

Working for Glossies. A case study on young magazine journalists in Romania

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Abstract: *In Romania, in the context of the concentration of media ownership and resources in very few hands, and in the context of a post-communist media lacking a tradition of media regulation and journalistic standards, young journalists face difficulties in magazines desks, as well as in other type of media editorial offices (newspapers, television, radio etc.). The paper (part of a larger postdoctoral research, within POSDRU/89/1.5/S/62259, University of Bucharest) will present an account on the working conditions of young Romanian magazine journalists. The theoretical background of the research explores the critical views on creative labour and decline of journalists' status in the 21st century informational society. We also take into account the critical approach on magazine journalists, considered to be practicing a "smiling profession" (John Hartley, 2000), an extension of the PR and advertising world.*

The research is based on 20 semi-structured interviews related to work procedures, wages, professional standards, and professional organizations. The in-depth dialogue with journalists is considered by contemporary researchers to deliver a better understanding of the everyday practices in newsrooms. In addition to the interviews, data from previous research papers on journalists situation in Romania will be also be used (Coman, 2004, Surugiu& Radu, 2009, Vasilendiuc, 2010 inter al.).

Young journalists do not usually have a firm work contract: they are paid within the "copyright agreement" framework (they get paid only if they deliver feature stories or news). As the profession has become more technology-ridden, young journalists are expected to be computer proficient, to deliver content for print magazine and its online version, in the same time, for the same amount of money. Nevertheless, the interviews showed

that young journalists do not consider important to belong to a professional organization or union, as they share an individualistic approach on work, in spite of their praise for teamwork.

Jobs at magazines have many desirable characteristics: an artistic side, a flexible work program, a certain level of autonomy, editorial independence, recognition. Many people are eager to work in a creative and stimulating environment. However, the research showed that young magazines journalists in Romania work under precarious conditions (long hours – over 60 hours per week, on low wages, and under the continuous pressures from advertising and PR agencies).

Keywords: *journalists, magazines, working conditions, qualitative research*

Introduction

If you closely look on research work on magazines you may notice two striking aspects. First of all, magazines are overlooked by media academics, on grounds that newspapers, radio and television programs allow a better understanding of the public sphere and of social change in nowadays world. Then, many studies (especially the ones dedicated to women's magazines) are based on textual and content analysis. Others offer historical accounts on magazines, accounts that may be not as culturally significant as they were intended to be.

Journalists as professionals have been subjects for the academic research, since the 50s. However, researchers focused on journalists working for 'serious' media outlets, as newspapers, radio and television networks, and doing investigative or interpretative reporting on political, social or economical aspects. Magazine journalists are still overlooked by academic scholarship, as they produce soft (read: 'trivial') stories on beauty and fashion trends, celebrities, cooking, travelling etc.

The Context

The critical approach on magazine journalists is that they practice a "smiling profession" (in John Hartley's words, quoted in Holmes and Nice, 2012, p. 2), an extension of the PR and advertising world. "Such an orientation towards audience produces a frame of reference for journalists that is said to be characterized by interesting (as opposed to 'important') issues, convenient and practical information, commitment and emotionality (rather than objectivity and rationality) and a mode of address that assumes audiences as consumers." (Van Zoonen, 1998, p. 126)

Nevertheless, serious journalism has been the subject of important shifts and transformations in the last decades. The "audience-oriented journalism" (Van Zoonen, 1998, p. 126) is not any more the playground of consumer magazines.

Newspapers have been ‘magazinified’: they run soft stories, lifestyle features and they diminish the importance of hard news on economy trends or international politics (see for example Conboy, 2004; Cole, 2007).

Magazines are a significant part of what we call nowadays journalism. Their roles (to inform, to explain, to entertain, and to reassure) are similar to the roles of other media, although their content focuses on lifestyle stories. The social dimension of magazines must not be overlooked.

However, if we closely look at the research works done so far on consumer magazines in general, we will notice too much interest on texts and images (the message), too little interest on journalists (the senders).

The Research

Although magazines represent a major part of today media landscape, they escaped somehow the attention of researchers that focus their scholarship on the so-called mainstream media (newspapers, radio and television networks) (Holmes, 2007). The studies cover many themes related to the history of magazines and content/text analysis, and have seldom left aside the industry of magazines and the professional aspects related to magazine work (Johnson, 2007).

In this context, we have to mention the enormous contribution to the magazine research of the Cardiff School of Journalism (Tim Holmes, in particular) that has fostered seminars and conferences (Mapping the Magazines 1-3), dedicated to magazine research. In Europe, on the non-academic domain, it is worth mentioning the project Colophon (International Independent Magazine Biennales, 2007, 2009). These academic and non-academic initiatives have supported the idea of including magazine industry as a theme of research.

It is my understanding that the magazine industry cannot be grasped without taking a close look at the practitioners. The journalists’ views and opinions are important in understanding the recent developments in the media landscape all over the world.

In Romania, research on journalists focused mainly on professionals working for important newspapers, radio and television chains. In the last years, the online integration of mainstream media and its consequences on journalists as a professional body have been the topic of several research projects (Surugiu and Radu, 2010, Lazar and Radu, 2012, Drula *et al.*, 2012). The studies on the portrait of media professionals are mostly based on quantitative data, obtained through applying questionnaires (see for example Coman, 2004 and Vasilendiuc, 2011). The magazine journalism *per se* has not been a subject of academic research, until now. There are, of course, several historical accounts on magazine journalism, but the nowadays industry is still ignored.

The present paper tries to answer the research question: What are the working conditions of Romanian magazine journalists? by interpreting the findings from 20

semi-structured interviews (anonymous, face-to-face) with journalists working for Romanian print magazines and their online versions. The interviews were done as a part of a class project – ‘The Identity of Magazine Journalists in Romania. A qualitative approach’ – by the author and by the Master students in Specialized Journalism, School of Journalism and Communication Studies, University of Bucharest. The names of the interviewees are mentioned in the References section.

The interviews had 26 open questions, divided in seven parts: introductory questions related to age, academic background, job experience; questions about journalistic experience, actual and previous jobs and about being a part of a professional organization; the daily routine part, main duties, main constraints, job satisfaction and discontent; comments on the audience; comments on the advertising and PR relationship; questions related to journalism as a profession; concluding remarks on the future of Romania media, especially print and online magazines, and on the personal future plans and prospects.

When implementing the research, the author had to overcome one major step-back: the journalists working for magazines are reluctant to be interviewed by academic scholars, especially when it comes to working conditions or wages. They require anonymity and even ask the researcher to keep the information ‘off the record’, which in journalistic terms means not to be quoted, not to be attributed. The author experienced this problem in Romania and found similarities in Sammye Johnson’s observations (2007).

Main Findings

The demographic profile of the interviewed journalists displays an average age of 27 years old. Five out of 20 journalists are over 35 years old and 5 out of 20 are men. We found not a clear connection between being a man and earning more, or between being a man and having a higher position in the hierarchy. The high proportion of women interviewed suggests the possibility of a gender imbalance in magazine industry, i.e. women journalists outnumber men journalists. However, in the given circumstances, it is difficult to determine if the magazine journalism is a feminized domain.

However, the academic background of the interviewed journalists is of extreme importance for the research. All 20 journalists have at least a Bachelor diploma in Journalism or related fields (Sociology, Philosophy, Psychology, and Literature). Many of them completed master programs in Journalism, Marketing, Communication Studies, or Media Management, or plan to apply for a master program. Many journalists have recently participated in non-academic trainings.

Nevertheless, a strong academic background is not similar to a privileged position within the magazine desk. Asked to talk about their daily routine, many journalists explained that they spend many hours doing administrative chores, refreshing the Facebook wall, updating the website, sending e-mails for the editor-

in-chief, attending PR events or translating stories from the international edition of the magazine.

Magazine journalists work on precarious conditions. They are supposed to stay long hours at the office on the grounds that the magazine is not profitable if many people were hired. The journalists also offered other type of explanations for accepting such a difficult situation: the global economical crisis, or the crisis of Romanian print media.

“Taking into account the crisis that Romania overcomes, and Europe also and the entire world... (...) We (journalists) can do better, it is obvious, but we can't overlook the harsh conditions of Romanian media nowadays.” (journalist, male, 24 years old)

Moreover, many of them do not have a strong work contract or their contracts are not reinforced by the employers:

“On paper, I work part-time and I am paid for part-time. In reality, I work full-time and much more than I am supposed to.” (web editor, female, 23 years old)

Many of them are employed on the so-called ‘copyright agreement’ contract. 14 out of 20 respondents mentioned the copyright agreement as a way of employment. This type of contract was, at first, designed to offer a law protection for people involved in artistic creation: painters, writers, composers etc. Their artistic products are bought on item, together with the intellectual property rights for a determined period of time. In the last decade, the copyright agreement was rapidly adopted by the media industry in Romania, as a mean of hiring and paying employees, without covering health insurances, pensions, holidays and sick days.

The wages vary between 1000 Romanian lei or less (approx. 227 euros) to 4000 Romanian lei or in a few cases more (approx. 909 euros). Communicating the monthly wage is a sensitive aspect in the Romanian media. Every employer imposes the employees to keep this information confidential. Journalists may face sanctions if they publicly speak about payment or payment conditions. In the present research, 4 respondents refused to reveal the wage, and others offered an approximate figure (over 1000 lei, or between 1000 and 2000). Their explanations are, however, extremely interesting. Some journalists complain that they are not able to support themselves from the money they earn. Others accept money from translating articles or from writing advertising sponsored articles. Behind some explanations, you can see the employers’ ideology: it is not the money that counts, but the work itself.

“My wage is normal for the journalists in Romania. Not too much, nor too little, I cope with it. It is motivating, not as motivating as the work itself. When you like your work, there are other things more important than money.” (journalist, female, 30 years old)

“We are entitled to be paid for writing sponsored articles, to get money from advertising (...). My parents support me (she giggles).” (journalist, female, 22 years old)

“From the very beginning, I thought that the wage is too low, but taking into account that I had no a significant previous experience, I considered that I have to learn first, in order to be allowed to ask for more. It has been the same wage since I got the job.” (journalist, female, 25 years old)

In order to be hired, magazine journalists also agree to spend between 3 to 6 months in a non-paid internship. Some of them say they had longer internship, others mention a training period in which they were paid on article. In some magazines, the recruiting system favors the young and inexperienced.

“For example, you can hire a beauty editor from a certain magazine, but s/he will come with the previous working experience, and will have a difficult time adapting to our editorial concept. From this point of view, it is much easier for a person that has not worked in this domain, because this person is open-minded.” (editor-in-chief, female, 24 years old)

It is also true that young and inexperienced journalists accept low payments and precarious working conditions, as part of a vicious recruiting circle.

The respondents offered very homogenous views on being a member of a professional organization. 19 journalists out of 20 are not members of any professional organizations, and 8 of them explicitly rejected the idea of belonging to an organization now and in the near future.

When it comes to internal and external pressures, journalists mentioned the overwhelming influence of advertising agencies. The nowadays magazines cannot live without advertising and PR industries. They are in a sort of symbiosis with these two segments.

As circulation revenues are not able to cover the costs of producing and publishing a magazine, the solution is to include advertisements. On paper, everything seems as simple as that. But on practice, the advertising agencies come along with many editorial demands: i.e. advertorials and different types of promotions. The magazines actually sell their audience to the advertisers, as a common strategy to get high advertising revenues and to resist on the marketplace (‘the audience commodity’ concept, Smythe, 1977).

The editors usually feel that advertising and PR’s editorial interventions are major obstacles in their journalistic activity. Journalists also consider that they betray the audience, when accepting editorial pressures from advertising clients.

“Because of advertising many publications are ruined. Media products with a clear editorial direction have been in the situation to make concessions for advertising contracts. (...) These compromises are not OK in relation to the

reader. Then, you lose credibility, and next time the reader will not buy your publication. (...) At a certain moment of time, the reader will figure things up, and you lose the product's credibility." (editor-in-chief, female, 24 years old)

"Since 2008, magazines have been desperate for advertising, they accept everything. For example, when I worked for Elle (magazine), you could not find advertising for Ariel (a laundry detergent) in Elle's pages. Well, now, you find ad prints for Ariel. That is a very good example on how things go in the media." (editor, female, 25 years old)

"Sometimes, I feel that we betray our readers by giving up in front of the advertising pressures, and by encouraging consumption." (beauty editor, female, 24 years old)

Conclusions

The portrait of the Romanian magazine journalist has a few distinctive features: (s)he is young, with no previous experience on "hard news" journalism, with strong academic education on journalism or related fields (many hold one or two master degrees), pragmatic, enthusiastic, ambitious and individualistic, willing to work long hours for less money, willing to undergo long internship stages.

Jobs at magazines have many desirable characteristics: an artistic side, a flexible work program, a certain level of autonomy, editorial independence, recognition. Many people are eager to work in a creative and stimulating environment. However, the reality is not as beautiful as it looks: journalists work long hours, on low wages, spend many months on non-paid internship programs in order to get a job, and are a subject of continuous pressures from advertising and PR agencies.

The title of this article was inspired by a phrase, taken from one interview: 'we are workers in/for glossies' ('suntem toti muncitori in glossy', in Romanian). It somehow reflects the gap between the glossy image of magazine journalism and the matte image of magazine jobs.

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