

TRANSFORMATIONS OF JOURNALISM IN BULGARIA VIEWED BY THE MEDIA RESEARCHERS (2000 – 2020)

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Nadezhda Miteva. Transformations of Journalism in Bulgaria viewed by the media researchers (2000 – 2020)

Abstract: Since the beginning of the 21st century, intensive processes of transformation have been taking place in the Bulgarian media environment under the influence of new digital technologies and new economic models of production and consumption of media content. The article “Transformation of journalism in Bulgaria through the eyes of media researchers (2000-2020)” examines the available research devoted to the media and journalism in Bulgaria in the first two decades of the century, from the perspective of: availability, diversity and accessibility of sources of information, research and expert capacity, representativeness, relevance of the data and conducted research, as well as the possibility of continuity and continuity of the monitoring of the researched processes. The overview of the existing media-related publications in the period 2000-2020 allows to highlight some risks for the media, journalism and research units in Bulgaria.

Keywords: media research, media transformations, market conditions, journalistic competences, monitoring capabilities

I. Introduction

During the first two decades of the 21st century, the Bulgarian media ecosystem is subject to intensified processes of transformation, under the influence of emerging new digital technologies and new economic models of production and consumption of media content. These processes are part of the global digitization of all human activity that has begun and the subsequent transformation of economies and societies from analog to digital. They continue even now.

The preparation for these processes, at the beginning of the new century in Bulgaria, is taking place against the background of the still unfinished transition from a complete state monopoly to the diversification of the media and their functioning in market conditions. Remnants of this monopoly are clearly visible

even today in the financing mechanisms of public media in Bulgaria, which cast doubt on the independence of BNR and BNT from the ruling political class.

In the considered 20-year period, the research interest is primarily focused on digitization processes and the entry of new technologies into the media field. At the same time, the academic and professional community also studies the changes resulting from these processes in the essence of the journalistic profession, the role of the media and journalists in the new socio-economic conditions.

II. Research methods

This publication examines the media environment in Bulgaria and its transformations during the first two decades of the 21st century. The subject of the study are the interpretations of the researchers in various publications dedicated to the changes in the Bulgarian media and journalism in this period. Over 200 accessible sources of information have been studied, among them: scientific articles, monographs, collective studies, dissertations, theses, expert analyses, sociological surveys, annual reports, reports, documents of institutions, regulatory bodies, non-governmental organizations, foundations, etc. The aim is to study the availability, diversity and accessibility of sources of information, research and expert capacity, the possibility of continuity of the researched processes monitoring. By using descriptive and analytical methods, the overview of the existing publications on media topics in the period 2000-2020 allows to highlight some risks for the media, journalism and research units in Bulgaria. They are divided into several thematic fields: market conditions, production conditions, working conditions, journalistic competencies, and public service media. The research was conducted in 2021.

III. Results

3. 1. Publications, data sources and main monitoring actors of Bulgarian journalism domain

The main source of information about the current changes and the state of the art of the media and journalistic profession are studies and publications of the academic and professional community in Bulgaria (books, academic articles, dissertations). Among the most comprehensive studies are those published by researchers from the Faculty of Journalism and Mass Communication of the St. Kliment Ohridski Sofia University. Valuable analyses on media economics and of the tendencies in media market and professional developments are conducted by researchers from the University of National and World Economy in Sofia. Researchers from New Bulgarian University of Sofia are also productive on various media issues. Media research has also been conducted by other Universities with

social sciences and humanities profiles and from institutes with similar profiles of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences.

The first decade of the 21st century is characterized by the interest in recalling and redefining the key skills and competencies of journalists, provoked by the upcoming changes in the society. This interest is in response to the preparations and implementation of the digitization of the radio and television broadcasts and electronic media in Bulgaria. At that time, the humanity is a few years away from the ubiquity of web-based media, social media, and the replacement of 3G with fourth-generation telecommunications networks.

Another factor is the widespread commercialization of the Bulgarian media. The discrepancy between employers' and society's expectations of journalists and the actual competencies of media professionals acquired during their professional training was already clearly noticeable and alarming¹.

As the second decade of the new century progressed, the topic of the state of the journalistic profession and values began to be considered as an aspect or consequence of other problems of the Bulgarian media environment. Among them are the behavior of the commercial media as market entities, the legal and ethical norms and above all – the ownership of the Bulgarian media.

The topic of pluralism and the lack of transparency in the ownership of the Bulgarian media in recent years dominates the content not only of scientific publications, but also in various reports of the European Commission dedicated to Bulgaria, the annual reports of non-governmental organizations for monitoring the media environment in the country (Media Democracy Foundation, Konrad Adenauer Foundation's Southeast Europe Media Program, Reuters Institute Digital News Report, Freedom House, IREX etc.).

Important primary sources of information on the state of the art and developments of media and journalism are professional associations and organizations (the Union of Bulgarian Journalists, the Association of the European Journalists-Bulgaria, the Investigative Journalists Association, the National Council for Journalistic Ethics Foundation), as well as the media industry organizations (the Association of Bulgarian Radio and Television Operators – ABBRO, the Union of Publishers in Bulgaria, the Audit Bureau for Circulation in Bulgaria, the Union of Journalists and Distributors of Printed Publications, the Bulgarian Web Association, the Branch Association of Bulgarian Telecommunication Operators).

Useful, but often insufficiently comprehensive, information on media research can be found in documents and reports of the Ministry of Transport and Communications, the Ministry of Culture, the Commission for the Regulation

¹ СПАСОВ, Орлин. За пропастта между обучението по журналистика и медийната практика: няколко структурни аргумента. В: Публична комуникация, глобализация и демокрация. 2006

of Communications, the Council for Electronic Media, the National Statistical Institute.

Reviewing the output of the aforementioned sources, the critical junctures in the Bulgarian media environment become visible.

3.2. Market conditions

At the end of the second decade of the 21st century, in Bulgaria is witnessed an unprecedented merger of telecommunications, media and online industries. However, general rules in the competition law do not include specific provisions for the media market in particular. At the same time the actual level of concentration is impossible to track due to a deficit of precise data, which is considered as a risk itself. These concerns are regularly present in the annual reports of the European Commission for Bulgaria, Freedom House, Reporters without Borders, etc.)

In the last few years, the issue of market conditions and media ownership and the interests they stand for has become increasingly acute for Bulgarian society. The efforts of state institutions, however, do not produce the expected results. Of particular importance is the information provided by professional associations (media, journalists, distributors, etc.), as it can be considered primary. In response to the public interest, property registers have been established at the broadcasting regulator for owners of electronic media (Council for electronic media) and at the responsible ministry of Culture for owners of printed publications (Ministry of Culture, Register). However, the real owners and their interests, especially of the mainstream influential media in Bulgaria, often remain hidden behind formally registered companies and individuals. Revealing the real owners to the public is usually the merit of the country's investigative journalists. (The investigations of journalists from the website bivol.bg, which shed light on the connection of the Bulgarian M.P. Delyan Peevsky with the ownership of print media and TV7 in the period 2013-2018, are only one of the multiple examples.) Thus, the information in the maintained registers may seem abundant, but does not give an idea of the real state of ownership in the Bulgarian media and in a sense is useless. Information on the income and financial condition of the media in Bulgaria also has a certain deficit. As commercial companies, they enjoy the right to keep their financial health secret. However, most of the leading commercial media in Bulgaria are part of large international corporations, some of them are listed on the world stock market. Chances are to find data about media financial status in the annual reports of the corporations published by the stock exchanges. The Interactive Advertising Bureau since 2016 annually has been examining revenues from digital advertising in the media (Interactive Advertising Bureau). Another source is TV & Digital Report – research by Publicis Groupe together with GARB and Nielsen Admosphere on media consumption, public preferences for different information channels, intensity of viewership, etc. in the period 2020-2021 (Publicis Groupe). The studies are on

a monthly basis and each of them is focused on a separate media, program or news program. For several years in a row since 2008, research by the Nielsen Company has been available on the Internet, providing in-depth measurement and analysis of the Internet audience, advertising, video, and media with user-generated content (Nielsen Online, 2008, 2009, 2011). Among the best kept secrets in Bulgaria are the ratings, advertising tariffs and the revenues from sponsorship and advertising of the media. In terms of ratings, only the weekly report of one company is available free of charge².

3.3. Public service media

The annual reports of the public service broadcasting media BNT and BNR are also publicly available. There is also an abundance of research material devoted to public media in Bulgaria.

Bulgarian National Radio and Bulgarian National Television are financed mainly through state subsidies and limited by legislation revenues from advertising, sponsorship and co-productions (Radio and Television Act, 1999). Directors-General of the two public service electronic media are elected for a term of 3 years by the members of a regulatory body (Council for Electronic Media/CEM). Directors-General report their work to the aforementioned regulatory body twice a year. The Bulgarian National Radio is among the most preferred news media in the country³, while the ratings of the Bulgarian National Television are traditionally far from those of the leading television stations NOVA and bTV⁴.

3.4. Production conditions

Production conditions, such as multiplatform journalism, digital resources, investigative resources, foreign correspondents are comparatively well researched⁵. During the first decade of the 21st century the discrepancy between the expectations of employers and society towards journalists and the real competencies of media professionals acquired during their higher education and professional training has already been clearly noticeable and alarming⁶. Lecturers and researchers in academic institutions are beginning to consider the need for practical training of students and acting journalists to work in an online environment, and especially –

² Nielsen Admosphere. 2022, [online]. Available from: <https://www.nielsen-admosphere.bg/products-and-services/tv-audience-measurement-in-bulgaria/audience-results/>

³ Отчет за дейността на Българското национално радио, ноември 2021 – април 2022 г. В: BNR.bg. [online]. Available from: <https://bnr.bg/files/uploads/Otchet%201%20final.pdf>

⁴ Nielsen Admosphere. 2022, [online]. Available from: <https://www.nielsen-admosphere.bg/products-and-services/tv-audience-measurement-in-bulgaria/audience-results/>

⁵ ВАСИЛЕВ, Симеон. Дописки от хаоса на времето. София: Сива, 2020

⁶ СПАСОВ, Орлин. За пропагандата между обучението по журналистика и медийната практика: няколко структурни аргумента. В: Публична комуникация, глобализация и демокрация. 2006

in online versions of traditional media, in social media, in social networks, and in converged communication platforms^{7 8}. Methodologies, new courses and master's programs are being developed, specifically aimed at the qualification of future staff in the new media⁹. Supplementary training programs for journalists also include NGOs with mixed funding, e.g. Center for Media Development, Open Society Foundation, Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, etc. The contribution of researchers to the study of the transformation of media and journalism in Bulgaria is serious^{10 11}.

3.5. Working conditions

3.5.1. Intra-organizational diversity

A consequence of the lack of institutionalized, comprehensive and up-to-date information is the scarce number of studies devoted to the state of the journalistic profession in Bulgaria. Since the beginning of the 21st century, there are only a few studies on this topic. The most extensive and academic among them dates back to 2010¹².

The latest serious research on the state of the journalistic profession in Bulgaria^{13 14 15} contain detailed information on the education and training, the demographic profile of journalists in Bulgaria (predominantly age, gender, and education), working conditions, degree of autonomy and freedom of expression, journalistic roles and professional ethics. The scope of the sample of these studies,

⁷ КОНСТАНТИНОВА, С. Приложни аспекти на обучението по онлайн медии. В: Взаимодействие-тоория-практика: ключови проблеми и решения, 2011, Т. 4. БСУ, с. 150-154.

⁸ ВЪЛЧАНОВ, Иван. Професионални компетенции и умения в онлайн журналистиката. В: Медии и обществени комуникации., бр. 14/ Септември 2012. [online]. Available from: <https://media-journal.info/?p=item&aid=204>

⁹ КОНСТАНТИНОВА, С. Трансформации на журналистическата професия. Теория и практика в онлайн среда. София: Сиела, 2012.

¹⁰ РАЙЧЕВА, Лилия. Феноменът телевизия - трансформация и предизвикателства. София: Тип-топ прес, 2013

¹¹ ПАВЛОВА, И. Да споделяш в облаците. Новите медии и журналистиката. Велико Търново: Фабер, 2012

¹² ФИЛЕВА, Петранка, Л. СТОЙКОВ, М. Нейкова и др. Журналистически професии. Статукво и динамика в България. София: Софийски университет «Св. Климент Охридски», 2010.

¹³ SLAVCHEVA-Petkova Vera. Journalists in Bulgaria. A Country Report. In: Worlds of Journalism Study. 2017, [online]. Available from: https://epub.ub.uni-muenchen.de/36881/7/Country_report_Bulgaria.pdf

¹⁴ SPASOV, O., OGNANOVA, N., DASKALOVA, N. (2016). Monitoring Media Pluralism 2016. Monitoring the Risks to Media Pluralism in the EU (plus Turkey and Montenegro). National report: Bulgaria. 2016, [online]. Available from: <https://op.europa.eu/bg/publication-detail/-/publication/ac565076-e46f-11e7-9749-01aa75ed71a1/language-bg>

¹⁵ ВЪЛКОВ, И. Журналистика без маски. Годишно изследване за свободата на изразяване в България. В: Асоциация на българските журналисти, 2020. Available from: <https://aej-bulgaria.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Jurnalisti-bez-maski-1.pdf>

however, is limited and non-representative. There are no reliable and accurate data on the total number of employees in the Bulgarian media.

The above-mentioned research allows to draw several conclusions with a high degree of reliability: 1. women predominate among journalists in Bulgaria, the average age of journalists is between 30 and 45 years; 2. a large part of the journalists (over 60%) have a diploma for higher education, but the number of journalism graduates decreases; 3. the journalistic profession is not well positioned on the labour market (in terms of working conditions, social benefits and payment); 4. journalists in Bulgaria feel themselves working in the conditions of increasing pressure from various external players (business, political, institutional), growing self-censorship, physical assault and prosecution against them. The last two statements are two good reasons for the declining prestige of the profession.

3.5.2 Journalistic competencies, education and training

At least ten universities in Bulgaria offer journalism higher education (BA, MA, and PhD programmes) – six of them are public, namely: The St. Kliment Ochridski Sofia University, The St. Cyril & Metodius Veliko Turnovo University, The St. Neophyte Rilsky Blagoevgrad University, The St. Paisiy Hilendarski Plovdiv University, The Konstantin Preslavsky University of Shumen, The University of National and World economy (with focus on business journalism), and four are private: New Bulgarian University, Varna Free University, Burgas Free University, American University in Bulgaria, Blagoevgrad. There is also program in Journalism, offered by the National sports academy, with focus on sports events coverage.

In the last five years, the number of students enrolled in Journalism and Mass Communication has been gradually decreasing. In the academic year 2017 2555 students enrolled to study this major (BA-2209, MA-346), while in 2021 their number decreased to 2226 (BA-1933, MA-293) (National Statistical Institute, Enrolled students, 2021).

IV. Discussion

In the last twenty years the academic and professional community in Bulgaria has created a large corpus of studies on media and journalism developments. The sources can be divided into several groups: academic research; research of professional and branch organizations; research of non-governmental organizations; and information from regulatory bodies and state institutions. The sources from the first three groups are predominant.

The annual reports of non-governmental organizations and foundations dedicated to the media environment in Bulgaria during the last decade have been

characterized by topicality and continuity. However, the information they contain is often unrepresentative (for example, in the annual reports for Bulgaria of the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism it is explicitly mentioned that the recorded data are not representative of the country).

Topicality is most inherent in the data published by primary sources – these are the reports of professional and branch organizations, whose participants voluntarily provide information about their own activities. However, this information is rather sporadic and lacks continuity. The same can be said for sociological research on media issues.

There is no detailed and up-to-date information about the realization of the graduates of journalism students in Bulgaria. The Faculty of Journalism and Mass Communication at the St. Kliment Ohridski Sofia University, which produces the largest number of graduates in mass communication in Bulgaria, does not publish information about the career developments of its graduates. Similar information is missing in the annual ranking of universities in Bulgaria (Ministry of Education and Science), as well as in the books of the National Statistical Institute.

V. Conclusion

The review of media research in the period 2000-2020 allows to clearly distinguish two sub-periods.

The first sub-period coincides with the preparation, digitization and consolidation of media ownership in Bulgaria (2000-2013). At that time can found the last comprehensive, in-depth, interdisciplinary studies of the media environment in Bulgaria¹⁶ ¹⁷. In the years after 2013, the topics of opaque ownership and interests in the Bulgarian media, as well as fragmented studies of individual aspects of the media environment, dominate media research. One of the reasons is the lack of comprehensive, systematized and regularly provided information from the primary sources – the media organizations themselves and the journalists.

Publications, surveys and discussions on journalism issues have impacted to some extent the awareness of the media guild on sustaining professional standards.

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¹⁶ ПЕШЕВА, Мария. Радио и Телевизионната среда 2001–2010. Велико Търново: Фабер, 2011.

¹⁷ ПЕШЕВА, Мария., ПЕТРОВ, Милко. РАЙЧЕВА, Лилия. Радиосредата 2001-2010. Велико Търново: Фабер, 2011

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