

## ADDRESS UPON BEING AWARDED THE TITLE OF PROFESSOR HONORIS CAUSA OF BABES-BOLYAI UNIVERSITY

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**ABSTRACT.** This address upon being awarded the title of Professor Honoris Causa of Babes-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca , on 22<sup>nd</sup> of May 2018 discusses the role of journalism and media in modern societies as well as the role and the status of journalists.

**Keywords:** role of the media, role of the journalist, media education

Esteemed Vice Rector, Vice President of the Senate, Dean of the Faculty of Political Science, Administration and Communication, Director of the Department of Journalism, esteemed colleagues.

The awarding of the title of Professor Honoris Cause is for me a great honor and an emotional moment for a number of reasons, beginning with the prestige of the institution making this award, the reputation of the Faculty of Political, Administrative and Communication Sciences and the success of the Department of Journalism.

Mass media and journalism are at the center of modern society, affecting every sphere of life. The independence and professionalism of the mass media represent the key to a society in which the citizen is free to seek his own destiny, to live in a just and tolerant society and to participate in the decision-making process at the local and national level. From this perspective all democracies have difficulties these days.

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In other words, it is the key to a liberal democratic society. It is not at all surprising that the president of Reporters Without Borders, Christophe Deloire, declared in January of this year that the “Crisis of Western democracy is a crisis of journalism.” The impasse in which the former communist states find themselves – including Romania – is twice as acute because they do not have consolidated Western-type democracy, nor did they build an independent and ethical media system.

The politicization of journalism, the lack of response by various governments to stories of corruption, and the ambiguous interpretations of laws that are meant to guarantee freedom of the press, to protect journalists and their sources, and to deal with libel, defamation and insults of public officials and personalities are anti-democratic, not only illiberal. The fact that some journalists contribute to the emasculation of journalistic independence and its power to change things for the better is concurrently sad and damaging.

I am certain that you are familiar with the sad situation of Romanian media and the uncertain status of its journalism. Romania is not a consolidated democracy. It is not an exception. That said, we have to recognize that all democracies, whether consolidated or not, are fighting today against both the ideologies of the Left and Right, and that the populism associated with these illiberal ideologies threaten the very basis of the values upon which liberal democracies are based: tolerance, reason, societal, individual and press freedoms.

The role attributed to mass media in the process of transformation in which East and Central Europe find itself was from the very beginning conceptualized from an idealistic rather than practical perspective. The model for media’s role in transition was certainly not based on experience, because in 1989 the world has not known an identical transition but only similar ones (Latin America, Greece, Spain, and Portugal). The world did not have experience with a transition from Marxist-Leninist totalitarianism to democracy.

I recently wrote that, “The “Third wave” of democratization smashed against the shores of the Baltic states, Eastern, Southeastern and Central Europe’s (BESCE) history and unprepared culture and

political culture like an out-of-control sailing ship caught in a severe storm. It left the expectations that the regions' countries would rapidly evolve after communism's overthrow in 1989 into liberal democracies, with reciprocally helpful media systems, clinging to leaking lifeboats.

The absence of a fertile ground for the establishment of media freedom should not have been a surprise. Those of us who study media evolutions are well aware that a confluence of needs were not present in 1989. The so-called enabling environment, as some scholars defined the overall need, included certain facilitators permitting the media to make significant contributions. Most were missing in Central Europe; all were missing in Eastern Europe.

You no doubt recognize that here in Romania in 1989-1990, for example, there was NO,

- civil society and an independent public sphere;
- established role for public opinion in public life;
- willingness to depoliticize important areas of social life;
- trust in an acceptance of public broadcasting regulation to serve public interest;
- no emergence of journalistic professionalism based on a notion of public service

In addition, other related requisite to enabling the media and journalists to be independent, ethical and efficacious contributors to democratization were missing:

- An independent judiciary to guarantee a liberal interpretation and application of new laws meant to protect journalists and their sources, and address libel, defamation, and other media-oriented laws;
- Sufficient transparency and social responsibility in government and state institutions to allow journalists to do their work;
- A political elite oriented toward society, that is, socially responsible, and sustaining of the first two elements listed here and appreciative of the media's role in democracies, with respect for journalists;

- A new media business elite that encouraged de-politicized journalism and editorial independence, and, finally,
- Professional organizations capable and willing to militate for journalists' rights, independence, and protection, and defining and enforcing journalistic ethics.

It is sufficient to say that defining the mass-media's mission has to be tied to the countries that are confronted with the difficulties of democratization and liberalization. Of course, none of these countries had experience with a liberal democracy - obviously a moving target. We should not forget that the mass media do not function as independent agents of change; we knew this but for unidentified reasons we did not seem to want to recognize this in regard to Central and Eastern Europe.

In turn, the socio-political, economic and cultural evolutions that are part of a transformation and to which the mass-media are connected are as much dependent on recent development as they are on the past. As Tony Judt wrote - perhaps too pessimistically - the evolution of Eastern European nations "remains *forever* mortgaged to the past."

Both Western and Central Europeans had unrealistic expectation in regard to the speed and extent of democratization and liberalization of post-communist countries. In this context, the perception that the development of mass media is a failure is not surprising. Of course, these were failures only if, as I pointed out, we consider the media as independent agents of democratization and we evaluate them through the lens of Western normative values.

In general, the media in former communist countries and, certainly in Romania, have remained less professional than in the West but more corrupt and corruptible, subordinated to political and economic power, operating in corrupt socio-political and cultural climates. A small segment of the media has managed to meet Western standards despite the overall atmosphere and the pressures established by politics. These (very few) media outlets have also played the role of watch dog, so necessary for growing and supporting civil society.

To date, Romanian democracy and news media's professionalization have not met indigenous and foreign expectations. Both institutions have failed to assume their social responsibility, but not because of the kind of ideological restraints present during the communist era. Rather, because of the persistent crisis in ethics, enveloped in the illiberal culture and political culture, is victimizing the process of democratization and the media's professionalization.

In a yet-to-be published book chapter co-authored by Brindusa Armanca, we recognize that there are two Romanias today. The Romania of the democratic civil society that militates for transparency in government, for state institutions run democratically on behalf of citizens, and yearning for an enlightened political leadership capable of establishing transparency and accountability in government. This Romania has a few media outlets and journalists who assume the responsibilities of their profession, respect and abide by its ethics, and strive to inform their audiences.

The other Romania has a corrupt political elite governing on its own behalf, clouding the state they control, without being responsible to citizens. Its media and journalists are not allowed and are unwilling to abide by professional standards and ethics; they serve as propagandists and political instruments to beffuddle, mis-inform, and dis-inform audiences and thus oppose civil society and democratization.

I repeat, the controversy surrounding mass media and journalism is present in all East and Central European countries – the manipulation, control and corruption; the constant pressure by the state, governments, political parties, politicians and companies – are in fact proof of their importance in each country, as well as at the international level.

Therefore, Romanian media's general failure to make game-changing contributions to democratization is not surprising. They are expressions of the political-economic systems that, in turn, are the children of the culture and political culture whose transformation is infinitely slower than the transition from one system to another. For these reasons, the situation has not changed, as we all know. As I have already mentioned, the majority of the Romanian media do not fulfil

their proper role in a liberal democracy. This is perhaps why the political elites do not embrace the true values of liberal democracy but we must not forget that there is a mutuality of causation. These elites, to reiterate, prevent the mass media in myriads of ways from playing a salutary role.

In general, the new and old Romanian elites' values, beliefs and attitudes are undemocratic, not because of an ideological choice, but because of calculated choices made out of personal interests. That means that the majority is not oriented to society; politicians are without social responsibility. They arrogate for themselves the freedoms they deny others, are intolerant, and hierarchical and have a "shocking lack of respect for the existing rules, regulations and laws," as one of my colleagues who deals with Eastern Europe wrote.

The emerging civil society of Romania, together with small media groups and independent journalists, are the key to the country's liberal and democratic future. Here's where hope lies for the future. That is why Western democracies should never give up on Romania and the European Union and the institutions to continue to support Romania. And for the same reason I would like to continue my modest support for the media, for journalism and for education in Romania.

The academic disciplines of communication, media and journalism studies have been well established since the beginning of the 20th century, at least in Western Europe and before that in the United States. Given its Marxist-Leninist content, the study of media and journalism during the communist era developed without much academic value. This is how it was in Romania, when I think of the Stefan Gheorghiu Academy, and to a somewhat lesser extent in Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Yugoslavia.

In the United States, the works of John Dewey and Walter Lippmann produced what is undoubtedly the most important *multidisciplinary* scholarly contributions in this field, defining it as an area of study that is solidly contextualized in society. This is why media scholars who deal with media studies are both political scientists, sociologists, economists, psychologists, historians, literary critics and anthropologists.

I would argue that academic research in the field of mass media, and in particular in the field of comparative and international media research, is currently hampered by two distinct but at the same time correlated shortcomings. First, the inapplicability of theories and models formulated a few decades ago; they no longer explain today's changed and still changing media systems and journalism. The second shortcoming is the incomplete and sometimes incomprehensible socio-political and cultural context in which media and journalism operate, a context that is necessary for media scholars to do their job. Researchers argue that the relationship between theories of media systems and those of journalism is a symbiotic one; they are mutually informing.

Existing theories have certainly proved inadequate in examining Central and Eastern European developments since 1989. First of all, because theories based on empirical evidence observed in the West are not necessarily applicable in post-communist countries; Western, social, political, cultural and historical realities are not shared in Central and Eastern Europe. Secondly, the introduction of digital media, along with the changes in journalism that digitization has prompted, puts into question the validity of all theories and models either in the West, in Eastern Europe and anywhere in the world.

The problem of media systems theories, particularly, is that they have been formulated through the lenses (a) of politics; (b) economy; (c) social change - the media reflecting society, serving as agents of changing and / or influencing society. None of these approaches has been sufficient and effective in explaining the post-1989 development in Central and Eastern Europe despite the fact that their countries share similar socio-political and economic systems (democracy and open markets), as they also do with the West.

Existing theories do not help us to understand why these systems work so differently, even when their architectures and formal ethos mirror one another. The fact that democracy and open markets work differently in Spain compared to Germany, the United States of America, Poland or Romania shows us that the explanations are not grounded in political or economic systems. I have come to understand

that the explanation for these differences is based on the very concrete set of beliefs, values and attitudes that govern the way each society operates and its political, economic and social structure.

Briefly stated, culture is the key to understanding what is behind the nature and functioning of media systems, either directly or through the political and economic systems that culture also affects. There are studies by political scientists, economists, anthropologists and culture studies scholars to support a cultural approach to studying and modeling media systems.

In Romania, the awareness of the cultural specificity affecting the socio-political and economic domains is supported, as you know, in the works of Eliade, Noica, Cioran, Marino and, more recently, by Lucian Boia, Gabriel Liiceanu and Horia-Roman Patapievi, to name just a few. Reorienting our approaches to media systems studies is necessary for the reasons I have listed and it is also imperative to re-emphasize the growing importance of the public in defining media systems, now that digital environments have changed these systems.

The discipline of media and journalism studies, the continuous examination of this key societal institution, is of utmost importance in today's world. We must understand, first and foremost, how and why the media are organized as they are and, even more importantly, why they function as they do. Our economic, social, political, international, cultural, personal and even academic worlds are now more than ever before affected by the media and their journalism.

This is why the communication sciences and journalism program at Babes-Bolyai is so very important. Congratulations on your 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary and for making it such a great success, both from the perspective of teaching the discipline to future generations and for the scholarship that is produced here.

Thank you.