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The Hungarian Press System in Romania During the Nineties: The World of the Operators

The main goal of the theses presented here is a descriptive understanding of the role of the written press of the Hungarian minority in Romania¹ – maintained, safeguarded and developed in the nineties – as a decisive sub-system of minority institutionalization. We build this 'understanding' on our preliminary three-tiered studies: a) press-history analysis; b) surveys prepared by means of written questionnaires among journalists; c) interviews conducted with the editors of the most important dailies and weeklies of the Hungarian media in Romania.

We hope to answer the following questions with our multi-level analyses: 1. Which theoretical, cultural and political constraints impact the minority public operators in question? 2. How can the society of journalists that exists behind the examined press be described in sociological terms? 3. Can gatekeeper-functions be identified by means of approaches focused on the individual level or that of the layer of journalists? If so, which taboo-creating mechanisms gain prominence in the minority press in the course presenting characteristic content?

Frames

The importance of press-history – selective inheritance: What did Hungarian press in Romania in the nineties inherit and how?

Public fragmentation and appreciation of the local press ('Mócs Syndrome') characterized the Hungarian press in Transylvania prior to the First

¹ According to a 1992 census, the Hungarian minority in Romania consisted of 1,624,959 individuals. According to the 2002 census, 1,434,377 Hungarians resided in Romania, of whom 99% live in Transylvania.

World War (Trianon). Between the two world wars, in the first decades of minority existence, a kind of elitist/cultural-defensive attitude emerged as a singular 'minority ethos' or constant reflection concerning 'fate-questions' of the minority community. In other words, the modalities of minority and majority group co-existence, permeated the thinking of journalists who had arrived to the profession mainly via literature.

After a short reprise, a period of clear political compromises and obtrusive influences developed in the life of the Hungarian public in Romania and continued in the decades following the Second World War. The press was forced to continuously relate, on the one hand, to the central (communist) powers and, on the other, to its own minority organizations. The public had to assume extramedial functions in the midst of political constraints until – in the final years of the communist dictatorship – it had to fight for its very existence. Under these circumstances, in the midst of the restrictive formal and informal measures of censorship, (some) journalists internalized the use of metaphorical, ambivalent language and attempted to mark (with more or less success) the boundaries of a gray or second public.

In the nineties these cultural inheritances led to the continued fragmentation of the Transylvanian Hungarian press with the increased importance of localities. During the first half of the decade, journalistic activities and published materials were heavily saturated with (defensive) answers to nationalistic aspirations freely exhibited in early 1990 by certain segments of majority society, as well as political parties. In the second half of the decade, partly in response to the transformation of the internal situation of Romania (the entrance of the DAHR² into government), and partly on the Hungarian model, cleavages appeared in the previously unified and defensive minority attitude. It became clear that the minority was not unified community, but one divided along lines of differing interests. These divisions also appeared and became accepted in the minority press. Currently, as occurred previously in Hungary, the press exhibits a dualistic character with the 'left-wing' (i.e. Markó-supporters, prepared for compromise with majority parties) on the one hand, and the 'right-wing' equivalent³ (i.e. Tőkés-supporters, Fidesz-friendly and following a more radical strategy) on the other.

² Democratic Alliance of Hungarians in Romania

³ Placing "left-wing" and "right-wing" in quotation marks is warranted. The 'question of the Hungarian nation,' 'minority existence and permanence,' etc. belong, for the most part, in the dictionary of the right-wing in Hungary, while they assume a central place for both sides in the context of the Hungarian minority in Romania.

The continuity of 'frameism'

This press-history suggests that the operation of the present-day press system reflects recurring (and as we indicated above, selective) inheritance. This 'inheritance,' which determines the journalist's wiggle-room, stands in close proximity to the very fact of minority existence. Any intellectual creation by a minority likely assumes acceptance of some (conscious or unconscious) minority ideology. This acceptance contributes to the designation of quasi-permanent frames for the minority press. We can call this phenomenon 'frameism.'

The '-ism', in hindsight, suggests that the existence of the frame assumes some ideological determination. The journalist considers her/himself as the insider 'frame-familiar' and, as a result of her/his situation-consciousness, adjusts her/his actions to this frame. She/he contributes to the creation of such frames as their existence facilitates her/his daily work. Guided by these frames, she/he does not question matters that may disturb the unity of the former frame. As a minority journalist, this frame also serves to protect her/his ethnic group and assumes some connection between her/himself and the imagined reading community. The functioning of the frame may contradict with professional principles or the conscience, but the journalist nevertheless continues to maintain them. Frame maintenance is partially consistent with work routine, but is in greater part due to the agenda-setting in the minority press. Thus, the journalist turns with higher probability to subjects that strengthen the frames guiding her/his work.

Widening professionalism v. minority ethos

Professional logic and the minority ethos are often at odds. They appear as exclusive attitudes. Although it can be shown that a kind of confrontative professionalism emerged toward the late nineties, this does not mean an obvious move in the direction of dominant professional logic. The existence of 'frameism' described above provides exactly the main reason for this.

Professional clarity does not necessarily mean that the minority ethos, the morality that has pervaded the Hungarian press in Romania since its beginning, ceases to exist among the operators of the press system. Purely professional and minority moral values must be imagined accordingly as value-clusters existing beside each other that may distinguish certain journalists but that, with all likelihood, appear for individuals as hybrid-formations

containing elements of both clusters which prompt them (qua journalists) towards equilibrium.

The increased importance of professional logic does not mean that those 'frames' with deeper roots which determine the functioning of the press and which give space to public discourse cease to exist. As a consequence, ideological and cultural frames, the main traits of which we will describe through various mechanisms (primarily taboo-creation) remain. The minority journalist feels compelled to protect the imagined community (the minority itself), and in doing so allows that the operation of the frame may clash with professional logic.

The frames underlying the present-day press are hence ideologically-determined and bear political, cultural and inter-ethnic dimensions alike. These dimensions are continuously transformed, in part by internal professional matters and in part by other kinds of interactions (example-searching and example-taking in relation to Romanian and Hungarian press). The pluralization of the press system, as well as its development at a number of levels, leads to a variety of frames. The tension between community norms and professional expectations, however, is present everywhere. Perhaps one will never gain the upper hand or ideological dominance), and this gives minority press its constantly reproductive specificity. If professional logic were 'set to win,' the personifications of minority ethics would call attention to the mission-consciousness of the minority (based on the questions 'where are we from?' and 'where are we going?'). If minority feeling were dominant, the profession would sooner or later wear away the one-sidedness, which is exactly what occurred in the late nineties.

Operators

The Hungarian society of journalists in Romania: does its general characteristics differ from that of the society of journalists in general?

International, comparative studies of journalists are linked to the names of Weaver and Wilhoit⁴ and begin with the assumption that, despite all kinds of constraints and influences, news (the general media), as well as the manner in which such news is presented, is influenced by the social background

⁴ Weaver, David – Wilhoit, Cleveland: *The American Journalist: A portrait of U.S. News People and Their Work*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986; Weaver, David – Wilhoit, Cleveland: *The American Journalist in the 1990s: U.S News People at the End of an Era*. New Jersey, Mahwah, Erlbaum, 1996.

and the general, diverse attitudes of the journalists.⁵ Splichal and Sparks have also done comparative studies, yet their 'expertise' is limited mainly to journalism students. They conclude that although the craft of journalism cannot be clearly defined, it has, through training, changes in specific journalistic knowledge, and through the high-profile declaration of ethnics and autonomy, become increasingly professional worldwide.⁶

The roots of Weaver's studies reach back to 1971. The studies prepared generally confirmed that journalists are basically recruited from what can be viewed as the dominant cultural group in society. Newer studies have also confirmed that (statistically speaking) the typical American journalist can be described as a Caucasian, protestant, male in his thirties.⁷ In the nineties, perhaps a slight rise in the average age (36 years) could be noted, in addition to an increased presence of minorities in the media, and a higher ratio of individuals with non profession-specific university degrees. Weaver, in summarizing the results of an international study of journalists (extending to 21 countries), declares that the society of journalists consists, with one or two exceptions (e.g. Finland), of young men who possess university degrees unrelated to journalism. As regards the exceptions, Weaver hazards the presumption that in the near future, ethnic and racial minorities will not be present in journalism in accordance with their ratio within the general population of their states. As to the professional role of journalism, study participants almost universally acknowledged prompt information provision. There was also a relatively high level of agreement among journalists living in different countries as to the importance of public access. Opinions regarding objective coverage, entertainment value, communication of in-depth analyses and the media's watchdog role, however, differed. According to Weaver it can only be ventured that professionalism can to some extent be explained by the specificity of the given political system, while one's view of the ethical dimension is influenced by cultural patterns.

On the basis of written surveys among Hungarian journalists in Romania we can ascertain that this society of journalists also exhibits the characteristics demonstrated in international surveys. There are signs of a middle-class, as well as clear indications of in-class 'male dominance.' The most conspicuous difference is with regard to age: minority journalist-society

⁵ Weaver, David H. (ed.): *The Global Journalist. News People around the World*. New Jersey: Hampton Press., Inc. Cresskill, 1998

⁶ Splichal, Slavko – Sparks, Colin: *Journalist for the 21st Century*. New Jersey: Ablex, 1994.

⁷ Weaver-Wilhoit, *The American Journalist in the 1990s*

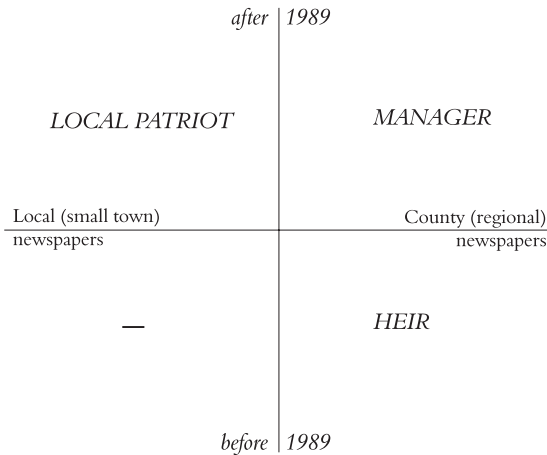
seems relatively old at the end of the nineties. This can be considered, in part, an inheritance of the seventies and eighties but, at the same time, portends a change of generation (increased youthfulness) in coming decades – something that will surely influence press content. Generational distinctions can already be observed within the society of journalists in internet-use, foreign-language abilities and attitudes toward minority interest organizations (DAHR). The aforementioned also bears an explanatory force in relation to possible press content.

Generational particularities can also be identified with regard to social and geographic mobility. Social mobility is more intensive in older circles than younger ones, due in part to greater journalistic prestige in previous decades and in part to changes in the school system. In their qualifications, younger journalists resemble their fathers to a greater extent than their older colleagues do. At the same time, geographic mobility is also less prevalent in younger generations than in those over 40, likely due to the termination of previous party-directed recruitment and the increased salience of novel local attachments.

Editor-in-chief types: the heir, the manager and the local patriot

The qualitative section of the empirical study (based on interviews) made it possible to distinguish among editors-in-chief, who carry out the decisive roles in the lives of newspapers, along sociological dimensions. On the basis of interviews, and taking into account major life-events and the characteristics of their present-day jobs, editors-in-chief were grouped into three types. These types naturally do not exist in real life, but do provide a handhold for the understanding of the Hungarian (written) press in Romania. We have assigned the labels *heir*, *manager* and *local patriot* to the three groups. We arrived at this identification system by determining whether editors-in-chief form the fields of an imaginary coordinate system. The horizontal axle signals the type of newspaper (one pole constituted by local and smaller town newspapers, the other by county and regional ones). And, the vertical axle denotes the amount of time spent gaining professional experience (considering 1989 the origo, so that we calculate the point when the present editor-in-chief began his career.)

These types are the results of hypothetical construction. In reality, the marks of each of the three labels are present to a greater or lesser degree in the case of any given editor-in-chief. The labels can thus really be considered metaphors:



- *Heirs* belong to the older generation and began their careers in the seventies and eighties. Their qualifications are very similar similarities: most studied in some department of philology (humanities) at the present-day Babeş-Bolyai University in Kolozsvár (Cluj). Their socialization can thus primarily be dated to the period of state socialism; during their editorial work they experienced and lived with censorship. They highlight public service as the main mission of the newspapers under their leadership, and hence view the spread of tabloids with distaste. They state that there are no taboos in the Hungarian press in Romania.
- Most *managers* are presently in their thirties, and received their labels as a number of commercial considerations appear among their newspaper strategies. They aim for a high degree of individualization in their lifestyle. With regard to qualification and family background they are a heterogeneous group, but share a growing professional consciousness prompting them to keep their distance from politics and to assume the watchdog function of the press. In formulating a sense of mission for their newspaper, information-provision stands out. In a related matter, they concede the existence of taboos stemming not only from a minority situation but also those arising from professional incompetence.
- *Local patriots* are at the head of town or small regional newspapers. They have no university qualifications, but have been in contact with press institutions since the eighties due to their literary inclinations. They are somewhat older than managers are. In their newspaper-man-

agement strategies they attempt to place themselves primarily within local systems of interest (so that their relations to the DAHR often mirror the local variety of 'politics at large'). At the same time, they bravely use tabloid elements as a means for survival.

The editor-in-chief types can be considered metaphors of the Hungarian elite in Romania, active in the change of political systems. The *heirs* represent the continuity that unifies inclinations before and after 1989, while prior to 1989 they were active near power, they now find themselves in power. *Managers* (or technocrats) embody a novel spirit, a rationalization (and professional ethics), and urge the necessity of generational change within the elite. *Local patriots* constitute that (not necessarily peripheral) portion of the elite that manages social change at the local, small town level. The *local patriot* understands 'politics at large,' but is often also a part of local power.

Minority Media Logic

The central elements of minority logic

Examination of journalist-society exposes the emerging patterns influencing content in the minority context. The model above can be considered 'neutral' from the minority point of view. According to our hypothesis, in the case of Hungarian press system operators (and especially considering the system characteristics that can be gleaned from political and press-history), a 'minority effect' must also assert itself in content-influencing⁸ methods. This effect may result from a particular understanding of professional concepts, but also from the self-organizing characteristics of society. By embedding Shoemaker and Reese's⁹ hypotheses concerning the individual level into a minority environment we can formulate the following sub-hypotheses:

- The particularities of media content can be explained by journalists' sociological characteristics (age, qualification, and gender), circle of interests and professional approach.
- Individuals with backgrounds and characteristics similar to that of journalists appear with higher probability in the press (e.g. more news appear about Hungarians).

⁸ We must, however, consider that there are direct and indirect forms of influence and that it is not always easy to draw a distinction between them as power roles in and outside the media cause some blurring (compare Gurevitch-Blumler, 1982: 282–287).

⁹ Shoemaker, Pamela J. – Reese, Stephen D.: *Mediating the Message. Theories of Influences on Mass Media Content*. Longman, 1991.

- A journalist's extramedial attachments have an impact on content. In the case of minority press, the extramedial connection primarily means an organization linked to minority self-organization (in this case the DAHR).
- Published and publishable content is influenced by editorial staff position.
- The more an event falls outside the journalist's sphere of interest or ethical approach, the more unlikely she or he will be to participate in it (or report on it). It can be assumed from the role of the minority press that events detailing the minority-majority situation will appear with greater frequency.

On the one hand, the acknowledgment of the existence of taboos and, on the other, the particularities of journalistic autonomy indicate the most important dimensions of minority media logic. Since in a minority environment the journalist's role often extends beyond the function of press worker there to inform, one can assume that he or she works amid extramedial ties (to civil organizations and to minority politics) that leave their mark on methods of news selection and presentation. In other words, the minority journalist becomes, to a significant degree, the embodiment of social activism for a minority community. Community-based thinking, however, also becomes defensive thinking, which necessarily produces selective mechanisms (subordinate to communities of subjects describable in press organs). In our survey we found that two-thirds of journalists think that there are taboo subjects, among which DAHR internal matters occupy the first place, and the church, second. It is thus not surprising that politics attempts to influence the press to the greatest degree, while journalists feel that press owners are most vulnerable.

Structural self-censorship

Due to the connection between social activism (extramedial attachments) and intra-staff hierarchy, function-aggregation is an accepted fact among the minority elite. Staff position may, however, influence outward expression and acknowledgement of taboo topics.

The strong connection between denial of taboo subjects and editorial staff position may result in the phenomenon of *structural self-censorship*. By this we mean that a journalist's position in the professional hierarchy somehow hinders her/his ability/willingness to portray subjects in the newspaper that

could damage her/his position, and thus the network interests attached to it. Generational differences, including whether socialization occurred before or after 1989, lies in the background of these concerns. Age impacts self-limitation, but its effects dissipate – in a manner detectable through path-analysis – at the levels of staff hierarchy, political orientation and use of new methods of communication.

Narrowed structural self-censorship

We can give greater nuance to the phenomenon of structural censorship (which shows that there is an inverse correspondence between acknowledgment of taboo and position in the editorial staff hierarchy) through an analysis of interviews with editors-in-chief. Editors-in-chief occupy high positions in the editorial staff hierarchy, which could lead one to hypothesize that they will claim no taboo subjects exist. Based on our model of editor-in-chief types, however, this layer cannot be considered a homogenous social group. We can formulate a thesis of *narrowed structural self-censorship* based on our research thus far: news concerning DAHR and the church occupy a prominent place among taboo subjects. Furthermore, taking into account the habits of editor-in-chief types, as well as their attitudes towards the DAHR as described above, *heirs* will, with high probability, deny and *managers* confirm the existence of taboos. We expect that *local patriots* will represent an in-between position due to their involvement in local politics.

Mechanisms of taboo creation

An equilibrium-creating relationship exists between editors' image (auto-stereotype) of themselves (i.e. the Hungarian press in Romania) and unmentionable subjects: *taboo functions as protecting self-image*. The self-image editors construct, along the lines of Poppe structures¹⁰ familiar from social psychology, can be grouped along moral and competency dimensions, both dimensions having negative and positive poles. A kind of minority morality occupies the positive side of the moral dimension, while blocked professionalism occupies the negative side of the competency dimension. The moral, positive dimension of the auto-stereotype is linked to the minority ethos and is generated by taboo subjects concerning the maintenance of a positive minority self-image. Meanwhile, the negative dimension of competency re-

¹⁰ Poppe, E.: *National and Ethnic Stereotypes in Central and Eastern Europe. A Study among Adolescents in Six Countries*. Utrecht: ERCOMER, 1998.

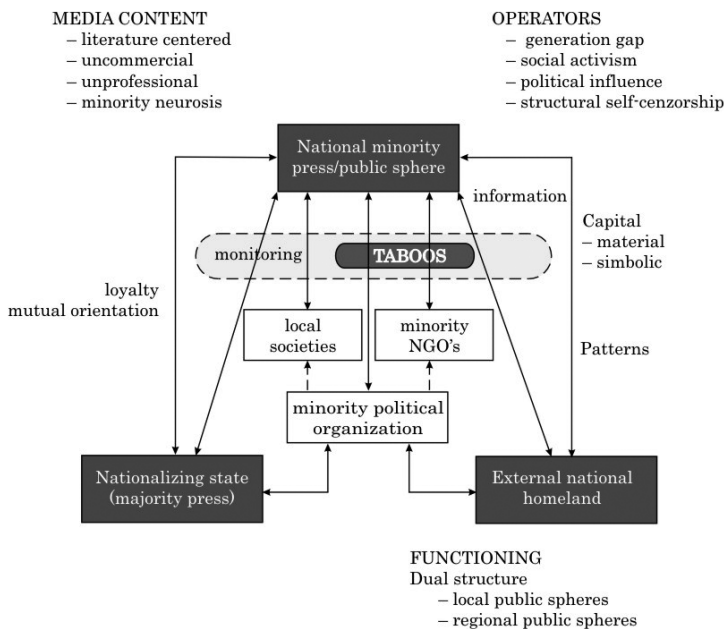
sults in the desire (one deduced from the minority ethos) to eliminate the lack of professionalism.

Taboo-creation in the Hungarian press in Romania does not imply that news regarding canonized institutions (on the level of political rhetoric, those serving minority 'conservation') does not appear. It implies that journalists intend to build on reader demand and on the placement of a particular message into a situation of potential inter-ethnic conflict, without penetrating the walls of certain institutions. The canonized institutions thereby become, to use the words of one of our interviewees, 'sacred cows.' *Taboo-creation thus fundamentally does not affect the institutions themselves but their operation.* The reasons for this may be found in part in competency dimensions. But, to a greater extent, can be explained by the fact that the minority press, and its intellectual elite operators, consider the formulation of Hungarian-related symbols of primary importance as they contribute to the maintenance of ethnic distinction consciousness. Symbols and their emotional content thus become more important for the elite than those social facts, or the presentation of events of crucial importance to daily life, which are not rendered sacred by symbolic politics.

Taboo-creation is thus a means of continuous ethnic-boundary building. Yet, editors-in-chief can be divided into two groups on the question of the existence of taboos, and hence produce duality within the ethnic boundary. Taboos are the result of a world-view based on continuous dichotomy and are the effect of an unceasing use of binary oppositions. Hence, taboos assume the existence of (publicly) mentionable and unmentionable differentiation between the saint and the profane. In the context of minority and majority ethnic groups, this results in the maintenance of semantic structures that bring ethnic stereotypes into play. Stereotypes, in turn, generate binary oppositions and concepts of an enemy.¹¹ Finally, the enemy gets a name: the 'moral us' will not surrender to the 'them,' the 'Balkan,' 'corrupt' external enemies. Taboos ensure the lack of border crossings. Belief in one's own morality necessarily does away with self-evaluation, however, so that reports on world events increasingly leave space for distorted caricatures forced upon reality by one's own erroneous images.

Accordingly, *two kinds of taboo-creation take place simultaneously*. One functions in the inter-ethnic field, the other proceeds in the intra-ethnic one. The former stands guard over minority ethos (resulting in 'literaturization' and the existence of a minority neurosis), the latter can be explained by lack of

¹¹ Koselleck, Reinhart: Ellenségfogalmak. In Szabó Márton (ed.): *Az ellenség neve*. Budapest: Józsefvég, 1998. 7–23.



competence (and glimpsed in a lack of professionalism and commercialism.)¹² As previously mentioned, however, generational differences exist in journalist-society and in the narrower layer of editors-in-chief, with clear effects on the reorganization of the boundaries between ‘mentionable’ and ‘unmentionable’, and on the development in the repository of taboos.

A model of minority press

The operation of minority press systems can be better grasped, in contrast to earlier theoretical assumptions,¹³ not only through a look at the relations between minority and majority, but also with the help of one of Brubaker’s theo-

¹² For more detailed discussions of literaturization, minority neurosis, lack of commercialism and lack of professionalism, see Magyar, Tivadar: Hungarian Minority Media in Romania: Toward a Policy of Professional Improvement. In Sükösd Miklós – Bajomi-Lázár Péter (eds.): *Media Policy Reform in East-Central Europe*. Budapest: CEU Press, 2003. 185–202.

¹³ Riggins, Stephen H.: *Ethnic Minority Media: An International Perspective*. London: Newbury Park: Sage Publications, 1992.

ries. In Brubaker's terms,¹⁴ it is useful to operate with a triadic nexus when attempting to understand ethnic minorities. The key dimensions of this three-fold division are the national minority, the nationalizing state (the state on the territory of which the minority lives) and the external national homeland (the state with whose majority the minority form a linguistic and cultural community, but of which they are not citizens). Unlike Riggins implications, here we must consider not only the strategies of the minority and the state, but also a third web of relations constituted by the contacts between the minority and the home state. Naturally, in the case of Hungarians in Romania these contacts were in operation prior to Brubaker's approach – one could say they owe their existence to the assumptions of the latter. We have only experienced changes in the 'visibility' of these relations and in the degree of their institutionalization in the past few decades.

We can even place taboo-creation within Brubaker's approach, as taboos emerged as a result of interaction between the three actors mentioned above (the minority, the majority and the external national homeland). We can also add the minority (representative) organization to this list, which also generates taboos due to its important role in the political life of Hungarians in Romania.

Translated by Enikő Horváth

¹⁴ Brubaker, Rogers: *Nationalism Reframed: Nationhood and the National Question in the New Europe*. Cambridge University Press, 1996.