

Then and now: The evolution of the Romanian press in post-Soviet Europe¹

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Abstract: *The past quarter century has brought about significant waves of change for the nations of Central and Eastern Europe as Communism waned as the region's dominant political ideology. Paramount to these transitions - as well as the success of the democratic governments that have come to replace their authoritarian predecessors - has been the role of press systems in informing citizens and holding government, and governmental officials, accountable to the respective publics they serve. This has been the case in Romania, where the nation's press system has been in a state of flux since the nation's violent revolution of 1989. Through a series of semi-structured interviews, this article takes stock of what progress has been made some 25 years following the birth of the nation's democracy, assessing findings with a keen eye towards prior scholarship outlining the shortcomings of the Romanian press and perspectives shared by well-informed individuals about the present performance of the nation's media.*

Keywords: *Romania; Romanian press; media system; post-Soviet; Eastern Europe.*

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Introduction

For most Romanians, December 21, 1989 began as most other days that had preceded it. Toiling in pointless professions, most carried about their routines, struggling to adapt to scarcities in even the most basic necessities of adequate living (Carothers 1996).

December 22, in contrast, began in a vastly different way.

The events that transpired just more than twenty-five years ago would radically transform Romania from a communist nation at the beck and call of a ruthless dictator to a fledgling post-communist nation striving, in many ways, to be anything but what it was in the past (Carothers 1996). The months and years that followed would be characterized by vulnerability, political maneuvering and transition, as the Eastern European nation would slowly, and sometimes painfully, inch towards democracy (Carothers 1996).

In the days leading up to the blood-stained revolution, the idea of a free and independent press – and more so, a press that would help develop and support Romania's infant democracy – was likely considered nothing more than a Western pipe dream for most of the population (Carothers 1996; Gross 1996). The events of December 1989 would bring such an achievement into the realm of possibility for the people of Romania, though the years that followed would introduce new threats to the newfound freedoms – and the emerging press – brought about by the revolution (Gross 1996). The freedoms and liberties of the media and other institutions in the country's new society would soon be inhibited – not by the all-too-familiar formal controls of the former communist regime of the nation's past, but rather by covert influences and restraints that would prove to be even more insidious than the oppressive conditions they replaced.

It is within this context that the present study explores conditions of the Romanian press at approximately the quarter-century anniversary of the emergence of its democracy – assessing both shortcomings that remain and progress that has been made.

Literature review

Post-Communist Society and the Media

As the Soviet Union dissolved and communism began to wane as the dominant political ideology in much of Central and Eastern Europe, the individual nations were left in a state of dramatic, sometimes drastic transition (Gross 2002). From patronage to nepotism, subtle cronyism to clear corruption, the communist governments varied in some ways, but carried many of the same common threads across national borders (Gross 2002). So, even as the Soviet empire crumbled and the figurative chains of communism were removed from the different nations, what remained was in many ways less clear than what had been removed (Gross 2002).

While the countries were at once no longer under authoritarian and totalitarian control, they were also not necessarily democratic (Gross 2002; Carothers 1996). Some were outright opposed to, or at least wary of, the idea of a democratic state – suspicions that could very well have been derived from the “learned helplessness” or passivity that was ingrained in the cultures of authoritarian regimes (Gross 2002, p. 3). As one scholar argues, “it could take generations for the political, social, economic and professional cultures of Eastern Europe to be transformed” (Gross 2002, p. 3).

While the transitions of individual nations from their respective authoritarian pasts differed along international boundaries, a commonality was the recognition that a strong, free and independent press has the potential to play a strong role in supporting an emerging democracy (Gross 2002). In fact, the freedom to launch new media outlets based on any premise other than spreading the views and wishes of a totalitarian state was a much-welcomed phenomenon in societies in Central and Eastern Europe, and most nations saw strong increases in the number of press organizations in the years following the dissolution of communism as the region’s dominant ideology (Gross 2002). The almost sudden split between media and the state was embraced by the public, as the press began to be seen as a vehicle through which the development of a more democratic style of government could be supported in such nations (Gross 2002).

Romania as a Laboratory

The tale is much the same in the case of Romania – a nation that experienced a sudden and rather violent revolution in late December 1989 (Carothers 1996). After decades of suffering under the increasingly oppressive rule of the nation’s communist party leader, Nicolae Ceausescu, the Romanian population had become rather complicit – hesitant to step out of line and wary of the uncertain road that was ahead in the post-revolution nation (Carothers 1996; Gross 2002). In many ways, the country was closed off from its surrounding regional, European context, as economic conditions worsened and Ceausescu’s heavy-handed approach to leading the country became more riddled with fear and, consequentially, distrust among citizens both of government and of one another (Carothers 2002). Romania exemplifies many of the challenges faced by Central and Eastern European nations on the whole, though it also encountered its own set of obstacles (Carothers 1996; Gross 1996). While some research has shed light on the history and development of the Romanian press, many of these books and studies have taken a broader European approach, and paying more attention to media systems in other societies (Burt 2006).

Romania’s mass media was left in a unique position following the nation’s 1989 revolution and the subsequent progressions towards democracy. During the communist legacy, the press system was a particular target of influence for party officials (Granville 2010). Editorial staffs were packed with loyal party supporters,

and in the event that a staff was not dominated by party members or sympathizers, “competent activists” were dispatched to assist in keeping the newsrooms on track with the appropriate party lines (Granville 2010, p. 90). The regime would also censor what information would be released to media outlets, and at various points printing presses were limited and computers required to be registered with police (Carothers 1996; Granville 2010). The initial days of post-authoritarian Romania saw rather drastic changes in some media outlets, with editions on the last day of the communist regime appearing as they had for the many decades that preceded, and the editions on the first day of the nation’s democracy offering “real” journalism (Gross 1996, p. 40). One publication in particular, which bore the name *Scinteia* (The Spark) in the days of communism, had quickly instituted a change in its moniker to *Scinteia Poporului* (The People’s Spark) that appeared the very same day, replacing what would be the final copy of the publication in its communist format (Gross 1996).

In a society that had just begun a period of certain change, shifts in the press came as a tangible symbol of the cultural and governmental transitions that were underway (Gross 1996). The transition from a communist to a democratic press was also a transition from a press being controlled by the state to an industry being controlled by the market (Frumusani 2013). This evolution also brought about changing roles for the individual journalist, who essentially found himself or herself shifting from “an anonymous cog in the vast propaganda machine” to “the mediator between event and information” (Frumusani 2013). It was during this period of vast and rather rapid change that the duties of reporters and editors changed significantly, as the responsibility of shaping a strong press capable of supporting the nation’s evolving democracy began to fall on the shoulders of journalists (Frumusani 2013).

Gross (1996) describes the development of the media into a populist tool, which over the period of just a few weeks became more specialized – in many cases – and began to be characterized by sensationalistic coverage of many matters. As Gross explains,

Journalism was first applauded, then damned. It was first considered an essential tool of surveying the mélange of political views, contending realities and near-realities and the recovering of Romania’s long-suppressed history. Then it was viewed increasingly as entertainment with some dubious informational value, and highly sensationalist (Gross 1996, p. 126).

In another piece of research on the topic, Gross (2008) describes the media as a product of a transition from a past devoid of democracy, ethics and even positive models in the country’s press history that it could emulate. Such a past offers a set of strong barriers to development, Gross argues, and leads to many concerns

that the Romanian media more closely resembles its communist heritage than its democratic present and future (Gross 2008).

Shortcomings of the Romanian Press

While it was no longer subjected to the overt controls of an oft-cruel, communist regime, the governmental transition came far short of presenting a cure-all of the press system's ills. Even the nation's accession to the European Union in January 2007 did not solve some of the remaining problems being faced by journalists and media organizations (Gross 2008b). Significant barriers still exist, including: attacks on the freedom of press organizations by some governmental agencies; continued attacks on and threats against reporters; media consolidation and shifts in ownership; efforts on the part of some public officials to either block pro-press legislation or craft ways to access the notes or records of reporters and news organizations; the manipulation of news entities for political or personal gain; the lack of organization and camaraderie between members of the news media; and the poor pay that reporters receive (Gross 2008b). In addition, the press continues to be seen by many as a tool for influencing the masses – much like it was during the communist era (Gross 2008b). Presently, the majority of news organizations are also owned by powerful businesspeople or politicians, who often utilize the mediums to further their personal and professional interests (Gross 2008b). The end of the communist era in Romania brought about not only drastic new opportunities for the country's media system, but at the same time it erased the decades of rules, organizational systems and practices that had become commonplace (Coman 2004). For better or for worse, this led to a shuffling of many aspects of the industry with realities that have fallen far short of the idealistic image of the post-communist press that emerged in the days following the nation's bloody revolution (Coman 2004). As Gross (2008b) states, "the Romanian media have not established themselves as an institution in its own right, a necessity in any democracy" (p. 145).

It is this set of obstacles to journalistic efficacy, documented in the years following Romania's transition to a democracy, which serve as the premise of this study – which seeks to examine what progress, if any, might have been made in recent years.

Methodology

Premised on historic accounts of the Romanian press and its transition following the nation's 1989 revolution, the objective of this study is to address the following research question:

RQ: From the perspective of news media professionals, public officials and researchers studying the media, how effective is the Romanian press – and what factors play a role in its effectiveness?

The abovementioned research question will be addressed through a case study of the Romanian press. This qualitative approach consists of a series of interviews with well-informed individuals, seeking to shed light on the nature of the mass media in Romania and the various factors impacting the performance of press organization as well as individual journalists. Employing a qualitative, rather than a quantitative, research design is appropriate given the nature of the subject under study. According to Frankel and Devers (2000), “qualitative methods are needed when the questions being asked pose puzzles that are difficult, if not impossible, to address using conventional [quantitative] research approaches” (p. 253). Qualitative methods differ from quantitative research approaches in the sense that the former involve inductive reasoning, and such studies commonly seek to find explanations for “people and groups’ particular situations, experiences, and meanings *before* [original emphasis] developing and/or testing more general theories and explanations” (Frankel & Devers 2000, p. 253).

Interview Procedures

Over the course of 13 months, two sets of semi-structured field interviews were conducted in the city of Cluj-Napoca, Romania. The multicultural municipality of Cluj-Napoca, which serves as the seat of Cluj County, is the second largest city in the country and the home to eleven major higher education institutions and an evolving business climate (Cluj Business 2014). With the goal of becoming the European Capital of Culture in 2020, public, private and nonprofit leaders in the city have been working to foster development opportunities and increase the profile of the city (Cluj Business 2014). Cluj is second in size only to the nation’s capital, Bucharest, and the wealth of corporate and governmental offices based in the city make it an ideal location for such a case study (Cluj Business 2014).

A total of 18 interviews were conducted with well-informed respondents during the course of two visits to Cluj-Napoca, with ten taking place in 2013 and the remaining eight in 2014. Both rounds of interviews were conducted individually and in person, facilitated by the author and a research colleague, a graduate student in the Public Administration Department in the College of Political, Administrative and Communication Sciences of Babes-Bolyai University, which is based in Cluj-Napoca.

Respondents

Through the assistance of faculty members within Babes-Bolyai University’s College of Political, Administrative and Communication Sciences, contact was made with a selection of well-informed individuals, approaching them with a request for participation in this study. Those selected for participation were identified based upon their knowledge of the field, employing a purposive, rather than

random, sampling technique. According to Devers and Frankel (2000b), “purposive sampling strategies are designed to enhance understandings of selected individuals or groups’ experience(s) or for developing theories and concepts” (p. 264). In this way, so-called “‘information rich’ cases” are identified in respondents with the goal of capturing voices and vantage points that would best inform the study (Devers & Frankel 2000, p. 264). Respondents were not compensated in any way for their participation in the study, and each provided verbal agreement to the terms of participation.

Given the sensitive nature of the topic and many of the questions presented in the survey instrument, respondents were granted confidentiality and are identified in this report only by their general professional vantage point. This guarantee proved to be essential in securing the participation of respondents, many of whom would agree to an interview only if there would be no record of their participation – a concern which underlines the complexity of the topic and the sensitive nature of some of the areas encompassed by the survey instrument, as well as the potential for professional harm or personal harassment that could result from their responses. The granting of confidentiality in light of these concerns is an accepted practice in such circumstances (Singer, Von Thurn and Miller 1995; Tourangeau and Yan 2007).

For the purposes of this study, each of the 18 respondents was classified into one of the following four categories, which identify the vantage point from which the various respondents approach the relationship between the media and government in Romania:

- **Elected Official:** Elected governmental officials in either the city of Cluj-Napoca or Cluj County. The elected officials who participated represent a range of offices and positions, from city councilmembers to senior county officials.
- **Appointed Official, Spokesperson:** Appointed or hired staffers for public agencies at the city or county level whose job responsibilities dictate contact with the press, or who, in the course of fulfilling their prescribed duties, interact with members of the news media on a routine basis.
- **Journalist:** Professionals actively working in the field of journalism across various mediums, with representation of print, television, radio and online platforms, and including both reporters and editors (with past experience as reporters).
- **Media Researcher, Former Journalist:** Individuals who serve in teaching and research capacities revolving around the news media, and who have prior experience as journalists themselves.

Survey Instrument and Procedures

This study employed two distinct survey instruments utilized during the interviews. The first, employed when speaking with respondents in the “elected official” and “appointed official, spokesperson” categories, contains a set of questions related to the interaction between the media and government. The second survey instrument was employed when speaking with respondents in the “journalist” and “media researcher, former journalist” categories. In the case of both survey instruments, the questions – primarily open-ended lines intended to facilitate a guided discussion about the topics being studied – were used by members of the research team to guide the semi-structured interview with each respondent.

Findings

The following presents the findings derived from a series of 18 field interviews conducted over a period of 13 months, arranged by the various themes which became evident during data collection and analysis.

The Media in Romanian Society

Respondents expressed a variety of viewpoints regarding the significance of the role the mass media plays in Romanian society. Most of these opinions were couched in the challenges faced by reporters and various prohibitions imposed upon journalists due to informal constraints placed on media organizations – factors that will be discussed throughout this section. For the most part, public officials shared the belief that the media is a powerful force in Romania. This reach seems to be expanding, the public officials reported, as press coverage of elections and political developments have captured the attention of more Romanians. The media has been proven to be influential as well, with one elected official remarking that:

The media today is the most powerful tool in the social life of Romania (Cluj-Napoca city elected official, personal communication, January 31, 2014).

Several elected officials shared the view that the media is a critical channel for information to be communicated between government and citizens, though it was noted that this passage of information is trending towards virtual channels as fewer households subscribe to print publications. Rather, news is communicated via television programs and radio shows or, most commonly, through online news platforms. While some of these are managed by professional news organizations, others are more opinionated sites that might not necessarily gather and disseminate news with the same level of integrity as more traditional media firms.

In the case of appointed government officials who commonly interact with the press, media organizations are commonly viewed as a tool for sharing information

with the public. In many cases, this is the primary means with which public agencies can share plans, developments or policies with constituents. The overriding opinion of public employees is that media organizations and individual journalists play an important role in communicating information from the government to the citizenry. One Cluj County staffer commented,

[The media] is very important, especially for us as a public institution and a local institution. We have a lot of projects that people need to know about. Through the media, through the journalists...the people, the citizens know about these kinds of projects or investments (Cluj County official, personal communication, January 21, 2014).

The Performance of Journalists in Romania

Respondents shared several perspectives related to the performance of Romanian journalists, including what several appointed government officials described as a pattern of laziness among some reporters. One spokesperson reported that particular journalists simply copy and paste content directly from statements into their stories – a practice that can make it quite easy for a public agency to control the message that is conveyed to the journalist’s audience. One journalist characterized some reporters as simple spectators during press conferences or public events, describing their habits of merely writing down the information provided to them by officials without asking questions or demanding detail or clarification. Still, one city official expressed the opinion that many Romanian journalists perform their job satisfactorily:

I think there are very serious and dedicated journalists who do their job well (Cluj-Napoca city employee, personal communication, January 23, 2014).

However, that official couched this opinion in a laundry list, per se, of improvements that could be made in the performance of reporters. Chief among these is refraining from tabloid practices, a problem they note as being a common trend among many publications, and one that must be avoided for the media to be effective.

Press Independence

Nearly every journalist included in the sample – including those with past experience reporting who now serve in governmental or research capacities – spoke of the informal, yet pervasive, pressures that inhibit the ability of reporters to cover the news objectively. These pressures manifest themselves in various ways – in some cases, an entire news organization has a clear slant or political agenda that is exercised in all of its reporting, while in other cases individual journalists might lean in a particular ideological direction. And they come both from within

news organizations – through unofficial mandates or unwritten rules about how coverage should portray particular individuals or institutions – and from outside entities, which can use threats or other forms of coercion in an attempt to exercise control over the messages disseminated by reporters. One elected official serving a constituency in Cluj-Napoca summarized this trend related to coverage of public administration and politics:

Unfortunately, almost all media that covers politics and administration is biased. Unfortunately, journalists in Romania are not journalists; they are militants, which support the political parties or economic...groups that support political parties (Cluj-Napoca city elected official, personal communication, January 31, 2014).

Such results emanate from political and financial ties to media ownership and leadership, ties that make it difficult, if not impossible, for individual journalists working for these publications to operate in a completely objective fashion. When it comes to covering politics, several respondents stated that some media firms provide only one side of the story, or feature a particular politician or political party in a consistently positive or negative light, despite the reality of a given situation. As one staffer for Cluj County stated,

[A newspaper or television program] has someone behind the scene (Cluj County employee, personal communication, January 21, 2014).

One elected official made the argument that financial independence is the greatest need of the Romanian news media; if organizations did not have to depend upon financial support from wealthy politicians or political operatives, the official claimed, the media outlets could pursue the truth in every story without fear of jeopardizing the careers of employees or the financial stability of the organization.

Investigative Reporting

When discussing the state of investigative journalism in Romania, journalists and editors expressed concerns that there is typically not enough time for reporters to effectively pursue such enterprise reporting. A lack of funding for long-term, complicated projects also compounds the problem. Participants indicated that political pressures imposed upon reporters can also determine the success or failure of a given investigation. What results from this confluence of barriers, respondents indicated, is a dearth of investigative stories - with those that do get completed mainly identifying more about existing, known problems rather than uncovering new issues.

Seemingly more pervasive are instances in which powerful officials or operatives levy threats or actual force in efforts to inhibit the activity of journalists. Many respondents remarked that journalists do not occupy a particularly high social class in terms of their occupation, as many look upon journalists with distrust.

One respondent, who previously worked for several organizations and now operates an online news service in a media research capacity, spoke on this:

You have to be very careful here in society when you go and say you are a journalist, because they can be very severe and savage sometimes with you (Media researcher and former journalist, personal communication, January 29, 2014).

Journalists expressed the sentiment that an individual reporter is only as effective as his or her organization is supportive. This adage rang true for journalists interviewed in the study, who related that they are essentially acting alone when pursuing investigative assignments.

One elected official did offer the opinion that the Romanian news media is fairly effective in exposing corruption within public offices in the nation – particularly at the central government level. The official described corrupt officials as one of the chief challenges for progression in Romania’s civil society, and applauded the media:

The media in general – it is effective in discovering the corruption of politicians, which [has been] Romania’s biggest problem for years (Cluj-Napoca city elected official, personal communication, January 31, 2014).

However, the official added that many journalists can uncover such corruption because of sources tied to the political ideology of their respective news organizations. In a sense, therefore, media firms become propaganda wings of political parties or operatives, serving the cause by conducting opposition research and publishing negative stories on their opponents. Many respondents connected the challenges facing journalists to the authoritarian past of the nation, and the country’s relatively young and still-evolving democracy. A media researcher and former journalist summarized the difficulty of the sentiments that reporters have to tolerate:

We are in the European Union now, but we have part of the society that is mentally communist, and they deal with you from that point of view (Media researcher and former journalist, personal communication, January 29, 2014).

Journalists Transitioning to Politics

While the internal and external pressures from political forces have a significant impact on the media industry in Romania, another practice has contributed to the erosion of journalism as a profession and the challenges facing working journalists: the fairly common practice of journalists moving into careers in politics or government. According to the study’s respondents, two of the predominant incentives for this type of a transition are the higher salaries and the greater levels of respect paid to individuals working for elected and appointed officials. At the same

time, politicians might be more likely to hire journalists due to their experience in the field, particularly for roles that involve regular communication with the news media. This trend, however, leads to skepticism as to the behavior of the individual journalists while they were in their reporting careers. Particular scrutiny is paid in hindsight to the nature of stories they covered related to the party or candidate they eventually find employment with, as well as their party affiliation.

The Relationship between Government and the Media

Interviews also revealed details about the complex relationship between government and the media in Romania. Overall, respondents expressed opinions of a rather sensitive relationship, and one in which government officials tread very lightly. According to the study's sample, spokespersons responsible for representing a governmental agency or entity to the media are careful to be fully transparent and to avoid accusations of being secretive – an all-too-common characteristic of the nation's authoritarian past. They also relayed their cautions about waging wars with the media, asserting that it is impossible to be successful in such an endeavor. Politicians, in the opinion of two appointed government officials and one journalist interviewed, are generally fearful of the media and watch its coverage very carefully.

Another official in Cluj-Napoca expressed the difficulties faced by public officials who see the political leanings of journalists and media firms, and can detect the biases in all of their works. An employee of Cluj County who frequently interacts with the media went so far to say that some public agencies have the tendency to shape or craft messages given to the press, depending upon the political leanings of the particular outlet. The official used the example of a newspaper reporter contacting the agency for comment:

When we speak with a journalist, we ask from what newspaper [they are from]...we know what is behind that newspaper, who is behind that newspaper. It is necessary to know...the perspective of how you talk with that guy, about what, and what to say and what not to say (Cluj County employee, personal communication, January 21, 2014).

Transparency

Central to discussions of the media industry in Romania are considerations of transparency in public processes. Respondents expressed mixed opinions on the topic, with some arguing that transparency is strong and others asserting that there is room for improvement. They made it clear in most of the interviews, however, that there are disparate levels of transparency – as well as accessibility – between various levels of government.

When asked about transparency, most responses included a reference to Law 544, legislation passed in 2001 that guarantees free access to public documents and information. Interviewees revealed a consensus among both government officials and journalists that the law is a positive step, and that it has had a real impact. This study revealed high levels of access to many public buildings and offices in Cluj-Napoca and Cluj County. In fact, in some locations journalists – or any member of the public, for that matter – can simply enter a public office during the day and remain in most locations without an appointment. One spokesperson related a story of a journalist who would spend eight hours each weekday just sitting in various city hall offices trying to eavesdrop and learn about the activities of various officials.

Transparency has, in large part, been connected to considerations of the nation's evolving democracy. One Cluj-Napoca city staffer explained that government in Romania cannot afford the perception of being secretive, and added that the nation's accession to the European Union has helped to expose the country not only to higher standards, but also best practices in fellow EU states. However, such developments do not come without exceptions. One elected official in the city explained that, while most major decisions are made publicly, some officials in the central government have the tendency to make sweeping decisions of high importance in a short period of time, often with significant portions of the process being kept secretive. The official stated,

The formal decisions are mostly transparent, but the present government has the bad habit of making major decisions in one or two days, in secret, without consulting the civil society (Cluj-Napoca city elected official, personal communication, January 31, 2014).

This type of behavior could be attributed to what one media researcher described as remnants of the legacy of Nicolae Ceaușescu. The interviewee described this legacy as being personified in the attitudes and actions of some lingering officials in positions of power who expect only positive coverage of select issues to make it into the news.

While examples of poor transparency were reported, there was a general consensus among respondents that conditions are gradually improving. Public officials are generally accessible to reporters, and are often eager to provide comment. More public documents are also being made available online, and at least one interviewee expressed the belief that things become more transparent each year, particularly as younger staffers begin to assume positions of power in governmental agencies.

The Practicality of Watchdog Journalism in Romania

Each of the interviews conducted in both phases of this study contained a set of questions related to media as a watchdog of democracy. There was a universal understanding of what this concept means, and how it could be applied in the case of Romania, though there was significant variation in perspectives related to how journalists are presently fulfilling this role.

While several respondents spoke of the decline in readership of traditional media outlets, notably print television stations, one elected official noted that the news media still has an extensive reach in Romania, stating:

The people are more informed about politics, about what the politicians are doing. The people are more informed, with the good things and also the bad (Cluj-Napoca city elected official, personal communication, January 30, 2014).

The official attributed this awareness, concentrated around political information, to the power of the news media.

Journalists interviewed tended to believe that such a watchdog role is important, and one to be followed and respected. However, this varied according to experience in the field. While veteran journalists generally considered this role increasingly more difficult to fulfill, younger journalists had more optimism. There was virtual consensus, however, that the overall ability to serve as a watchdog media organization revolves more around the orientation of the news organization more so than individual reporters. This has been attributed to the strong impact of environmental factors on newsroom productivity and effectiveness. Journalists see “enrolled” colleagues – those who have unofficial, yet binding, connections to political candidates, parties or organizations – as a major threat to this traditional role.

Another journalist spoke of the dangers of watchdog journalism, particularly in relation to covering the misdeeds of public officials at any level of government. The dangers of writing about such occurrences are compounded by the smaller teams that comprise newsrooms, and the all-too-common result of a reporter working on such features alone, and frequently without strong levels of institutional support. Concerns like this not only inhibit positive journalistic work, but also make fulfilling a watchdog role less practical.

For government officials in Romania – both elected and appointed – the theory of a watchdog media was one they considered critical to protecting the nation’s evolving democracy. One official remarked that the media has the responsibility of guarding against abuses of power, and helping politicians to avoid making mistakes with the threat of making such errors or missteps public. Others expressed the importance of the press in curbing corruption and holding officials to high standards of conduct. An elected city official discussed the rotation among parties

in power and opposition, likening the press to a permanent opposition party:

The media has become a constant opposition in Romania, no matter who is in power, which is very healthy (Cluj-Napoca city elected official, personal communication, January 31, 2014).

However, several officials spoke about the shortcomings of the media in Romania as strong detriments to its ability to fulfill the watchdog ideal of journalism. In short, officials for the most part agreed with reporters in stressing the importance of the watchdog role of journalism in countries like Romania, but did not express confidence that the media is currently living up to this standard.

Discussion

The series of interviews that comprise this study – conducted just after the quarter-century mark of Romania’s democratic governance – reveal significant shortcomings of the nation’s press system. Respondents indicated a range of obstacles to more effective reporting and news dissemination, not the least of which are off-covert controls and restraints shaping the nature and tone of news coverage.

Nearly every journalist included in the study’s sample spoke of political pressures and controls that are levied against media firms, which in many cases are owned by political figures or others who are heavily influenced by the same. This has resulted in many outlets having a clear slant or bias in reporting, and has contributed to an overall sense of distrust among audiences of the news media. This is a significant factor holding back the press from achieving its goal of acting as an institution, and providing a service to the people of Romania – objectives shared both by journalists and public officials interviewed in the study. And because the pressures are applied to media firms themselves, the challenge goes far beyond individual reporters or editors.

Following the abovementioned factor is the lack of training and support afforded to Romanian reporters and editors related to thorough, in-depth reporting and investigative journalism. Respondents expressed concerns that most reporters – notably younger and newer staff members – lack the formal training to effectively conduct investigative reports. Furthermore, in most cases there is a general absence of institutional support for reporters doing such work, so the fairly common trend of threats or other actions being taken against journalists from outside entities can go without any repercussions because individual journalists must often act alone. Along these lines, it is not only very possible – but relatively common, according to several of the study’s respondents – to silence journalists in Romanian society, and thus to deprive the public of information pertinent to maintaining and protecting their relatively young freedoms.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

It should be noted that the relatively small size of the sample relied upon in this study restricts the ability of its conclusions to be generalized to the broader journalism industry in Romania, or for that matter, the Central and Eastern European region. Future studies on this topic could benefit from an expanded scope, perhaps including a wider range of respondents. Research could also include consumers of news, who might have opinions about the quality of news coverage that could prove useful, and further benefit could be derived through expanding future studies to encompass other states in Central and Eastern Europe.

Concluding Remarks

While the sudden and violent revolution in Romania took place over the course of hours, many scholars have argued that the nation's transition from a communist society to a democratic state will take place in a much more deliberate fashion, and over an exponentially longer period of time. The results of the present study indicate that this has been the case as it concerns the Romanian press, particularly related to the performance of journalists and the product that media firms deliver to consumers of news throughout the Eastern European state. As respondents in this study indicate, some significant changes have become evident in the more than 25 years following the demise of communism in Romania, though there remain some notable shortcomings in press operation and effectiveness. What emerges clearly both from prior research and the findings of this study, is that the continued evolution of the Romanian press in its host democratic society will remain a focus of great interest and attention both among scholars and practitioners – not to mention the general public.

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