

Objectivity between illusions and professional standards in today's journalism

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Abstract

In this paper we approached the problem of objectivity in Romanian press. We presented the newest and also the most pertinent definitions of the subject and we have found that the researchers' opinions are divergent. As a case study we chose a newspaper known in the Romanian media market as having a very high level of subjectivity and partisanship. We analyzed this publication during the parliamentary election in 2012 and we identified the manners in which the journalists express their subjectivity.

Keywords: Journalism, objectivity, fairness, Romanian Press, elections

In the contemporary society, dominated by the postmodern principles, it's very difficult to find concepts with absolute value such as "truth" or "objectivity" and it's even more difficult to find them in journalism. The recipient of journalistic messages is nowadays at the command of many sources of information. As Ignacio Ramonet (Ramonet, 2011) noticed, not only is this new type of public better informed, but it is also "an advised witness" (Ramonet, 2011, p. 37) of the journalistic communication process and, implicitly, of the release and interpretation errors. This kind of communication "on sight" also reveals the fact that behind the text there is an employer who is usually involved in other types of financial and economic relations and, thus, he has personal expectations from the publication he finances. This transparency also feeds the readers' mistrust concerning the quality of the information received. The receiver will always

approach the journalistic text knowing he assists at what Ignacio Ramone names the politics – press cohabitation. This observation obliterates at some degree the idea that the Internet is a way to insure objectivity.

By analyzing objectivity through the eyes of the sender, this time we find together with Elisabeth StabryŁa-Thiel (1973) that any kind of interaction with reality includes contiguity, adaptability of the real to the type of subjective perception. StabryŁa-Thiel (1973) calls this state “collaboration”, meaning that “any knowledge is creation which gives a new aspect to the object” (p. 13). The subject recreates the object. On this line, we may speak more frequently about objectivity for and through the “I”, and less about objectivity for or through “he” or “she” (p. 54). We find the same idea with Richard Keeble (2006), who shows, following Umberto Eco, that the personal cultural luggage of every reporter influences the perception of the event he witnesses (Harcup, 2009, p. 81). We speak, hence, in Wittgenstein’s terms (1998, 1953), about a press article as a reflection of exteroception, a reflection of the intersection between the interior and the objective surrounding world.

Primarily, objectivity referred to “journalistic excellence” (Lévêque, Ruellan, 2010, p. 14). As a journalistic professional standard, objectivity includes/included separation of facts from opinion elements deriving from subjectivity (Harcup, p. 82). Objectivity is most of the times understood as fidelity for the facts with the famous irony “*facts are sacred*”.

Gaye Tuchman had established in 1972 (pp. 660-679) some “strategic rituals”, i.e. four procedures by means of which one could build objective journalistic information materials. The researcher considers objectivity not in the epistemic value of the material (in truth), but in “the set of procedures which the reporter uses in the order to produce those contents objectively true”. Tuchman describes four procedures reporters must follow so as to achieve objective news. According to him, objectivity means first of all the use of sources in (concurrently) verbalizing the truth, quotes, deep details, as well as the use of the reversed pyramid. Only one year later, Elisabeth StabryŁa-Thiel argued on the one hand that objectivity meant writing in accordance with the facts, but also the acceptance on the journalist’s point of view. Following Jean Daniel, the researcher believed that objectivity “is also set up according to the socio/cultural standards, but also by convention” (p. 207).

Between the writing ritual and the result of a convention, objectivity has lost its meanings in the vortex of experience. Thus, many researchers **deny the existence of objectivity itself**. The French theoretician Benoît Grevisse, author

of many studies and manuals which are very important in journalism, even said that the famous expression „facts only facts” – is “naturally an intellectual imposture”. The French theoretician believes that the journalistic message is built exactly on this tensional point between the desire to render and the awareness of the impossibility to reach the Truth (2008, p. 42).

Just as vehement is Erik Neveu, as well, who believes that objectivity is “a coarse illusion”. But objectivity became a professional standard which should generate a “cloned description” of the event, a speech which establishes the comment as “blather” (Neveu, p. 11). Neveu understands objectivity as the claim of a verified and neutral story of the facts and the separation of facts from the comment (p. 64).

Patrick Imbert talks about the myth of “objectivity”. The researcher believes that no one can credit the idea of objectivity as long as it is undertaken from the perspective of a monopole over the act of communication, and as long as there is only one perspective over the presented facts and as long as this perspective accepts only a “primary” antagonist view” (1989, p. 14).

Objectivity was then explained by a number of concepts such as accuracy, impartiality, honesty (Elisabeth StabryŁa-Thiel, 1973, p. 38), even resemblance. Tony Harcup himself distinguished between *impartiality* and *objectivity*, meaning impartiality implies neutrality and objectivity only a checking of the facts (2009, p. 83).

The concept is also found with Denis McQuail () for whom impartiality means “balance in the selection and use of sources (...) separation of facts from opinions, avoiding value judgments or emotional language or emotive images” (Harcup, p. 83). For Frost, impartial journalism means that the journalist aims for the truth while true objectivity involves creating an entire picture - an impossible task for a journalist (analogy created by Harcup) as it is for the cartographer. This is because, as in the case of the map, news is also a mediate and selective representation of reality rather than reality itself.

Benoît Grévisse believes it would be fairer to speak of a principle of *fairness* (*fairness*, apud *Washington Post*). The concept conditions fairness on completeness, on coherence, meaning that in the material there are placed “elements that have nothing to do with the subject, in the detriment of significant facts”. Also in order to define the principle of fairness, Grévisse speaks about the *imperative of honesty*, namely about the need for journalists not to mislead the reader. Likewise, the theoretician also warns on the “expression subtleties” (p. 49), which could conceal the journalist’s involvement in the object of his

communication.

These, and others, are concepts created to cover a media reality incompatible with the ideal of objectivity. It is incompatible in several respects. The journalist's impossibility to abandon his own perception is an axiom.

In our opinion, each of these concepts transfers the concept of objectivity. The recipient should receive the journalistic text framed by convention: the text is unbiased, the text is fair. Both principles require the recipient to accept the journalist's decision regarding the selection of sources (the first case) and of the facts believed as important (in the last case). Both principles meet in the concept of "non-reducible subjectivity to partisanship" (Brin, Charron, Bonville, in Neveu, 2004, p. 98). Therefore, the paradigm of the communicational journalism is/ was opened. That means the rating will come first rather than the judicious presentation of the facts.

Capture actions take place in the framework of an ego-centric system, not of a media-centric one (Ramonet, p. 21). The recipient chooses his sources, information, platforms, chooses the rhythm and type of reception. He can combine and order them, can waive or may gather, according to the rhythm of his own subjectivity. This recipient who is located in the centre of the information waves is no longer available to grant the promise of objectivity, impartiality, neutrality. Therefore, we suggest to move out of the recipient's motivations for reading, which cannot be controlled, towards the sender's motivations to write, especially regarding the possibilities to confer believability to the journalistic text.

In this new context, objectivity cannot be the cause but the effect at the most. For example, the journalist Jean Quatremer believes that "the Internet is the guarantor for the freedom of the journalistic act" (Quatremer, 2012, 179-180) in the meaning that the sender has the acknowledgement of communication transparency. If we were to carry on with this reasoning, the Internet can also be the guarantor of the objectivity effect, as long as the reader can decide his text while advancing in information, can confront, can contradict etc. But the recipient will not have time to also decide on the objectivity of the text. He will believe it or not. On the other hand, Ignacio Ramonet believes that the Internet generates an "informational insecurity" in the vortex of what Neil Thrumman called "paradox of plent" (p. 125).

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The publication observes the stellar layout of the information and hypertext, and the favourite structure is antitheses. Elements of opinion are very

present and they vary from the opinion genres to the graphic, syntactic, lexical, and semantic signals. Almost all items converge in a single theme: fraud. In its narration, the USL is the aggressor, and the PDL, the assaulted. The latter has a defensive attitude against incoming attacks, usually being presented while making complaints. Materials are legitimate, most often, from one communicator, PDL and the Romanian President Traian Basescu.

The portal takes by storm the aggressor's figure through the same processes: ambiguity, lack of assignment, absolute control over the information: "Several hundred fanatic supporters of the USL will force a diversion which could degenerate into violence. Therefore, the secret services are on alert (...) The goal is to create a scandal that would take effect on public opinion in the very day of the vote" (Marinescu, Teodorescu, 14th of October 2012 evz.ro). Ambiguity is geminated and supported here by words with great power of evocation (e.g. miners' march): "Dragnea is not a stranger to this scenario either. And he took the responsibility of bringing to the capital, from several counties, groups of 'discontent citizens'. If serious events occur, the USL will transfer the responsibility over the acts of violence to the suspended president. The action from Villa Dante can turn into a mini-miners' march, the beginning of a long series of street protests" (Marinescu & all, evz.ro). On other occasions, Ion Iliescu's personality is being evoked: "Ion Iliescu votes in the company of Dana Năstase". From a title like this we can understand that those two were together to vote. Moreover, their names evoke strong feelings in a part of society. Their negativity is aimed to be doubled in this context: "Former President Ion Iliescu voted at 'Jean Monnet' High school in the capital where he forgathered with Dana Nastase, former Prime Minister Adrian Năstase's wife" (evz.ro).

Many materials poach from the rumour rhetoric, mostly built on the indeterminacy. No kind of source (official or not) is mentioned for statements such as: "In mobile networks there have been and still are being sent messages to urge voters to vote. (...) A reader pointed us at the editor's office..." (Vintila, 14th of October 2012, evz.ro) or "Another incident was reported at Brad, (...) an employer if he were to threaten his employees" (Iancu, 14th of October, evz.ro). No source supports these facts: "PDL representatives also identified four vehicles that entered Craiova several times" (14th of October, evz.ro).

The sender seeks to give a direction to clear interpretation. In this respect, public interventions of USL are qualified as electoral campaign, while those of the PDL are taken as such, press releases.

Conclusions

The analysed publication subsumes the speech of an idea in the support of which the journalists intended to bring linguistic, logical, factual argument. Almost no material achieves requirements of objectivity as it is defined in textbooks and in other works quoted above. The strategy each undertakes is related to catch the attention by building a tension and by unmasking of a bad thing.

The temporary conclusion we phrase for now includes the need to catch the attention, necessity on which contemporary journalism everywhere is built on. In our opinion, this law of catching the attention found the Romanian journalism at the beginning of its reconstruction. Hence the euphoria style we identified, the enthusiasm with which one theme or another is being supported and which moves the journalistic speech from the reed of a cold, detached tone, controlled by the inflexibility of facts, to an emotional speech that overcomes the events by means of expressiveness.

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