one of these professional blogs³⁰.

It is hard to say to what extent the Romanian blogosphere includes such professional sites, meant to correct the inaccuracies of the press. While this question remains open for further research, we can however identify a number of blogs, often owned by persons who worked as journalists and who are able to regard the press, especially the online kind, in a critical manner. *BlogulDeMedia* for example talks about the "inherent blunders" in this area³¹. *ReporterVirtual*, another Romanian media blog, often broaches topics, which concentrate on the interface between management and the political dimensions in the area of journalism, hoping to restore the „lost dignity" of the press³². There is a long list of well-known blogs, which refer, in one way or another, to the press (*StareaPresei*, *PaginaDeMedia*, *Tolo.ro*). What we are interested in is the fact that blogging journalists have already carved for themselves, in a spontaneous manner, a place that hosts debates on the topic of the Romanian press (classic and digital). "Zoso's" criticism of the journalists' inability to adapt to the requests of the online medium (see above) exemplifies the type of reactions awakened by the errors made by classic journalists in their passage to digital media.

It is by that kind of bloggers' criticism that „the new media become the only feedback mechanism of the *classic* or *old* media" and the blogs become the „natural antibodies of democracy"³³. Even if this label widely refers to the public space, we believe that it could be also appropriate for the micro public space inhabited by journalists and bloggers, since the latter are regarded as "media watchdogs": "they employ the blogosphere to draw attention to issues marginalized or ignored by the mainstream media"³⁴. This special type of „regulation" in the new media, consisting of opinions and criticism by the blogosphere directed against the press (or the other way round), proves especially important for the functioning of the digital press. These are reasons for which we believe this phenomenon is worth clarifying, instead of being seen as a mere symptom of the fierce debate between bloggers and journalists:

- Compared to other professions, there is no „job description" for journalists, that is subject to well-defined regulation; in other words, there are no clear

Culture", in Z. Papacharissi, ed., *Journalism and Citizenship: New Agendas*. New York: Lawrence Erlbaum/Taylor and Francis, 2009, p. 18).

²⁹ Nick Couldry, "New Online News Sources and Writer-Gatheres", in Natalie Fenton (ed.), *New Media, Old News. Journalism & Democracy in the Digital Age*, pp. 142-144.

³⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 144.

³¹ Cf. <http://bloguldemia.ro/despre/>.

³² Cf. <http://www.reportervirtual.ro/about>.

³³ I. Comănescu, *Cum să devii un nimeni*, p. 149.

³⁴ Zizi Papacharissi, "The Citizen is the Message. Alternative Modes of Civic Engagement", in idem, (ed.) *Journalism and Citizenship: New Agendas*. New York: Lawrence Erlbaum/Taylor and Francis, 2009, p. 37.



standards that refer to specific areas of competence, except for a variable set of editing techniques and of „a body of knowledge which legitimizes the journalists’ mission and social responsibility.”³⁵

- Although Romania has possessed a unified Professional Ethics Code since 2009, followed by the organizations that represent the written press, this Code has not been internalized and enforce in an adequate manner by the journalists or by those in charge³⁶.
- There is no ethical organism that specializes in the regulation of the written press (print or online)³⁷, which would be an institution having a similar role to that of the National Audio-visual Council which takes care of the Romanian public TV and radio networks.
- The bloggers that have a manifest interest in the regulation of the press have become notorious in the sphere of the new media³⁸.

What Bloggers Demand: Accuracy, Transparency, Digital Expertise

The age of „believe me, but it is as I say”, that is, of the epistemic authority of the journalist, is at an end. The growing multitude of the media channels and the suspicious attitude of the “Net Generation” have given rise to a new attitude, which can be summed up by the principle: “Be skeptical!”. This means that we, the readers, don’t have “to take for granted the trustworthiness of what we read, see or hear from media of all kinds, weather from traditional news organisations, blogs or online videos”³⁹.

Bloggers are undoubtedly the most demanding, critical and “skeptical” readers of the professional media, because they compete with news professionals and continuously challenge the “authority” of traditional media⁴⁰. But this challenge of authority can be also seen as a chance to raise the standards of excellence of the online media. As the famous journalist Alex Jones stated, “accountability is the greatest thing that blogs are bringing to journalism”⁴¹. As we will show below, the main values and virtues that bloggers demand from journalists are those belonging to the “intellectual” realm: truth, credibility, transparency, honesty and trust. In the struggle against alternative sources, credibility and the reader’s trust are the survival

³⁵ Mihai Coman, *Introducere în sistemul mass-media*, third edition, Iași: Polirom, 2007, p. 240.

³⁶ A major concern for the Romanian press, identified in 2011 by the Mission of the European Federation of Journalists (EFJ), is the lack of a “well established and recognized mechanism of self-regulation in the media”; that is why EFJ recommends the journalists’ Unions to “promote the Professional Ethics Code” and to create “a debate about the importance of a new approach to media accountability and ethics” (*Journalism in the Shadows: The Challenge for Press Freedom in Romania*, Report of EJM Mission, 3-4 February 2011, p. 14 – accessible online at <http://europe.ifj.org/assets/docs/215/123/229d0d7-93d7a7b.pdf>).

³⁷ *Ibidem*.

³⁸ In November 2012, the monitoring blog *ZeList.ro* included in the Top100 of famous Romanian blogs, the blog *Tolo.ro* belonging to Cătălin Tolontan, editor-in-chief for “Gazeta Sporturilor”, the aforementioned site *ReporterVirtual*, the opinion aggregators *VoxPublica* și *Contributors*, including notorious senior editors, the political blog *Sutu.ro* of Cristi Șuțu, former senior editor of several newspapers, *Orlando.ro*, the blog belonging to Orlando Nicoară, the head of the Mediafax Group, and the blog *Ciutacu.ro* of the editor-in-chief of the national newspaper *Jurnalul Național*. All these blogs frequently post information, opinions, evaluations and debates on the topic of the Romanian press.

³⁹ Dan Gillmor, “Toward a (New) Media Literacy in a Media Saturated World”, in Z. Papacharissi, ed., *Journalism and Citizenship: New Agendas*. New York: Lawrence Erlbaum/Taylor and Francis, 2009, p. 9.

⁴⁰ See Stephen D. Reese et alii, *op. cit.*, p. 259.

⁴¹ Quoted by Rebecca MacKinnon in her report of the press conference “Blogging, Journalism & Credibility. Battleground and Common Ground” which took place in 2005 in Harvard (http://cyber.law.harvard.edu/publications/2005/Blogging_Journalism_Credibility).



chance of the traditional media which seeks to take its place among the new media. Here are some examples in this respect:

Accuracy and fact checking. Some years ago, one of the most popular Romanian bloggers, musician and actor Tudor Chirilă (who is an exception compared to the other bloggers who write about the media, since he does not have press experience) made an experiment meant to demonstrate the incompetence of the so-called „copy-paste” journalists, who, in haste, mechanically copy the news, without even minimally checking them. Chirilă wrote on his blog the story of how he ran stark naked in the city centre of Bucharest. Shortly after, *Ziare.com* (a news aggregator) took over this item of news as such, without priorly checking it. After Chirilă admitted this was a hoax⁴², *Ziare.com* claimed that the information should not be checked if it was directly taken from the person involved. The way in which the news aggregator above chose to defend itself reveals the general situation of Romanian journalists, who are more into the fast selecting among multiple sources (blogs, mobile conversations, chats, RSS) and are much less concerned with digging for information. In the Romanian online journalism, “privileging the speed over thorough fact checking” is an unfortunate outcome of the digitization of the journalists’ work⁴³.

Digital expertise. At the beginning of the article, we were quoting „Zoso’s” observations concerning the inability of online journalists to organize the content of a webpage. The blogger and current editor-in-chief of the national newspaper *Adevărul* Mihnea Măruță also talks about the way in which bloggers know how to tell stories that „warm the readers’ hearts”, something that traditionally-trained journalists need to learn: „Now you can add video materials, texts, links to the sources you used, which is, over all, more than you were able to do in print, where you could at most add a photo gallery”⁴⁴. The accession of the press to the online medium requires journalists to become adequately familiar with the instruments and „ecology” of the digital media. Journalists have to adapt their writing style (which should be shorter and more direct), to effectively use search tools, to be able to edit video and audio materials. All is part of a „digital expertise” that is necessary in order to improve the quality of online journalism⁴⁵. Unfortunately, Romanian online journalists had a harder time adapting to the new media than bloggers, mainly because, in Romania, the digitization of the media began later than in the countries of Western Europe, but also because Romanian media companies “did not organize coherent training programs for the use of new technologies”⁴⁶.

Transparency and integrity. “The blogosphere’s golden rule” is to always quote sources and also the reasons for which you write, the principles you abide by and the means by which you came by the sources you offer⁴⁷. In that sense, journalist, blogger

⁴² Since Internet hoaxes are more and more frequent, it is no wonder that the updated variant of the ethical code of the Canadian Association of Journalists stipulates: “We consider all online content carefully, including blogging, and content posted to social media. We do not re-post rumours – see *CAJ Ethics Guidelines*, <http://j-source.ca/article/caj-ethics-guidelines>.”

⁴³ Marius Dragomir and Mark Thompson (eds.), *op. cit.*, p. 43.

⁴⁴ Mihnea Măruță, “Revoluția biografică”, communication presented at the third edition of the debate series “Din On în Off” organized by the blog *TVdece.ro* in Cluj on 27 October 2011. See video recording on <http://mihneamaruta.ro/2011/10/28/revolutia-biografica/>.

⁴⁵ Dominic Boyer, “Digital Expertise in Online Journalism (and Anthropology)”, in *Anthropological Quarterly*, volume 83(1), 2010, p. 87-89.

⁴⁶ R. Surugiu and R. Radu, *op. cit.*

⁴⁷ Cecilia Friend and Jane B. Singer, *Online Journalism Ethics. Traditions and Transitions*, M.E. Sharpe, New York, p. 123.



and “green” activist Mihai Goțiu “denounces” on the blog aggregator *VoxPublica* a number of ads that were presented in the guise of news on the site of *Realitatea TV* (both outlets are part of the same media group – *Realitatea Media*). The „advertorials” were advocating for a questionable gold mining project in Romania⁴⁸. The lack of transparency/integrity can be explained by the mentality of the journalists of the 2000s generation, who are known to give in to the business demands of the media trusts they belong to. The digital medium is used by Romanian online journalists for “increasing the array of money-making vehicles to the detriment of increasing the platforms for socially responsible media”⁴⁹.

The list containing the bloggers’ critical remarks directed against online journalists could go on – from plagiarism (“copy-paste” journalism) to unacknowledged corrections (corrections introduced directly inside the body of the article, instead of providing an errata), from the lack of interaction with readers to conflicts of interests. All these standards are necessary to ensure the credibility of online journalism, which has been challenged by bloggers, and to offer valid and useful information to the public. Besides the care for the community’s welfare, in the context of “the pressure of immediacy”, online journalists must combine the concern for accuracy, the spirit of initiative and the inquisitiveness and, last but not least, the ability to discern between the real knowledge of hoaxes and gossip⁵⁰.

In the last section, we will not only attempt to summarise the most important abilities or „virtues” of the journalists that live in the Web 2.0. Age, but also investigate in what way the criticism brought by blogging journalists could partly support the ethic and professional regulation of the press (at least of the online one). We will try to examine in what way, without appealing to restricting and politically sensitive laws, there can appear innovative ways of inculcating values and principles that are specific to digital journalists.

The Ethics of Intellectual Virtues and Its Regulation by the Blogosphere

A) *Epistemic responsibility*. Function of financial and temporal limitations, journalism was defined as a hastily written history⁵¹. The novelty, by no mean easy to accept, of the new media is that now contents are no longer perishable, but can be accessed (almost) any time and (almost) anywhere. While in the past, a radio show was lost into thin air once it was over and paper soon found its way into the garbage bin, in the online medium, the radio show can now become a podcast and the edition of the paper that was published a month ago becomes quasi-synonymous with the site of the same newspaper. This is what prompts the update or the revision of the materials which appear in online newspapers once new and relevant information has appeared on the same topic. Metaphorically speaking, if the classic press suffered from an “attention deficit” – which meant that an item of news was readily abandoned and its consequences seldom monitored, due to the prejudice that the public would lose interest soon after, the new media seem to suffer from the reverse tendency, an “obsessive-compulsive” one: the blogger (but also the digital journalist)

⁴⁸ Mihai Goțiu, “MythBusters la Roșia Montană. Noua avalanșă de minciuni publicitare de la RMGC. Chiar pe aici, pe Realitatea.net”, published on *VoxPublica* (<http://voxpública.realitatea.net/politica-societate/mythbusters-la-rosia-montana-noua-avalansa-de-minciuni-publicitare-de-la-rmgc-chiar-pe-aici-pe-realitatea-net-68940.html>).

⁴⁹ N. Vasilendiuc and P. Gross, *op. cit.*, p. 80.

⁵⁰ D.A. Craig, *op. cit.*, p. 21.

⁵¹ Clifford G. Christians *et al.*, *Media Ethics: Cases and Moral Reasoning*, ninth edition, New York: Pearson, 2011.



comes with “a linear discourse, intertwined cases and stories, which repeat themselves and become more complex with each passing day”⁵². Due to the possibility of completion and subsequent adjustment of the situation, the so-called hastily written history should become, in the Internet age, a cumulative history, which grows more and more accurate and credible.

From the point of view of the necessity to revise and complete the news, the online event reporting has begun to resemble scientific research, since it requires the same type of intellectual virtues. In the case of lab investigations, besides physical skills, such as visual acuity (which is a required „sensorial” virtue), the stress falls on the abilities that pertain to determination and inquisitiveness: a sharp spirit of observation, an open mind from an intellectual point of view (the ability of accepting that your hypothesis is wrong), the care for the checking of the data, perseverance (a continual actualization of your knowledge). All these skills, which guarantee professional excellence in the field of research, contribute to “our *reliability as agents*; they enable us to deploy reliable faculties and mechanisms to good effect”⁵³. These “intellectual virtues” are not required only in the case of physicists or biologists. They should be also shared by another type of “agent”, who is also in pursuit of the truth, namely the journalist. In the case of the online journalist, perseverance (the news update) and a preoccupation for an attentive source check (from blog gossip to fake statements) acquires new dimensions which did not characterize classic journalism, where the sources (faxes, phone calls, press conferences) were usually more reliable.

Without denying the importance of courage, of honesty, impartiality, search for justice or involvement in the community’s causes (for the greater good) or of the respect for tradition⁵⁴, we believe that the passage from classic journalism to the new media requires, above all, the strengthening and training of two professional virtues that are separate yet intertwined: on the one hand the loyalty towards one’s public (a virtue that has become increasingly necessary in the context of an increased interactivity between journalists and readers, as readers are able to post their opinions at the end of the online article), on the other hand, what we could call „epistemic responsibility”⁵⁵. The latter actually comprises several intellectual „sub-virtues”, some of which were already discussed in the previous sections. The journalist’s skepticism of the possible „traps” set by politicians or by those in the advertising business, their modesty (the availability to correct their reports), but also the honesty (transparency) and the credibility offered by the accuracy and attentive information check⁵⁶ are all intellectual virtues essential for any journalistic genre, but,

⁵² I. Comănescu, *Cum să devii un Nimeni*, p. 146. An example in this respect is the temporary adding in the digital layout of Romanian newspapers (*Adevărul*, *Evenimentul Zilei*) of new sections, besides the traditional ones (Politics, Society, Art & Culture, Sport) centering on the report of more complex events or stories stretching on several days (a famous film festival, a series on the recent history of Romanian Communism, etc.).

⁵³ Christopher Hookway, “How to be a Virtue Epistemologist”, in M. DePaul and L. Zagzebski (eds.), *Intellectual Virtue. Perspectives from Ethics and Epistemology*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003, p. 188.

⁵⁴ Dan Gillmor, *We the Media. Grassroots Journalism by the People for the People*, Sebastopol, Ca.: O’Reilly Media, 2004, p. 134.

⁵⁵ We take over this concept from an approach on the ethics of journalism based on virtue ethics. A former journalist, but also a specialist in Alasdair MacIntyre’s philosophy, Sandra L. Borden uses the term “epistemic responsibility” in order to refer to a group of intellectual virtues, which range from honesty and credibility to the willingness to provide the information necessary for the flourishing of the community (Sandra L. Borden, *Journalism as Practice: MacIntyre, Virtue Ethics and Press*, ed. cit., p. 50 et sq.).

⁵⁶ For the list of the journalist’s intellectual virtues see S.L. Borden, *op. cit.*, pp. 17-20.



more than ever, especially for the online media. All this can be placed in the realm of “epistemic responsibility”, in the sense of an ability to discern between knowledge and rumour/opinion and to delimit the information which is worth thorough research. In the terms of virtue epistemology (L. Code), “epistemic responsibility” (synonymous to the Aristotelian “wisdom”) presupposes an ability to realize how serious the effort of inquiry should be “before it is reasonable to claim knowledge” and “what cognitive ends are worth pursuing” in our own interest, but especially in the common interest of an entire community⁵⁷.

The stress on intellectual virtues is translated in the case of journalism as an extra degree of professionalization. The improvement of the quality of the journalist’s work coincides in this case with an ethics of „intellectual virtues”. Along with Lipovetsky, we state that addressing the essential questions and resisting rumour and manipulation are skills enacted not only due to a „clear conscience”, but mainly due to „professional intelligence”. This is acquired above all due to an “intellectualist ethics” concerned with professionalization, the pursuit of truth and the curiosity for the world⁵⁸.

B) A substitute for ethics committees. The interesting issue, at least for Romania, is that the intellectual values and virtues of online journalism, which reside within the perimeter of epistemic responsibility, are taken into account by bloggers rather than by an ethics code or by ethical boards. The 2009 Professional Ethics Code, adopted by the Convention of the Media Organizations in Romania, includes chapters referring to the checking of information, to plagiarism or information corrections, but was not updated (up to the end of 2012) to refer to online journalism⁵⁹. Even if it stipulated that the rules and principles of this code refer to the online medium as well (art. 1.3), as long as for the written press (print and online), there is no ethical and national council meant to enforce the conduct code, such as, for example, the Press Complaint Commission in the United Kingdom. Thus, the self-regulation of the Romanian press cannot function properly⁶⁰.

This is why we believe that the debates and criticisms that have appeared in the blogosphere on the level of the professional press, concerning not only the journalists, but also the abusive managers and politicians who manipulate the press, are meant to compensate for certain gaps regarding the institutionalization of media ethics; deontological codes have not been properly internalized and the owners of press trusts interfere in the editorial process or abusively fire those who have become an encumbrance; there are no ethical committees for the written press and last, but not least, there are no *ombudsmen* in the private trusts who would listen and react the public’s criticism. Without being a separate institution and without representing the will of the people, blogging journalists appear as a *sui generis* instance, placed somewhere in between the press councils, made up of experienced journalists who daily analyse, for significant newspapers, possible code violations,

⁵⁷ L. Code, *op. cit.*, p. 41.

⁵⁸ Gilles Lipovetsky, *Le Crépuscule du devoir. L'éthique indolore des nouveaux temps démocratiques*, Paris: Gallimard, 1993.

⁵⁹ If we look at the *CAJ Ethics Guidelines*, for example, we will see that it includes a final chapter focusing on the rules of online journalism and on the way in which principles apply in this context (see *CAJ Ethics Guidelines*, published on <http://j-source.ca/article/caj-ethics-guidelines>). The Professional Ethics Code for the Romanian Press can be found at <http://www.organizatiimedia.ro>.

⁶⁰ See C. Ghinea and A. Mungiu-Pippidi, *op. cit.*, p. 329.



and the citizen associations that lodge complaints or write letters deploring the unethical dealings of the press⁶¹.

Thus, beyond the belligerent paradigm which opposes bloggers to journalists, we believe that, within the Romanian context, the critical attitude coming from the blogs that center on the criticism of journalism is a positive thing, which can contribute to a better awareness of the importance of credibility and veracity in the online media, where the loyalty to an increasingly discriminating public is the key to the survival of professional journalism. Naturally, the criticism on the themes of ethics and professionalization issued by watchdog bloggers does not replace ethical commissions, but can be of genuine help in the Romanian journalistic environment.

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⁶¹ Regarding the precise role of these instances for the traditional media, see Claude-Jean Bertrand, *Media Ethics and Accountability Systems*, New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2000, pp. 107-111.



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