



Book Review

***Manuela Preotesa and Iulian Comănescu:
Mapping Digital Media: Romania***
Open Society Foundations, 2011

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The present review is focusing on key findings related to digital switch-over issues of the Romanian media landscape. The *Mapping Digital Media – Romania* Report, commissioned by the Open Society Foundations' Media Program and written by Manuela Preotesa and Iulian Comănescu, with contributions from reporters Ioana Avădani and Adrian Vasilache, is part of the broader *Mapping Digital Media Project* covering 60 countries. The most important finding of the report is that in spite of its diversity, content quality of media products remains low in Romania. Another significant result of the analysis is that television has strengthened its supremacy as the main source of entertainment. The audiovisual news market is controlled by five large commercial players and the public service broadcaster. Private actors are dominating the news and the entertainment media market in Romania: Adevărul Holding, the Pro TV-holder Central European Media Enterprises, Realitatea-Cașavencu Group, Ringier and Intact Media Group. Meanwhile, the public service broadcaster is losing audiences, in spite of its leading role in the process of switch-over from analog to digital technologies. Digital switch-over has been delayed in Romania from 1 January 2012 to 17 June 2015.

The review is structured as follows: 1) Overview of the report – presenting briefly its scope and chapters; 2) Key findings of the report – summarizing issues of relevance for media analysts; 3) Conclusions and recommendations of the report

– following authors’ ideas, and 4) Reviewer’s conclusions – reflecting on the strengths and weaknesses of the report.

Overview of the report

The 92 pages extensive analysis on Romania’s media landscape, with a focus on digital media, has been commissioned by the Open Society Foundations’ Media Program to lead reporters Manuela Preoteasa and Iulian Comănescu, with contributions from reporters Ioana Avădani and Adrian Vasilache. Issued on 4 December 2010 and published on 1 May 2011 by Open Society Foundations, the report has been edited by Marius Dragomir and Mark Thompson from the Open Society Media Program.

The Open Society Foundations’ *Mapping Digital Media Project* (MDMP) covers 60 countries and it is aimed at assessing “how changes and continuity affect the media in different places, redefining the way they can operate sustainably while staying true to values of pluralism and diversity, transparency and accountability, editorial independence, freedom of expression and information, public service, and high professional standards.” (Preoteasa and Comănescu, 2010: 4). The main issues followed by the MDMP are the switch-over from analog to digital broadcasting, growth of new media platforms as sources of news, and convergence of traditional broadcasting with telecommunications. The project examines how these changes impact the media system and its core mission of providing quality news about political, economic and social issues.

Mapping Digital Media – Romania (MDMR) is structured in seven thematic chapters, followed by conclusions and recommendations. In the introductory section, MDMP description, country context and social indicators are briefly presented, along with an executive summary of the report. Each chapter has content related sub-sections and an assessment at the end.

Chapter 1 – “Media Consumption: the Digital Factor” examines the role played by digitization on the Romanian news market and presents consumers’ preferences when it comes to media platforms. It also provides an analysis of the main news providers in Romania and the dynamic of key media actors.

Chapter 2 – “Digital Media and Public or State-Administered Broadcasters” focuses on the public service and state institutions and their roles in shaping media landscape and the switch-over from traditional, analog technologies to digital ones. Policies and practices are also highlighted in terms of public service provision.

Chapter 3 – “Digital Media and Society” takes a closer look at user-generated content and digital activism. The chapter is dedicated to presenting the Romanian mainstream blogosphere and it is the most judgmental part of the report, reflecting mainstream journalists’ contempt when it comes to validating alternative sources of news.

Chapter 4 – “Digital Media and Journalism” is dedicated to assessing the impact digitization has had on journalists and newsrooms. A particular attention is paid to investigative journalism, cultural diversity and to the relationship between media and politics.

Chapter 5 – “Digital Media and Technology” focuses on technical issues related to spectrum, digital gatekeeping and telecommunications. It also examines the legal framework of policy-making in Romania pulled by key telecommunication market actors and pushed by European Union (EU) integration requirements.

Chapter 6 – “Digital Business” analyzes ownership, media funding and media business models used in Romania, with a focus on major players at a country level. It does not discuss local content creation or the emergent community based small media businesses.

Chapter 7 – “Policies, Laws, and Regulators” presents key actors responsible for making the media wheel spin, and its regulatory framework. Access and affordability, legal provision on public interest, participatory processes, laws on internet news and governmental interferences in the media market are discussed on a critical tone.

After this thematic overview, key findings, conclusions and recommendations of the MDMR report will be discussed in detail.

Key findings of the report

The most important finding of the MDMR research is that in spite of its diversity, content quality of media products remains low in Romania: “With no tradition of good-quality print media and the non-existence of a newspaper market in rural areas (where almost half of the population lives), many Romanians remain totally indifferent to news. Media literacy remains low” (Preoteasa and Comănescu, 2010: 6).

Another significant result of the analysis is that television has strengthened its supremacy as the main source of entertainment. As an effect of the economic crisis that hit Romania hard in 2008-2009, the number of those watching television has increased, as well as the time spent in consuming infotainment through this channel, significantly above the EU average.

The audiovisual news market is controlled by five large commercial players and the public service broadcaster. Private actors are dominating the news and the entertainment media market in Romania: Adevărul Holding,¹ the Pro TV-holder Central European Media Enterprises,² Realitatea-Cațavencu Group,³ Ringier⁴ and

¹ Controlled by the Romanian billionaire Dinu Patriciu

² A U.S. media conglomerate co-owned by billionaire Ronald S. Lauder and Time Warner media giant.

³ Owned by the controversial Sorin Ovidiu Vîntu's children

⁴ Owning tabloid *Libertatea*, women's magazine *Unica*, daily *Evenimentul Zilei* and weekly *Capital*.

Intact Media Group.⁵ Meanwhile, the public service broadcaster is losing audiences, in spite of its leading role in the process of switch-over from analog to digital technologies: “this process turns out to provide yet another opportunity for the public service broadcasters to make fresh investments in a non-transparent way” (Preoteasa and Comănescu, 2010: 7).

Digitization of broadcasting did not improve the quality of media content. It was never high, and it is declining – states the report critically: “[w]ith corporations and politicians monopolizing the communications sphere, the public interest is less well served and investigative journalism is becoming an expensive, sometimes inconvenient activity” (Preoteasa and Comănescu, 2010: 7).

With one third of Romania’s households connected, internet publishing has grown faster than the advertising industry’s capability to keep up. News portals like HotNews.ro and EvZ.ro are monetizing their web traffic and attract advertising revenues and investment from major media owners.

Preoteasa and Comănescu estimate a number of 200 influential Romanian blogs with more than 10,000 visitors a month, but “they rarely cover politics and serious issues”⁶ (2010: 7). The internet has had a major influence on journalism though: the emergence of independent news websites and journalistic blogs is the most important gain brought by digitization to the Romanian media landscape.

With the audiovisual space dominated by a few powerful groups, MDMR lead reporters recommend more transparency and a multiple stakeholder approach to the digitization process in Romania: “Digital licensing should be open and transparent, and the public should be informed about what digitization will mean for them. With the public moving online for entertainment, news and information, the internet should remain minimally regulated while self-regulation, with civil society involvement, should be actively encouraged” (Preoteasa and Comănescu, 2010: 8).

Key findings of each thematic chapter will be presented separately, as follows:

Chapter 1 – “Media Consumption: the Digital Factor”: Newspaper circulation is low in Romania: just over 1% of the 9.7 million⁷ economically active inhabitants of the country buy a good quality periodical. The best selling periodicals are, according to 2009 data, in order of circulation: *Adevărul*, *Jurnalul Național*, *România Liberă*, *Evenimentul Zilei*, and *Gândul*.

Television remains the main source of information for the population, with an average viewing time above three hours a day. In 2009, more than 96 percent of the 7.32 million households had at least one television set and half of those households owned two or even more sets, according to the MDMR report (2010: 14).

⁵ Comprising Antena 1, Antena2, Antena 3 TV channels, majority owned by politician Dan Voiculescu

⁶ A tone of contempt to be heard from mainstream, “serious” journalists towards “less serious” ones, such as bloggers – reviewer’s note.

⁷ From a population of 21.68 million inhabitants, according to the 2002 census – reviewer’s note.

Comparatively, only 46% of the households had a computer in the same year, and a third had broadband internet connectivity.⁸ “The internet has offered media consumers an immense opportunity for interaction between the public and content producers, and for contributing to published content. Prior to the ascent of the internet, interactivity was restricted mainly to sending letters to the editor or calling radio and television shows. This is one of the main factors behind the rise of the internet. Digital media at the same time has opened the doors to a new form of pressure that readers can put on news producers through their comments or blog posts” – according to Preoteasa and Comănescu (2010: 27).

Chapter 2 – “Digital Media and Public or State-Administered Broadcasters”: In Romania, two national broadcasters are publicly funded through the compulsory television and radio fee paid by the population and businesses: National Company for Television and National Company for Radio Communications. Taxpayers also fund a news agency called Agerpress, set up in 1989 – successfully competed by more professionally managed private actors Mediafax (created in 1991) and NewsIn (run since 2006).

According to the report authors (2010: 35), interactivity remains low in the public service broadcasting and there are issues of concern when it comes to transparent and accountable management: “[t]he existing public service provisions ensure the independence of the public media outlets only formally. The same could be said about their mission to educate and inform people in a balanced manner. This comes from the rigidity characterizing the structures of the public service institutions.”

Chapter 3 – “Digital Media and Society”: The most popular forms of user generated content, according to the MDMR report, are comments on popular news websites and on independent forums, followed by blogs, “but the quality of debate is low. Andrei Pleșu, a well-known philosopher and founder of Romania’s most influential intellectual weekly, *Dilema*, has repeatedly criticized the quality of comments on online articles”⁹ (Preoteasa and Comănescu, 2010: 36).

The largest independent news website is HotNews.ro, with 1.3 million unique visitors per month in June 2010. As for the high traffic media-operated websites, the front-runners are Libertatea.ro, the website of the tabloid daily *Libertatea*, with 1.68 million unique visitors, and Realitatea.net, with 1.66 million unique visitors, run by the Realitatea TV news station. However, none of these news websites equal Yahoo!’s traffic of 6.8 million unique visitors. Measured by audience reach in July 2010, the top five websites in Romania were social networking and blogging platforms: Yahoo.com (68.8%), Facebook.com (32.2%), Blogspot.com

⁸ Broadband penetration rate in Romanian households has grown from 30.36% in December 2008 to 36.82% in December 2010 (ANCOM, 2011: 57), still among the lowest in the EU – reviewer’s note.

⁹ Again, an elitist, intellectualist tone of the discourse – reviewer’s note.

(29.3%), Hi5.com (26.1%) and Wordpress.com (22.1%). Measured by millions of unique visitors, the most popular Romanian websites in June 2010 were social networking and video sharing sites, an IT forum and tabloids: Hi5.com (4.14), Trilulilu.ro (2.83), Forum.softpedia.com (2.61), Libertatea.ro (1.68) and Realitatea.net (1.65).

Digital activism is more successful at a personal initiative level and more visible in political campaigns, ignited and sustained by parties.

As for the blogosphere and other Web 2.0 platforms, Preoteasa and Comănescu (2010: 42) consider that they “seldom generate new, original information in Romania. However, a significant number of bloggers have reached a certain audience by contextualizing and criticizing the content of the traditional media. Some of the blogs, maintained by journalists or former journalists, give audiences a quick glimpse into the newsrooms of the mainstream television stations or newspapers.”¹⁰

Chapter 4 – “Digital Media and Journalism”: By providing rich and well organized information, digitization has improved journalists’ work. However, it had a negative impact on the quality of reporting, according to Preoteasa and Comănescu (2010: 49): “Journalists seldom go for the news: they prefer to have the information coming to them through emails, RSS feeds, press agency software, mobile phones, all-news television stations, and so forth. The selection of relevant information has become more valued than in-depth investigations”.

Diversity can benefit from digitization, but the internet also offers a niche for intolerant, racist discourses and for manipulative political propaganda.

However, blogs can function as “natural antibodies of democracy”, according to Comănescu (2009: 146) and, along with social networking sites, act as catalysts of digital mobilization.

Chapter 5 – “Digital Media and Technology”: Cable operators are the main news carriers in Romania, since the analog terrestrial broadcasting has steadily decreased and the new, digital broadcasting operators are behind the schedule in catching up with the EU 2007 Audiovisual Media Service Directive on digitization. According to the Romanian government’s digitization strategy, public debates should be organized in order to clarify tender procedures, guarantees on the functionality of the technical equipments for digital broadcasting, and the cost of building such infrastructure. Public campaigns aimed at informing population on the impact of digitization should also be organized – as digitization strategy prescribes. On a practical level though, little has happened, as Preoteasa and Comănescu noted critically.

Analog switch-off, initially set for 1 January 2012, has been delayed for 17 June 2015 by the Romanian government: the explanation was the difficult socio-

¹⁰ A tone of contempt, when it comes to new media outlets – reviewer’s note.

economic situation of the country and international regulatory framework. According to the final act of the Regional Radio-Communication Conference in Geneva (2006), the final shut-down date for terrestrial analog broadcasting in Europe should be 17 June 2015, not the EU-Directive set 1 January 2012 – Romanian authorities justifying their decision on digitization delay.

Competition over digital spectrum allocation is just beginning, and therefore difficult to assess its level of transparency and multi-stakeholder involvement. It is difficult to assess power relations of operators properly, Preoteasa and Comănescu explain (2010: 55): “[o]ne major problem with the telecoms market is the full confidentiality of the fees paid by cable operators to broadcasters. The lack of transparency over funding in the media industry is seriously detrimental to understanding the degree of market concentration.”

Chapter 6 – “Digital Business”: Ownership is one of the most critical business issues to be regulated, when it comes to such a lucrative industry as telecommunications and media. Concentration of ownership in broadcasting is measured by the broadcasters’ audience shares. The MDMR report highlights that according to the Romanian Audiovisual Law, due to continuing digitization, the dominant position has been redefined: an entity, individual or company is considered dominant in shaping public opinion if its average share of the media market exceeds 30 percent. Since television is the major source of information in Romania, it is important to note that there is no nationwide license for commercial television stations: they operate by accumulating local licenses. As for the commercial radio sector, only Europa FM and Info Pro hold nationwide licenses.

Romanian media business is dominated by the “big five” private actors Adevărul Holding, Central European Media Enterprises, Realitatea-Cașă Group, Ringier and Intact Media Group. In addition to these large groups, numerous niche publishers operate successfully on the Romanian media market: Sanoma Romania and Edipresse, a joint venture of Edipresse and Axel Springer, publish several magazines each. German ProSiebenSat.1 runs two television stations, Prima TV and Kiss TV, and two radio stations, Kiss FM and Magic FM. Dan Adamescu, a media entrepreneur, bought the daily newspaper *România liberă* in August 2010. The French company Lagardere owns the sole private nationwide radio network in Romania, Europa FM. Independent digital players Hotnews.ro, Netbridge and Internet Corp hold significant and expanding shares of the digital media market since 2004.

Chapter 7 – “Policies, Laws, and Regulators”: Since digital switch-over has been postponed from 1 January 2012 to 17 June 2015, the framework of policy, law and regulation is difficult to be assessed. Although public debates and raising awareness campaigns on digitization are missing, it is unlikely, according to report authors (2010: 81) that restrictions on civil rights and liberties would be entailed in the regulatory framework. Digital activism is visibly non-political and

policy-related issues seem to be stirred by political parties rather than civil society actors, MDMR report concludes.

Conclusions and recommendations of the report

Positive aspects of the Romanian media digitization process include: a basic regulatory framework has been adopted to guide transition to the terrestrial digital broadcasting; most of the media outlets have launched online editions and several independent news portals appeared; with interactivity increasing in online environments, diversity of opinions and news has increased; media actors are less dependent on hidden state subsidies for advertising.

Negative aspects of the digitization process are: the delay of analog switch-off from 1 January 2012 to 17 June 2015; political interference with the supposedly independent telecommunication regulator, ANCOM¹¹'s activity; the lack of clear provisions of transparency when it comes to media funding and ownership; a high level of media concentration.

At the recommendation section, the MDMR report states that they are under public review and consultation and no draft is provided. However, there are several prescriptive conclusions across the report that may be highlighted as recommendations: a more open and transparent regulation process and framework is needed; digitization process should speed up in order to catch up with EU directives; political interference with media and telecommunication regulations should be avoided.

Reviewer's conclusions

Mapping Digital Media: Romania is a dense, well documented and structured analysis of the Romanian media- and telecommunications market on its transition from analog to digital technologies. Authors are accountable experts of the news generation process and its regulatory framework. The insiders' perspective, although a strength, it is sometimes a weakness: reporters can hardly disconnect from their mainstream journalism context and seem to be judgmental in a series of new media issues. Their discourse has a tone of elitist contempt when it comes to user generated content evaluation, and gives little space to generationally shaped, online civic activism strengthening globally since 2009.

Therefore this report should be read together with more neutral approaches to the Romanian media digitization process.

¹¹ ANCOM – Agenția Națională pentru Administrare și Reglementare în Comunicații (National Agency for Regulating Communications)

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