THE 9TH EDITION OF THE INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE
EUROPEAN INTEGRATION
REALITIES AND PERSPECTIVES

From Accountability to Self-Regulation in Romanian Media

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Abstract: The present study is based on results dissemination for one of the four indicators (Background, Accountability, Solidarity and Efficiency) interpreted in the qualitative analysis of media self-regulatory system in Romania. The importance of this research topic for both practitioners and researchers in the field, lies in the fact that media self-regulation is a relatively new process, which has not yet reached the collective consciousness of Romanian society. This approach of the accountability indicator aims to obtain an overview of professional responsibility (an important pillar of media self-regulation) in order to create a development framework for a definition of media self-regulation, respectively to discover the relevance of this system implementation in Romania. The qualitative analysis will consider the common perception of journalists on two main themes: professional liability and media self-regulation system. The research methodology applied in this study was based on the qualitative method of in-depth interview. The research will answer the following questions: *What journalists understand by professional responsibility? Which are the most important professional values o be respected? Is management important in empowering journalists? Which are the triggering factors involved in the implementation process of media self-regulation in Romania?*

Keywords: professionalism; norms; values

1. Introduction

In the hereby study, the content of the collocation *system of media accountability* generally targets a series of demarches for the supervision of the professional journalistic act, involving a moral conduct in the development of the professional activities but also the existence of an organism specialized in the following of this conduct.

The present study will analyze from the quality point of view, the common perception of the journalists regarding two *main themes: professional accountability and the system of media self-regulation.* Each main theme has generated *secondary themes* corresponding to the assertions gathered after interviewing journalists. These secondary themes have focused on dimensions such as: attitude, evaluation, satisfaction, criticism, motivational, because the analysis contained the support of the respondents for a certain aspect, their appreciations regarding the functioning of a system or the satisfaction, critical level or the motivational one.

The motivation for choosing a *semi structured interview* is the fact that this type is suitable for a deeper analysis of a certain sector or for the track of the development in time of a sector which is already known. (Marinescu, 2009, p. 52)

Choosing this type of interview has facilitated the interrogation of the journalists regarding their accountability and the best methods to be applied in order to implement the system of self-regulation

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of the media in Romania. The targeted population was represented by 13 people chosen using the *snow ball method* from the category of journalists hired in national media and 2 media activists. Also the minimum experience for the selected professionals is 7 years.

The investigation instrument used was *the interview guide*[1] and the results were interpreted using a *frame of thematic analysis* in which were identified the *main themes and the secondary themes* of the unit of analysis. For the first main theme, *professional accountability* we have the following secondary themes: assertions on the definition of professional accountability; ranking of the professional values of the journalists; assertion of the importance of assuming the professional norms. For the second theme, *the system of media self-regulation* we have the following secondary themes: assertions on the definition of the term self-regulation; assertions on the people of which depends the implementation of the system.

This study started from the assertions of the respondents regarding the factors with major impact on the quality of Romanian journalism. The assertions have placed the *lack of accountability* and competence of the journalists as a secondary factor of impact on its reduction (the influence of the patronage being cataloged as being the first). The forms of manifestation of the lack of accountability of journalists consists in: lack of debated within this sector regarding the breach of professional norms, the low degree of association, the lack of functioning of the self-regulation, incompetence and refusal of investigating in professional training, the lack of mentorship in the profession.

2. Professional Accountability

2.1. Definition of the Professional Accountability

Journalist accountability is based on many dilemmas that they have to face: *I only provide correct information, am I objective, transparent, credible, do I follow the public interest, do I transmit someone's opinion in good faith etc.?* The term *media accountability* (Black & Roberts, 2011, pp. 393-395) is connected to the following terms: *to be accountable for* or the action of providing explanations and apologies; *condemnable* or the decision to establish if people deserve to be condemned for their actions; *responsibility,* a term which is commonly mistaken for *accountability*.

The difference is that the responsibility involves legislative aspects: *agreements over ethical standards* which should be followed by the media practitioners and the entire media industry, *power of the governmental structure over the media action.* Media accountability is lower in the liberal societies and the laws regarding the media help defining the level of accountability but do not have reach any ethical purpose; *the power of people and organizations* that seek to hold the media practitioners accountable.

Larson C. (2003, p. 44) explains the fact that the accountability of the persuasive agents (journalists, in our case) includes as elements: "*the fulfillment of the professional obligations, being accountable in front of the people, being accountable when evaluating based on some standards which are previously agreed upon, being accountable towards one's self-consciousness*".

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[1] What does it mean for you to be responsible in your professional activity? State the most important three values you take into account in your activity. How important is for you the assimilation of the norms of ethics in your profession? Do you believe that the journalists respect the professional ethics because their conscience imposes them to or because the fellowship/ professional regulation imposes them to? How would you define, according to your experience, the term self-regulation of the media? Do you believe that there is a system of self-regulation in the media in Romania? if not, what were the structural and conjuncture factors that did not allow the implementation of a system of self-regulation in Romania? On who do you think it depends the establishing of the system of media self-regulation in Romania?

Professionalism is based on standards of action which are aligned with certain values and one of these is accountability. Starting from the hypothesis that the role of the journalist in society is elitist[1] among the features of the elite defined by some authors M. Tudor, A. Gavrilescu (*apud* Coman, 2007, p. 326) the *moral accountability* and *self- consciousness* are indicated. They represent the also the reason of interrogating the journalists on the notion of professional accountability. To this end, the quality analysis of the results was based on the frequency of the theme in the journalist's answers. In analyzing the results, the following categories were identified, presented as a chart of categories: *compliance of the professional rules[2], correct documentation and respect for the people and public interest.* According to this chart of categories, we observe the fact that the respondents have defined professional accountability mainly from the perspective of *following the professional rules* with focus on the correct documentation, respect of the people and public interest. The definitions provided by the respondents have concentrated very much on the correct documentation[3] and verification of the information before publishing any king of material in order to avoid the dissemination of ungrounded opinions.

In what concerns the respect of the people and public interest, the respondents have underlined the avoidance of prejudice of the people writing about and the follow of public interest. The professional accountability is tightly connected to the awareness on the effects that can be generated by publishing a material. The consequences can sometimes be very serious not only at individual level, but also at social level. The lack of accountability of some journalists can break the balance of society, it can distort its values and can create a public opinion with *false guidelines* (journalist, hotnews.ro).

2.2. Ranking of the Professional Values of Journalists

The professionalization and development of a professional culture have proved to enhance the independence of the journalists and lead to the adoption of universal professional ethic and standards. Values are abstract ideas about what a society believes to be good, correct and pleasant and they also represent "*the grounds according to which we judge social actions*". Values represent, according to Grigore Georgiu (2010, p. 51) "*a series of appreciations, preferences and attitudes, affective and emotional, towards fundamental issues such as the relations between humans and nature, humans and divinity, meaning of life and death, relations with other humans, with the structures of the community and public authorities*".

Numerous studies[4] have established that journalists, referring especially to an American type of professionals, establish standards of action around some values such as: accountability, accuracy, impartiality, balance, objectivity and telling the truth (Zelizer, 2007, p. 64). Besides these, we can also

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[1]The results of analyzing the role of journalists in Romania after the model studied by the researchers Himelboim &Limor (2011, pp. 77-78) have indicated that the most frequent roles declared by the journalists towards the public are *neutral journalist, elitist journalist and supportive journalist.* The sociologic researches indicate that the journalists perceive their own social role as *responsible elites* both towards the information and education of the masses but also the control and information of the power representatives. The members of the elite are aware of the fact that they share the same sets of values and interests. They are judged not only by the success in fulfilling their tasks but also by the validity of these tasks for the society.

[2]*Accuracy, balance, impartiality, after that honesty and utility. If you respected all these rules (S1) to respect the rules that existed forever and were adopted over time (S6); is the one who respects what he learned at the university also that ethical code, respects the rules, knows that his freedom is not indefinite (S15); do your job with correctness and seriousness (S5); give correct information to the public (S12); know your mission (S6).*

[3]According to Ilie Rad (2011, p. 217) "*many times, for the sake of audience, the journalists do not investigate more and publish fake stories*".

[4]For example McLeod and Hawley, 1964; Johnstone, Slawskişi Bowman, 1972.

add media professionalism which defines the role of the media in society as an *assistant for people in the process of making decisions as personal level,* because the professional interests must coincide with the public interests (Pop, 2001, p. 238).

In all the professional activities in which the journalist makes assertions, he evaluates, ranks, gives importance and meaning to all the daily events and turns to *professional values.* All these activities are performed in relation to their own conscience which is guided by values, because they determine the social behavior. In order to form a system of values, at small scale, the respondents have classified the first three values they take into account in their professional activity. Depending on the answers of the respondents, in this situation it was more efficient to create the following table to follow the frequency of the values.

Table 1 Frequency- professional

S	VALUE 1	VALUE 2	VALUE 3
S1	Accuracy	**Balance**	**Impartiality**
S2	Credibility	**Objectivity**	Equidistance
S3	**Honesty**	**Good - faith**	**Public interest**
S4	**Good- faith**	Exactness	Ethics
S5	Justice	Equity	Solidarity
S6	Respect for the profession	Respect for the readers	Understanding the mission
S7	**Balance**	**Correctness**	Respect for the rights of the others
S8	**Correctness**	**Good - faith**	Rigurosity
S9	**Honesty**	Courage	Responsibility
S10	Common sense	**Objectivity**	Incorruptibility
S11	Truth	**Honesty**	**Balance**
S12	Fidelity	**Correctness**	-
S13	Real news	Not being mean	**Objectivity**
S14	Truth	**Public interest**	Equidistance
S15	**Public interest**	Accuracy	Ethics

As we can see, the *correctness* (assimilating here honesty as well) is the most mentioned professional value the respondents take into account in their profession. If in this classification correctness is in the first place, in the analysis made related to the professional ethical codes of the media organizations in Romania[1] after the model of Schwartz and Bilsky (*apud* Black & Roberts, 2011, p. 188), it came second after *respect for the truth* and before *responsibility towards the public, society and profession.* The correctness[2] of the journalist must be manifested, according to the opinions of the respondents, towards the public and the sources, in serving the public interest, in presenting the events and affirmations of a person. *The objectivity* (assimilating here the impartiality as well) represents the second opinion in the system of values made by the respondents and the good faith, balance and public interest and the last options.

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[1]The Sole Deontological Code, The Deontological Code of the Journalist, the Deontological Code of the Professional Journalists, the Deontological Code adopted by the Association of Journalists in Romania, the Deontological Code of the Journalist annexed to the Collective Labor Contract for the media sector, the Code of Conduct for the employees and collaborators of TVR.

[2] Correctness: *in documentaries (S7), with the public and sources (S8), do not express prejudice regarding the documentation (S3), serve the public interest (S9) together with the balance (S11), in presenting the events and declarations of people (S12)*

2.3. The Importance of Assimilating the Professional Norms

Regarding the journalists that respect the professional ethics, the respondents have considered that they act according to the impulse given by their own conscience, because the redactions and fellowship do not offer a specific frame to assume professional norms. Thus, the trigger factors for the embrace of the norms of ethic were represented by self- conscience, as reflected in the *chart of categories[1]*.

The respondents believe that there are journalists who respect professional ethics because they know their job very well as respect it. The motivation of respect consists in their own education, the respect they show for the public and the way in which the medias he/she worked before have educated the latter in this activity.

Regarding the assimilation of the norms of professional ethics by the journalists, the respondents have addressed the *importance* of this process but *"the issue is that this doesn't happen or happens very rarely"* (journalist, Adevarul). When the journalist does not assimilate these norms, he cannot gain credibility and cannot *"perform his mission of informing correctly and impartially, meaning that without these ethical norms the risk of disturbance is higher"* (media activist, ActiveWatch). The subjects have underlined the *important role of the editorial houses* which the latter should have in making the journalists more accountable. The editorial house should inform the journalists on the deontological code that they agree, but most of these editorials do not have such a code. The journalists as well should sign for the assimilation of the content of this code. The respondents have noticed the *lack of debates in the editorial house,* in relation to the flaws existent, debates which could be proven necessary and useful in the process of raising the accountability of the journalists. These discussions should be part of the current activity of the editorial houses.

3. The System of Media Self-Regulation

3.1. Definition of the Term Media Self-regulation

There are three main types of internal control: patronage, management and professional self-regulation. The first two involve a common analysis because the media in a society is mainly private and can be used for any type of purpose chosen by its owners, which indicated their inevitable involvement in the editorial process (McQuail, 2007, p. 105). Dennis McQuail (2007, p. 92) believes that both the control as well as the self-control of the media are incomplete in the absence of accountability. The International Organization Article 19 and the International Federation of Journalists defined self-regulation in a specific study (Article 19, 2005, p.7) as *the activity involving the establishment and implementation of norms by those whose behavior will be regulated, with the final purpose to improve the services offered to the consumers, beneficiary or – in the case of media- to the public in general*[2].

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[1] Conscience: *it is what their conscience imposed (S1); respects them because of the education, because he believes that way (S7); every individual with his own conscience, the way he is built (S10); many journalists respect the professional ethics because their own conscience imposes them to do so (S14).*

[2]*Freedom and accountability: protection of the freedom of speech by self-regulation of the press.*
ARTICLE 19, Global Campaign for the freedom of speech, International Federation of Journalists, March 2005, ARTICLE 19 http://www2.cji.ro/userfiles/file/documente/Autoreglementarea%20presei.pdf, viewed on September 6, 2012.

To the question *How would you define, considering your experience, the term media self-regulation?* Most of the respondents chose a concrete approach[1] of the phenomenon of self-regulation. They defined self-regulation as being the process of *creating, in the journalist sector, of a set of norms, rules, values, principles applicable at the level of the editorial houses of the media institutions and submitted to sanctioning in case of breach.* Their will to contribute to the creation of these norms which should come *from within the fellowship and not from the exterior* was noted.

For some respondents, this set of norms and rules, comprised in a code of professional conduct has to be *agreed upon when established at the level of the entire fellowship and accepted by all the associations* of journalists, professional, patronal and unions. This code of professional conduct should establish, practically, the rules according to which the journalist will perform his activity, as a reference point for his activities. For other journalists, this set of norms valid for all the media institutions can be *particularized at the level of each editorial house*, depending on their specific.

Other journalist complete the definition by bringing into discussion technical, administrative and professional measures which lead to the creation, within the limitations of the professional deontology, of this set of rules put into ;practice *by mechanisms of application or implementation.* We observe thus the fact that, for the respondents, the media self-regulation is nothing but the creation of a set of rules or norms commonly accepted and which are within the limitations of the professional ethics. Very few have included in the definition of the concept the ways of monitoring the respect of these norms and sanctioning their breach. We can say that only part of the instruments of traditional accountability, such as the code of conduct, have been mentioned by journalists. The respondents which opted for an abstract approach of the definition of media self-regulation have emphasized *the self-control of the journalist, his conscience and honor.*

3.2. The Existence of the Self-regulation System

In order to function, such a self-regulation system has to exist. Following the question *Do you think that there is a system of self-regulation in Romania?* From the answers of the respondents, in the chart of categories appeared the dominance of the *inexistence* of this system. In what concerns the causes of the inexistence or lack of functioning of the system of media self-regulation in Romania, from the responses of the respondents have been identified both *structural factors*[2] as well as *conjuncture*[3].

Most of the respondents consider that *there is no* system of media self-regulation in Romania. To this end, all the initiatives of self -regulation of the media coming from the media organizations had as result only the elaboration of deontological codes, adopted formally without practical results.

The existence of a set of rules is not sufficient and the media activists interviewed are the ones who noticed that the mechanisms of implementing these professional norms do not exist in Romania. On the other side, *the sole deontological code of the journalist established at national level does not apply* in editorial houses because many of them did not adhere to it yet. At the same time, the editorial houses which adhered to this deontological code have taken this step only formally.

At the same time, some of the respondents say that in Romania there is a system of media self-regulation because at the level of the editorial houses there is a set of norms after which the journalists

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[1]Concretely: *set of internal norms of a media institutions (S11); a set of principles, values and norms (S2); set of norms and rules (S7); set of professional norms of a fellowship (S8); some norms (S9); set of rules (S12); a fellowship defines its rules (S14).*
[2]*Free access to the profession, lack of professional culture, professional organizations.*
[3]*Economic factor: informal leaders in the editorials, patronal influence.*

perform their activity. But this does not suffice for the effective functioning of a system of media self-regulation. The perspective of the unionist organization brings, apparently, its own version of accountability of the journalists, a combination of what means regulation and what means self-regulation. Basically, it would be a combination between the labor legislation and professional deontology. Besides the salary rights contained by the Collective Labor Contract at the level of media, a deontological code for the journalists has been annexed, in which their professional rights have gained juridical power and the lack of compliance is susceptible of sanction. Also, the journalists who do not believe in self-regulation propose a different solution, which is maintaining a clean fellowship by action and involvement from the journalists, firstly and from the institutions and those affected, secondly. The alternative proposes a "boycott" action triggered by the companies which frequently buy advertising space – in the press and audio visual with low credibility. This 'boycott" has to be sustained by the pressure of the public over these companies so that they can fulfill their missions.

Among the factors that did not allow the implementation of a system of media self-regulation, the respondents have noticed that the *access to the profession of journalist* is not conditioned by certain rules of competence, which allows the performance of this activity also by people who do not respect the statute of journalist. Another factor, considered by the respondents as being very important is the *patronal influence* supervising the activity of the journalists, intervene in the materials and impose not the professional ethics but the lack of compliance with the latter. This is encouraged by the owners by maintaining within the editorial houses of journalists who agree with the breach of the deontological rules *proof that the quality journalists have either left the activity or are freelancers* (media activist, ActiveWatch). At editorial level, together with the patrons, a series of *informal leaders* is noticed, who share the same interests with the media owners. The respondents have noticed that they have control over the rules of conduct.

In the opinion of the respondents, because of the lack of a professional culture, the journalists follow the example of those who are paying their salaries. Reasons such as: patronal pressure, lack of editorial independence and professional education, lack of solidarity and association for the defense and promotion of common interests, have deprived the journalists of experiencing self-regulation. One of the dominant factors was the one related to the *professional, unionist or patronal media organizations.* They either *inactive* and are *invisible* in the associative sector, not not stand out through results and do not have a high degree of representation so that the fellowship is consolidated. The Romanian Press Club has lost its credibility, in the opinion of the respondents, when attempting to represent the interests of the journalists and the owners at the same time. All this pressure over the media prevents the formation of an organizational culture in the media institutions and implicitly its self-regulation. To this end, one of the respondents offers as example the editorial he works in as being an organization with an organizational culture based on clear values and rules for all the members of the editorial.

3.3. On Who Depends the Implementation of the System of Media Self-Regulation?

Following the question *On who depends the implementation of the system of media self-regulation in Romania?* From the answers of the respondents the *internal triggering[1]* factors within the editorial have emerged in the *chart of categories*. The implementation of the system of media self-regulation depends in the first place on the *fellowship of journalists*. This can be possible by respecting the professional deontology, creating own rules of conduct, but mostly by liberating the journalists from the patronal constraints, so that these rules can be respected. The fellowship of journalists is the only one capable, through solidarity and a powerful conscience, to regain its freedom and professional independence. Secondly, we can notice a series of factors *exogenous to the editorial* the respondents suggesting the need of certain collaboration between the actors contributing to the functioning of the media in general, such as the patronages, unions, professional organizations, journalists, editors. The help from outside the country is not excluded. In what concerns the attitude dimension, the journalists have manifested their support for the functioning of this system, taking into consideration the factors that have prevented and keep preventing the accountability of the journalists, the respondents were reticent in adopting it in the near future.

4. Conclusions on the Accountability Indicator

In what concerns the classification of the professional values, the respondents have attributed correctness the highest professional importance, followed by objectivity, good-faith, balance and public interest. Regarding the assimilation and respect of the professional norms, most of the subjects have considered that the journalists act according to the impulse dictated by their own conscience. Therefore, the ones who respect the professional norms are motivated by their own conscience and not by the editorials they work in or by the fellowship, because they do not offer a specific frame for the assimilation of the professional norms. Here intervenes the important role of the editorials and editorial management in the accountability of the journalists through internal debates over the breaches. Media self-regulation has been defined by the subjects as being the creation, by the fellowship of journalists, of a set of *norms, rules, values, principles applicable at the level of the editorials in the media institutions and susceptible for sanctioning in case of breach.* The lack of such a system of self-regulation in the media sector in Romania was motivated by the respondents by the intervention of factors that are both structural (free access to the profession, lack of professional culture, incompetent professional organizations) as well as conjuncture factors (economic, informal leaders in the editorial, patronal influence). The trigger role of such a system of media self-regulation is mainly fulfilled by the fellowship of journalists (internal factors).

Starting from the meanings of media accountability the researchers Black and Roberts (2011) attribute to the concept, *the mission of the media ethics* is to promote the a professional behavior adequate in relation to the third parties. To this end, the journalists can follow the coordinates offered by the moral perceptions. The ethics, deontology and principles offered by the latter have a major role in promoting a system of media accountability. The functioning of such a system will be possible only if the journalists proceed to assume their own actions and create rules of conduct which, by compliance, will enhance the feeling of moral commitment.

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[1] *By us, by the journalists *S4); if we respect the rules (S6); has to come from within the practitioners of the activity (S8); by the fellowship, the journalists (S14), a body of journalists (S3).*

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