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CHALLENGES OF POST-DECEMBER 1989 ROMANIAN JOURNALISM

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Abstract

More vulnerable than its former communist “sisters”, pre-communist Romania had not enjoyed a “secondary society” (the germs of a “civil society” or of a “public sphere and clandestine or alternative media”). When the regime changed, it “woke up” in capitalism, with the few existing media institutions being eager to change, but also conditioned by the new existential paradigm of market economy. Employers and employees, collaborators and consumers were entering a new world, with different desiderata and different rules. They all had, in mind and/or declaratively, a dream: to be able to express themselves freely. The definition, perception and exercise of this freedom have been complicated in the Romanian public space, which is dominated, according to the Western model, by the media. Which law regulates journalistic activity? What is the moral probity of the leaders of post-communist Romanian media? With what diplomas can journalists support the exercise of their profession? How can the trust of the public be earned, since the same public had been lied to for half a century, under the censorship of the Communist Party?

Is it acceptable not to immediately replace the law regulating the media? What about the uncertain status of journalists? Under the “empire” of freedom of expression, do excess language and slander do good (M. Coman)? What about the complicity of the “Messiah journalist” with commercial and political Power, even though we were living in a post-communist “ill society” (*Ibidem*)?

Keywords: civil society, freedom of expression, public space, journalistic practices, credibility

1 INTRODUCTION

The freedom brought about by the fall of totalitarianism in Eastern Europe facilitated the dream of free expression, both in everyday life and in media content. Simple at first glance, with real-world pitfalls, vulnerabilities, and obstacles, the right to free speech has challenged people and institutions of all

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kinds. Theoretically, what had strangled the freedom of the press (the *wooden language*) could be buried. Practically, moving from the "New Man" to the normal man, typical for democracy, required understanding, assumption, and sometimes traumatic consequences. The *wooden language* had succeeded in abolishing the sense of identity and memory. How can you quickly get rid of such a burden? There are no decrees for sponging off a slow vocabulary. Decades-old habits do not miraculously disappear. At most, in the years immediately following 1989, words and phrases are replaced, but not in a radical way. In the mass media, texts written according to the norms of the *wooden language* and texts written in the natural language coexist. In step with the defensiveness of the wooden speech, we note the entry into the vocabulary of "truth", "honesty", "tolerance", "dialogue", and numerous Anglicisms [1, p. 233].

In the autochthonous space, the evolution of the mass media ecosystem assumed the sudden transition from totalitarianism to democracy, from censorship to freedom of expression (M. Coman wondered: "*What is the social mission assumed or attributed to the media? Is there a relationship between this mission and freedom from which media institutions and journalists can benefit, managing to quell the excesses of freedom of expression?*" [2, p. 88]), from monopoly to a competitive market economy. This transition, located between imitation and innovation [3, p. 17], summing up, in D. Sandu's opinion, "unfulfilled transitions that negate each other" [4, p. 15], generates a legitimate question, *How is something new possible?*, which crept in discreetly (but firmly!) through the Romanian newsrooms and in the minds of the media leaders, sufficiently wrinkled as an image from the years of communism. Was a fundamental change necessary or one "of a gentleness spirit"? Were the executive chairs going to wobble? Were journalists who had thought, written, talked, filmed, etc., going to be "swept away" or perhaps "drawn to a dead end", according to the canons of wooden speech? Where should the new reporters, editors, filmmakers, producers, managers come from, be recruited, so that the public shakes off the old practices of journalism like a nightmare, remaining faithful to the new formula of the Romanian press?

It depended on the intelligence of each actor involved and on the conditions of the newly established market economy in the version of post-December 1989 times. The consequences are known: adoption of new names for publications with old states in servitude to the communist power (*Scântea* becomes *Adevărul*, *Flacăra Iaşului* is "baptized" *Opinia*); rotation at the head

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of the newsrooms; hiring of young (or more mature) in the editorial boards (regardless of the faculties they graduated from, but with a mandatory condition: they must not come from "Ștefan Gheorghiu" Academy); search for clean people at the helm of media institutions. In some cases, it meant no more than a make-up, an image strategy. In others, especially at the establishment of commercial newspapers, radio and television stations, the picture looked brand new and untainted by communist ideology.

It is worth noting the desire of many to enter the media world, learn the job "on the spot", the perseverance of some old people of journalism to stay in the field, accepting the change of style, of the covered topics, lower ranks, some temporary anonymity. Last but not least, the founding of the Association and Union of Professional Journalists (recognized by the Ministry of Labour), simultaneously with the emergence of the faculties and specializations of Journalism and Communication Sciences and PR within the most important Romanian universities (later, within some smaller, private ones, besides media trusts – fancy called "Academies" –, because, isn't it? the word academy refers to excellence in the field).

From a legislative perspective, in the first post-December decade, everything was operated by virtue of the SRR (Socialist Republic of Romania) Press Law No 3 (28.03.1974) [5], some purely communist regulations, according to which the journalist had the "social-political mission" to serve the socialist society and the tasks imposed by the Romanian Communist Party. In the context of democracy, this aberrant law was repealed only in 2012, by Law No 95 (July 9). The umbrella that also protects media professionals, the Romanian Constitution, stipulates, in Art. 30 the existence of protection guarantees for the freedom of the press and, likewise, for the citizens against the information released by the press. According to Art.1, the right of the person to have access to any information of public interest is recognized, and in this context, journalists have the obligation to ensure the correct information of public opinion. The same aridity regarding the status of the Romanian journalist can be noticed until the Convention of Media Organizations (CMO) from July 9-11, 2004 (Sinaia). The Code of Press Ethics was adopted by the CMO on October 24, 2009. At the European level, the *Charter of Ethics for Journalists* existed since 1971, stating that employers and journalists were deaf and blind to the pressing demands of society, under the pretext of interference in the freedom to exercise the profession. The consequences did not take long to show up: inaccurate information, the role of journalists as spokespersons for politicians and

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various organizations, the perversion of reality in a media show, and the lack of respect for private life.

The change in the Romanian media scenery did not hypostatize perfection. In many places and situations, the on-the-fly adaptation to the Western model of professional media involved obstacles and difficulties. The new "class" of media patrons also included the ones who were unskilled, excessive in demands, and obedient to the political and economic environment. The Western pattern of quality journalism, unfortunately, intersected with a modest "dowry" from a material-technological perspective, not to mention the equally outdated mentality of many Eastern European media workers. The stakes of credibility on liberal-democratic foundations gave chills and strongly stimulated newsrooms and "moguls", all interested in much more than survival or profit. Reputation was a goal not exactly easy to achieve and not by everyone. There was no lack of opportunities in the "post-revolutionary" years, from the specialization of some journalists in large Western European and North American institutions to the refreshing of newsrooms with young people taught by Western textbooks, from entrepreneurs schooled in management and marketing to the introduction of performance criteria, from the (re)establishment of regional radio-TV stations to the emergence of new, niche organizations, culminating in the transition from analog to digital and the emergence of *New Media*. For a better understanding of the titles of the articles, we have also provided a translation.

2 METHODOLOGY

Willingly passing over the years when the only representative of the local daily print media was called *Flacăra Iaşului*, operating within the ideological boundaries of a reprehensible red, we will "step" over the political threshold of December 1989, when the before-the-communist-regime title of the newspaper is resumed – *Opinia* –, trying to regain the credibility associated with the democratic regime in Romania.

In *Presa ieşeană de informație (1899-1910)* (Junimea, Iași; 2018), Emilia Chiscop (a journalist herself) identifies a significant vivacity of news, interviews, and political comments at the beginning of the 20th century, given the political orientation assumed by the Takist (Take Ionescu's wing) publication *Opinia*. The feeling and mentality of the spiritual patron of the newspaper worked in tandem with the "new beliefs of democracy" (D. Take Ionescu, unsigned article, *Opinia*, January 20, 1908:2). The members and

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collaborators of the editorial board, important names, personalities of social-political and journalistic life (editorialist and chief editor Lascăr Antoniu, Al.A. Bădărău, Gh. Ghibănescu, D. Hurmuzescu, Vespasian Pella, A.D. Xenopol, Take Ionescu), prove themselves excellent writings on topics of urgent political and socio-cultural actuality. Pleading for the preservation of the nation, democracy, "social reforms to give as much justice and welfare to as many as possible", the attachment of political formations to authentic values ("must be the faithful icon of the nation, and therefore be composed from all social categories, from the top, down to the deep masses of the working class in villages and towns" – "Democratic Conservative Party Congress", *Opinia*, February 5, 1908:1), freedom and equality, strong characters, sanctioning inadequacies of liberal government in power ("*Guvern fără autoritate*" / "*Government without authority*", article signed by Gh. Ghibănescu, *Opinia*, February 21, 1909:1), the compromise of the Junimists with the Brătianu's party ("*Dezagregarea junimismului și viitorul partidului nostru*" / "*The disaggregation of Junimism and the future of our party*", article of Vespasian Pella, *Opinia*, August 11, 1909:1), the parti-pris of the King and others, illustrating social movements of the time, prove, in their writings, that there are no subjects to be neglected, unable to keep the readers close if you ignore issues of general and local interest ("*Succesul nostru: inima țerii bate pentru noi*" / "*Our success: the heart of the country beats for us*", *Opinia*, December 23, 1908:1), unable to convince in the absence of arguments and style, unable to allow yourself to be "detached" from the citizen's agenda. Thus, political topics fill the pages of *Opinia* (daily newspaper from Iași, founded on May 1, 1897): news, debates, statements, comments, reports, "bayonet attack", pamphlets (V. Pella, "*Canibalism politic*" / "*Political Cannibalism*", *Opinia*, May 14, 1910:1) in the clearest logic of subjectivity; the social theme is frequent ("the peasant question" – 1907 Romanian peasants' revolt–, the Jewish question, public health); the life of the universities is reflected ("*Cum stăm cu universitățile*" / "*What are we doing with universities?*", *Opinia*, June 29, 1910:1), of the National Theatre; local administration is part of the thematic area and occupies generous spaces in the design of the publication.

Anonymously, in an article entitled "*N-avem opinie publică*" / "*We have no public opinion*", in the pages of *Opinia*, we find a definition of public opinion (September 25, 1908) as "the common idea that several citizens have with a fair judgment on some fact." It is the starting point of E. Chiscop's considerations about the press forming public opinion thanks to some

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genuine opinion leaders (A.D. Xenopol, Gh. Ghibănescu, M. Aldea, L. Antoniu, V. Pella, etc.). The existence and mobilization of public opinion at the beginning of the last century are attributed by the authors to the editorial content, the preferred theme, the tone of the Iași journalistic approach: "Most of the articles, not only the opinion ones, were written in a combative, mobilizing, horn or spokesperson style" [6, p. 153]. Informative and opinion-forming, the *Opinia* publication from Iași complied with its motto until the end.

In a subjective manner, we will rely on the analysis of some editions from the transition period from communism to capitalism, from the Romanian Communist Party's censorship to freedom of expression, from political regimentation to professional independence, years in which I was part of *Opinia's* editorial board, housed in a famous boyar house in the center of Iași and in the select company of the literates from *Cronica* magazine. I would make the appropriate mention: the glory days have long since passed, and the scope of the signatories (except for a few contributors: Aurel Leon – "the last former first editor of old *Opinia*, until its suspension by the legionnaires, in 1939" [7, p. 1], Ștefan Avădanei, Mihai Drăgan, Constantin Ciopraga, Al. Zub, Ion Mitican, Vasilica Stoiciu-Frunză, Tiberiu Brăilean, Valentin Ciucă, etc.) reduced to the proper scale.

I will rely on the selection of some titles of articles published in the Iași daily, founded on May 1, 1897 – new series –, from 1991-1993, a period recommended by its slogan "As many heads, so many opinions" (*Quot capita tot sensu*). In the current approach, the interest is to see if there are pages, columns, themes, and headlines specific to the discourse of the free press in a post-December local newspaper, in accordance with the specialized literature of the media field. According to established authors, the title is the one that decides the fate of the article, represents the major element of the first level of reading, and has the role of the main tool of choice by the reader [8, p. 127]. Contributing to the identity of the newspaper, through graphics and style, the set of titles performs functions such as: "hooks" the eye; ranks the information; provides the essence of the article; arouses the desire to read; structures the page; favours the choice [8, p. 130]. If it is clear, comprehensible, short, full of nerve, direct, precise, to the point, original, adapted to the illustrated journalistic genre, etc., the chance will smile on a good text of written press [8, p. 130-131].

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3 RESULTS

As illustrators of the state of society at any given moment, the subjects hosted by the press stand in an order mentioned by J. Hartley, from which there are no shortages: politics, economics, international affairs, local news, occasional information, and sports [9, p. 47-48]. For the current approach, we have selected the following fields: political, economic, social, and cultural-educational, exactly according to the model presented by E. Chiscop with reference to the daily *Opinia* newspaper at the boundary of the 19th – 20th centuries [6]. For each field, we will randomly invoke titles, signatories, the date of publication, so that, in the conclusions, we hope to establish some correlations and similarities with the results of *Presa ieșeană de informație (1890-1910)* analysis.

a) political field: *Se schimbă guvernul. Ce avem de câștigat?/The government changes. What do we have to gain?* (V. Gheorghiu, Oct. 10, 1991:1); *A demisionat primarul Iașului/ The mayor of Iași resigned* (June 6, 1991: 1); *Luciditate și demență/ Lucidity and dementia* (V. Filip, Oct. 3, 1991:1); *România e indivizibilă/ Romania is indivisible* (Gh. Mihalache, Oct. 24, 1991:1); *Moscova mai are cartușe/ Moscow still has bullets* (V. Filip, Dec. 10, 1991:1); *Cetățenii României au aprobat Constituția/ Romanian citizens passed the Constitution* (Dec. 10, 1991:1); *Chipul dihoniei/ The face of disunity* (V. Filip, Dec. 11, 1991:1); *"Cine nu va semna Carta, se va compromite definitiv"/ "Whoever will not sign the Charta, will be definitely compromised"* (S. Matei, July 16, 1991:1); *"Nimeni nu vede capătul celălalt al tunelului"/ "No one sees the other end of the tunnel"* (Ș. Bejan, July 16, 1991:1); *Stînga și dreapta „merg spre aceleași direcții”/ Left and right "go in the same direction"*(Gh. Mihalache, Nov. 25, 1992:1); *Încă n-a început „furtuna” în parlamentul de la Chișinău/ The "storm" has not yet begun in the Chisinau parliament* (August 4, 1993:4); *"Am urît comunismul din toată ființa mea!"/ "I hated communism with my entire being!"* (D. Hârjoabă, Sept.9, 1993:1); *Joc pe mîna domnului Rațiu/ I take the chance with Mr Rațiu* (March 13, 1993:8); *Opoziția, în sesiunea extraordinară, a dorit discreditarea guvernului/ The opposition, in the extraordinary session, wanted to discredit the government* (B. Irimia, Sept. 8, 1993:2); *Este presa românească o putere?/Is the Romanian press a power?* (Ș. Bejan, Sept. 22, 1993:1); *Va fi anul refacerii unității naționale/It will be the year of restoring national unity* (C. Lupu, Jan. 5, 1993:1); *Țărani jecmăniți de Guvern/ Peasants bullied by the Government* (P. Agachi, Aug. 5, 1993:1); *Guvernul*

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Văcăroiu nu e în stare să guverneze/ Văcăroiu government is unable to govern (Ș. Bejan, Aug. 5, 1993:3).

b) economic field: *Radiografie a economiei românești (I)/ X-ray of the Romanian economy (I)* (Nov. 7, 1991:1); *Blocajul financiar/ The financial blockade* (I. Șchiopu, July 2, 1991:1); *Fără busolă, nu nimerim economia de piață/ Without a compass, we cannot find the market economy* (V. Gheorghiu, Nov. 26, 1991:1); *Un nou seism în domeniul prețurilor/ A new earthquake in the field of prices* (I. Șchiopu, Nov. 20, 1991:1); *Flagelul corupției/ The scourge of corruption* (D. Hariga, Dec. 10, 1991:1); *"La trap" spre colapsul economic/ "Trotting" towards economic collapse* (I. Șchiopu, Sept. 11, 1991:1); *Ce vor americanii/ What the Americans want* (T. Oană, Oct. 20, 1993:1).

c) social field: *Castelul cu rîie și păduchi/ The castle with roaches and lice* (D. Bazgan, L. Dumitrescu, July 24, 1991:1); *E rău bine/ It's a good malice* (V. Filip, Aug. 17, 1991:1); *"Foamea ne pîndește"/ "Hunger is waiting for us"* (Gh. Mihalache, Sept. 5, 1991:1); *Un director sfidează legile și omenia/ An Executive Defies Laws and Mankind* (Oct. 5-8, 1991:1); *O dramă numită șomaj/ A drama called unemployment* (V. Vasâi, Oct. 30, 1991:1); *"Fură primarul, fură vicele, fură și dl. consilier, fură..."/ "The mayor steals, the vice steals, Mr. counselor steals..., all steal"* (P. Agachi, Aug. 12, 1993:1).

d) educational and cultural field: *Fenomenul Săpînța/ The Săpînța phenomenon* (V. Miftode, Oct. 5, 1991:3); *Să nu îngropăm spiritualitatea/ Let's not bury spirituality* (Oct. 10, 1991:1); *"Școala fără frontiere"/ "School without borders"* (Ș. Bejan, Nov. 19, 1991:2); *"Biserica nu trebuie să se amestece în politică"/ "The Church must not interfere in politics"* (E. Dumitrescu, Oct. 2, 1991:1); *BALETUL – mai neînsemnat decît măturatul/ BALLET – more insignificant than sweeping* (Ș. Bejan, Oct.18, 1991:2); *Ura/ Hate* (Ș. Avădanei, Oct. 19, 1991:1); *"Doamne, nu putem trăi fără milă!"/ "Lord, we cannot live without mercy!"* (Ș. Bejan, June 7, 1991: 2); *[La Bojdeucă]Rîsul copiilor a alungat ploaia/ [At the Bojdeucă] The children's laughter drove away the rain* (I. Ursu, June 11, 1991:1); *Mersul de-a-ndărâtelea/ Walking straight back* (Ș. Bejan, July 24, 1991:2); *Criza culturii/ The crisis of culture* (M. Drăgan, June 7, 1991:2); *Greva cititorilor/ Readers' strike* (Ș. Avădanei, June 22, 1991:1); *Provizoratul, precum otrava/ The temporary state, like poison* (Ș. Bejan, Nov. 28, 1991:1); *"O mască rîde, o mască plînge"/ "One mask laughs, one mask cries"* (Gh. Matei, Nov. 20, 1991:2); *Tărăgăneli ministeriale/ Ministerial protractions* (Ș. Bejan, Dec. 4,

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1991:1); *Bacalaureatul – dușmanul rămășițelor comunismului/ Baccalaureate – enemy of communism's remains* (Ș. Bejan, Sept. 11, 1991:2); *Eludind dificultățile, Universitatea își păstrează renumele/ Eluding the difficulties, the University maintains its reputation* (Ș. Bejan, Oct. 1, 1991:2); *"Se mai ară, încă, memoria istorică"/ "Historical memory is still ploughed"* (Ș. Bejan, Oct. 15, 1991:2); *Colegiile universitare – un fel de bermude ale învățămîntului?/ University colleges – sort of Bermuda of education?* (Ș. Bejan, Aug. 27, 1991:2); *Condiția Actorului/ The Condition of the Actor* (A. Luca, June 12, 1992:3); *Răfuiala/ The Reckoning* (Ș. Bejan, Sept. 3, 1992:3); *Actualitatea lui Maiorescu/ Maiorescu's actuality* (M. Drăgan, July 1, 1992:1); *"Ministrul trebuie să lupte pentru bani"/ "The minister must fight for money"* (Ș. Bejan, Nov. 25, 1992:3); *"Sîntem pregățiți să murim de foame..."/ "We are prepared to die of hunger..."* (Ș. Bejan, Oct. 17, 1992:1); *Simțul dreptății (II)/ The sense of justice (II)* (Ș. Bejan, July 15, 1992:3); *"Stau pe scaunul sub care arde focul"/ "I am sitting on the chair under which the fire is burning"* (Ș. Bejan, Dec. 5, 1992:1); *Pierdut în pustiul anonimatului/ Lost in the desert of anonymity* (Ș. Bejan, March 11, 1992: 4); *Pentru ce se ceartă inventatorii?/ What are inventors arguing about?* (St. Lascu, Sept. 22, 1993:2); *"Industria cărții se află, azi, sub trei dictaturi!"/ "Today, the book industry is under three dictatorships!"* (Gh. Apostol, Sept. 22, 1993:2); *"Diletanților" nu le este interzis să învețe/ "Dilettantes" are not forbidden to learn* (Ș. Bejan, June 26-27, 1992:3); *"Am debutat la Iași sub semnul polemicii, scandalului și ostilității"/ "I started in Iasi under the sign of controversy, scandal and hostility"* (Ș. Bejan, Sept. 21, 1993:1); *"Dacă ne atingem de această școală, avem de-a face cu Consiliul Europei!"/ "If we touch this school, we are dealing with the Council of Europe!"* (Ș. Bejan, July 7, 1993:1); *Academicianul Mihai Drăgănescu este hotărît să nu cedeze/ Academician Mihai Drăgănescu is determined not to give in* (March 13, 1993:3); *"Nici în SUA autonomia universitară nu este absolută"/ "Even in the USA university autonomy is not absolute"* (August 19, 1993:1); *"Nu vreau să înjur, nu pot să urăsc!"/ "I don't want to swear, I can't hate!"* (D.-Fl. Popescu, June 8, 1993:1); *"Toți vor arăta cu degetul spre Ministerul Învățămîntului!"/ "Everyone will point the finger at the Ministry of Education!"* (Ș. Bejan, Aug. 3, 1993:3); *Un recital Ștefan Ruha/ A Ștefan Ruha recital* (L. Gherman, June 30, 1993:2); *"Literatura română este, de departe, pe ultimul loc în Europa"/ "Romanian literature is, by far, in last place in Europe"* (Ș. Bejan, Sept. 18-19, 1993:1); *Teatrul înseamnă relație, comunicare/ Theater means relationship, communication* (Gh. Matei, Oct. 20, 1993:2); *Culpabilizare sau praf în ochi.../ Blame or dust in the eye...* (Ș.

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Bejan, Dec. 12, 1991:2); "*Vorba e: eu cu cine votez?*"/ "*The question is: who am I voting with?*" (Ş. Bejan, Dec. 5, 1991:2); *Între proiecte splendide și aberații/ Between splendid projects and aberrations* (Ş. Bejan, Nov. 20, 1991:1); "*Șobolanii roșii*"/ "*Red rats*"(Ş. Bejan, Dec. 5, 1991:2); *Tot mai îngrijorați și triști/ More and more worried and sad* (Ş. Bejan, Nov. 21, 1991: 2); "*Putem avea meseriași buni, dar nu artiști*"/ "*We can have good craftsmen, but not artists*" (Ş. Bejan, Oct. 22, 1993: 2); "*Nu ești copil de ceferist, afară!*"/ "*You're not a railwayman's child, out!*" (Ş. Bejan, Sept. 5, 1991: 2); "*Plătim mai scump, mâncăm mai prost: studenți ne zice*"/ "*We pay more, eat worse: they call us students*" (Ş. Bejan, June 6, 1991: 2); *Studenții Occidentului, despre România/ Students of the West, about Romania* (Ş. Bejan, July 28, 1992:3).

4 CONCLUSIONS

In the first years of post-communist Romanian democracy, facing an immense challenge – fundamental reform –, media organizations and journalists found themselves in an ambiguous context, dominated by expectations and, at the same time, tributary to an unfortunate legacy (from ideological, technical-material, mental perspective). Reporting freedom of expression and operating in the absence of a press law, a unique ethical code, and "enjoying" an uncertain professional status, journalists of the first years of press freedom saw themselves dependent on other "masters": the law of supply and demand, politics, advertising, patronage, competition.

In an attempt to see the resumption of good practices from the information media of the beginning of the 20th century, we had "under the magnifying glass" a prestigious daily newspaper from Iași – *Opinia* –, in two of its eras and poses: at the beginning of two centuries, in two "avatars" (press politically regimented to the Conservative-Democratic Party, post-communist press with claims of political neutrality). The same themes addressed, the same writing tone, the same typology of titles, other social contexts, and a different writing scope.

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