

MEDIA MONITORING AGENCY

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MAN BITES NEWS

Analysis report of TV news programs from the public interest and journalistic practices standpoint

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Preamble

Public interest and ethical media principles in the TV news programmes

The main role of the media, as a mechanism that supports the democratic climate in a society, is to inform the audience, to provide a debating space and to educate. The media consumer is actually informed when the public interest issues are to be found within the very substance of the conveyed messages, especially by means of articles or news programmes; hence, the media quality as a public service (including the commercial ones). But, what exactly does the public interest concept mean? We lack a precise formula to define such a large concept. Nevertheless, there are several approaches. The most comprehensive and the most frequently used definition say that those specific issues that have the potential to affect a large amount of persons are public interest issues. However, in attempting furthermore to notice the presence of public interest issues in the TV news, for instance, we need more information.

We have formulated our own definition. First of all, the public interest notion can be integrated within special situations, with no common characteristics. Therefore, we have based our definition upon presenting and assessing those situations. In our research, *the public interest* concept includes, without being limited to, matters that affect the security and health of a certain individual or of some categories of persons, that aim at the rights and freedoms of the human being, public money spending, the manner in which public services act, information about the economic, political and social environment. All the same, the press should intervene in order to prevent such cases when the people may be misled by certain statements or actions of individuals or organizations. In this context, the approached topics are of public interest.

The public interest concept does not represent something of general interest for the people, nor does it represent their preferences (*public's interests*). On a certain scale, rating estimation points out interests the public when watching TV. Nevertheless, such an estimation limited to the available offer of the TV screen cannot cover the complex mechanisms at the basis of the people's preferences; hence, it cannot ascertain, as truly as possible, their options. Sometimes, we are thrilled watching a TV show, not because we like what we see, but because the show in question is fascinatingly lame, or because the ignorance of the discourse astonishes us. Therefore, the things the audience is interested in are not necessarily matters of public interest as the above definition says.

We have talked about public interest issues that need media coverage because of their intrinsic quality and about issues that become of public interest by means of press intervention. The characteristics of the approached themes make the public interest news complex journalistic stuff. Sometimes, the information needs more conveying time and it asks for effort and consumption availability of the TV viewer. But the consumer is the one who holds the remote control and he can penalize the TV station by simply pushing the button. The TV stations need rating in order to sell advertisements - the main financial source of a media institution. In order to have rating, you – the producer - must obey the market rules and start adjusting the information so that one can attract the viewers and keep them watching the program. You believe that, here and there, the background information may lack, you add another piece of music and you take care that the reporter's discourse is as colourful as possible and loaded with emotion. At times, the message may be distorted by film techniques providing over-emphasis or by neglecting the essence of the event and intensifying the aspect of a common matter of fact. The examples identified and offered by my colleagues in this report are proving this. Therefore, the distorted message of a news story – otherwise of public interest - reaches the consumer. The manner in which the audience might interpret those messages is another theme to be researched and debated. One thing is certain. The citizens' right to be properly informed is infringed.

There are other times when tension elements and shallow approaches of the subject prevail to the detriment of the instrumental information. This matter is much obvious in the news stories on administrative issues. The citizen is sketched as the victim of the bureaucratic system - nothing more. Essential information to solve the problems or to assist the public in the relationship with the state institutions lacks.

Our Attempt

As a rule, we are concerned with promoting both professional standards for the journalists and public access to information that is well-balanced and of interest to the community. Therefore, this research's main goals were to identify the manner in which the main Romanian TV stations¹ comply with their task of acting for the benefit of public interest, as well as the manner in which they do or do not enforce ethic standards in journalism.

¹ Antena 1, Antena 3, Realitatea TV, TVR1, Prima TV, Pro TV

Particularly, we have tried to understand the manner in which a news programme is structured from the media agenda standpoint (information selection, its positioning within the news programmes) and from the viewpoint of message being formed. Likewise, we observed the extent to which journalists pursue the ethic principles when elaborating the news stories. All we have done has been to record, and not to determine a diagnosis.

The multiple approaches of the public interest concept, the audience agenda local features and the specific character of the media agenda have got us in trouble when we set to develop a viable methodology. Our intent of continuing has put us to a difficult test. We have accumulated materials: scientific researches, codes of conduct (BBC, TVR, COM etc), audio-video regulations. The work of collecting and interpreting the data has been done during very long debates. We have deliberated and argued both within the team and outside it. We have formulated standards of what we considered to be of "public interest", we have developed a methodology, we have ascertained and this report represents the result of our endeavour.

In what concerns the ethic principles being observed, the audiovisual regulations have provided us with the necessary values. Indicators had been codified to measure the compliance with the presumption of being innocent until proved guilty for those news about crimes; the compliance with the right to private life and to self-image; the irrelevant mentioning of a certain actor's ethnic origin; submitting the points of view of all parties involved in a conflict.

We truly believe that, first of all, the journalists have the social responsibility to inform correctly, in the public interest, to offer a debating forum, to grant the free circulation of opinions, to educate. By means of a common effort the media institutions (journalists, media owners, advertisers etc) have the duty in finding a balance between this aspect and the institutional activity within a market economy. How can we accomplish this? We invite you to take part in our debate.

Nicoleta Fotiade

The emotion behind the news

The emotion-sucking journalism, so very much alike the blood-sucking Dracula, seems to have become a practice quite often encountered in contemporary television. The news programme has ceased to be just an informative product and it has become a real journey within the psychological and affective universe of all involved actors (anchormen/women, correspondents, the news characters, but also the TV viewers). In the attempt to provide the journalistic activity with consistence, the news programme is no longer meant for anonymous TV viewers, but for witnesses. A non-temporal and non-spatial loop is being made where only the momentary feelings stirring up by the news matter. In fact, the TV viewer-witness should no longer evaluate or make decisions. He only has to get some feelings, to get emotional.

Accidents, violent deaths or fires are presented to the audience under the generous umbrella of two reference terms: tragedy and fatality. The game is treacherous and it puts a great deal of pressure on the TV viewers who are, thus, invited to take upon themselves the dramas of the victims or of their families and to accept the fact that the lightning might strike any time, anywhere.

According to the Romanian Language Dictionary, the word "accident" defines " a random, unpredictable event that interrupts the normal course of life". By broadcasting quite a large amount of news about any sorts of accidents, the TV stations seem determined to provide us with arguments in favour of describing our society as being abnormal. The fatality element can be found in news such as: "Followed by Death"², "Followed by Bad Luck"³, or "Fire and Shock"⁴. Those news are extremely rich in cliches about the imminence of death ("the chase towards death", "fatal/destroying impact", "they had no chance whatsoever"), but also about the magnitude of the unhappy events ("scenes from a war", "it was raining with people"). The TV screens are monopolized for so many minutes by jerky footages of pulling people out from twisted metal or of victims being resuscitated. The ambiance is supported by dramatic, funeral music and, also, by the sirens of the arriving ambulances. No matter if we speak about road, aircraft or human accidents, most of such news are built upon the same script of an endless series: "The Accident in Your Life".

² Pro TV, November, the 5th

³ Pro TV, November, the 6th

⁴ Antena 1, December, the 1st

If, in the case of news about accidents and their victims the most important factor is the predestination one, the emotional load is changed in the news about murders or about victims of violent deaths. The journalistic dialect has various notes of attitude: from sheer perplexity to compassion, from revolt to acceptance. All those behaviour variations bear the seal of drama, of tragedy. The respective news is transformed into a reconstitution where the journalists resume the course of events, without refraining themselves from exposing morbid details or the tension endured by the victims' friends. The TV viewer's eye is carefully protected, as the blood stains or the details from the murder scene are inserted in a suggestive way. Most of the times, "there are horror scenes", or "scenes from a horror movie". The neighbours are "stunned" and "they cannot believe" how a person they have known all their lives "could have committed a cold-blooded murder". In other cases, the entire community is alert and terrified because it is common knowledge that somewhere around there is a "Psychopath at Large"⁵. When justice has no one to punish, the journalists' attention is focused solely upon the dramas and the traumas of those still alive ("a horror movie has been shown to the little ones"). There are other two types of morbid subjects in the TV news cinematography: suicides and unaccountable deaths. The suicides are presented using the register of the inexplicable ("Incomprehensible Gesture"⁶), the emphasis being placed upon the absence of any elements that should establish the factors leading to that action. The tension increases when dead bodies are discovered under "mysterious or unclear circumstances". Although there are not sufficient details about such deaths, the journalists cannot restrain themselves from presenting a "Terrible Death"⁷, or "The Traces of a Horror"⁸. The obvious mincing tone used by journalists when presenting such cases, the suggestive images and the background music succeed to sketch fragments belonging to a reality that cannot be disputed, but, nevertheless, it cannot be considered as valid on the whole.

The news about starting isolated or generalized fires bring a substantial dose of spectacular. The TV viewers and the journalists build a bridge of compassion for the dramas of families that "are losing their lifetime savings" in such incidents. The structure of such news is simple, but powerful and having the same result. "The people of the fire" succeed to put it out after "long hours of fighting the devastating flames". The tendency to augment both the phenomenon and its effects is quite often encountered. The case of a family that has remained

⁵ Antena 1, November, the 1st

⁶ Pro TV, January, the 7th

⁷ Antena 1, November, the 5th

⁸ Pro TV, December, the 6th

homeless after a fire is presented by using the phrase: "a night of fire"⁹. Within the same register, a "Devastating explosion"¹⁰ shows the damages produced in one single apartment in a whole building. In all those types of cases, the tone is vivacious and it is supported by potentially dramatic audio-video footages.

The area of subjects built upon the emotional vein is much larger and it is not limited solely to the abovementioned examples. Therefore, the inclination of certain TV stations to benefit from the emotional potential of some news is obvious. Unfortunately, the message being focused upon the tragic or the dramatic nature of a news story or another amputates the information useful to the TV viewer. The emotional and shallow approach of the subjects turned into news does not reach the conscience of an informed TV viewer, but that of a more sensitive one. We truly believe that facts are more important than emotions in order to get ourselves protected and to prevent such events from taking place.

Ionut Codreanu

⁹ Pro TV, November, the 5th

¹⁰ Antena 1, December, the 5th

Case Study

"January, the 4th, 2007 - A day in the TV news life"

From the invention of the linotype, if not even earlier, any day might be reconstituted by using the media agenda tool. But, the accuracy of the reconstruction depends, to a large extent, upon the importance of the events that branded those days. Thus, from the viewpoint of the before mentioned agenda, a day such as 9/11, 2001, would be much easier to reconstruct, given the magnitude of the events that branded it and the almost unitary manner in which the entire mass media presented them. On the other hand, a common day, with not too many objectively important events, may cause some trouble to the media when presenting its agenda to the consumer. On such days, "the house recipe" gets to organize and even to influence the agenda provided by the media institutions. Rules and criteria - blending in the often ineffable concept of the editorial policy - give birth to many portraits, all of which are valid for the same day. The information consumer has but two choices. Either he lets himself be carried away, or he gets emancipated and starts to compare, to estimate and even to recycle the provided news, thus achieving his own vision of the current agenda.

The day of January, the 4th, 2007 was, if not an ordinary one, then one characterized by a certain balance between the events that could unify the TV stations viewpoints upon the current agenda and subjects meant to grant personality to each and every news programme. By comparing those, on the basis of identifying the common subjects and of analysing the differentiation elements, we might get both a dimension of the agenda applicable to that particular day and the extent to which the "recipes" intervene and cause considerably different visions.

A selective TV viewer might have got, after having surveyed the main informative programmes of January, the 4th, the following image of the media agenda: a day defined by snowfalls that affected a large part of the country; a day whose only political event was the meeting of the NLP (National Liberal Party) in Sinaia; a day when visitors could enter the People's House and a day when hundreds of persons from Bucharest stood in long lines in front of the Financial Administration, in order to get their European health cards.

If the TV viewer had watched only one news programme, his perspective upon the day of January, the 4th, would have been slightly modified, according

to the specifics of the programme (general or news specialized) and, maybe even more importantly, according to his availability of emotional involvement. Such consumption produces nuances of the main daily subjects, as it becomes easier for the TV viewer to understand the stress of the drivers stuck in snow (Pro TV), or the amused resignation of the people living in a village isolated by snow (Antena 1). His informational horizon is extended when he finds out that "in a village, in Braila county, a man killed his wife right in front of their three-year child" (Antena 1), or that a jail warder committed suicide using the gun he has been equipped with (Pro TV), or that "Withney Huston is bankrupt" (Prima TV). A TV viewer who, on January, 4th, watched the Antena 1 news found out that Prime-minister Tariceanu drove through Sinaia, "although he had suffered a knee surgery two months before", whereas a TV viewer watching Realitatea TV or TVR1 news found out that, also in Sinaia, the liberals convened in order to establish several modifications in their party's statute.

We present herein some of the nuances the TV stations used when showing the main subjects of the current agenda of January, 4th.

The weather section

The 4th of January media agenda was governed by the heavy snowfalls that affected various parts of the country. Vast reports about the consequences of the snowfalls were identified in the news programmes of all monitored TV stations. Generally speaking, all broadcast news focused upon the same subjects: blocked roads, isolated villages or villages with no electricity, tourists stuck in mountain sheds, perturbed railway system. All analysed materials provided information about the size of the phenomenon and the predicament of the affected people. Still, there were different manners in which the information was presented.

In the case of Pro TV, those subjects represented about 20% of the January, 4th news programme. Placed at the very beginning of the programme, the five news showed the effects of the snowfalls, emphasizing their dramatic aspect. Perhaps the most touching items about the snowfalls broadcast on that day, the Pro TV news abounded in wording such as: "we woke up in chaos", "saved from the white hell", "raids in the underworld", or "the snow trap". The almost movie-like manner of presenting the events was, sometimes, accompanied by special background music (Antonio Vivaldi's "The Winter").

Antena 3, Realitatea TV and TVR1 broadcast at the beginning of their programmes news about the snowfalls effects. The reports of those TV stations were alike because they mainly focused upon the state of the roads and upon the condition of the tourists stuck in various sheds in Fagaras and Bucegi mountains.

On the other hand, Antena 1 and Prima TV did not open their January 4th programmes with the issue of snowfalls, but the subject was as vastly covered as in the case of the other TV stations. Information concerning the condition of the roads, of the affected villages, as well as that of the stuck tourists could be found in the news broadcast by the two TV stations. The news programme of Antena 1 - "Observator" - began the bulk of the snowfalls news with an extensive report, tuned to the European key, about Bisoca village, blocked by the snow: "The Europeans in the snow drifts".

The politics of the day

The main political event of January, 4th, was the National Liberal Party meeting in Sinaia, when the liberal leadership decided to modify the party's statute. Most of the TV stations dealt with this issue in their news programmes, yet using considerably different approaches. In the news "He hasn't settled down", Antena 1 presented solely the moment when Prime-minister Tariceanu, "although having suffered a knee surgery less than two months before", drove through Sinaia. There was no element explaining the reasons for his presence in Sinaia, and, therefore, the TV viewer might have believed that the Prime-minister was on vacation. On the other hand, Pro TV, dealing with the same subject, added an informational aspect by mentioning the reason for which Tariceanu was in Sinaia. Nevertheless, the main issue of the news was the fact that he went for a drive.

When broadcasting this news, Antena 3 used the information provided by its sister TV station, Antena 1, but it also offered context information. Therefore, we could find out that the Prime-minister's drive had taken place after a meeting of the liberal leadership, where they had modified the party's statute.

Dealing with this subject, TVR 1 news programme left out the detail about the Prime-minister's drive, but provided information about the proposals of modifying the party's statute. The news also included a statement on this issue made by the liberal vice-chairman, Varujan Vosganian.

Realitatea TV granted this subject a large space, presenting information about the liberal meeting agenda, the main statute modifications, as well as some explanations of how those changes might affect the party life. Within the same news, Varujan Vosganian voiced the liberals' intention of legally contesting the Democrat Liberal Party having been founded. The detail about Tariceanu's drive through Sinaia was also omitted.

To conclude, after having examined each and every information provided by the TV stations about this subject, we could understand that the Prime-minister Tariceanu drove through Sinaia (Antena 1), that the Prime-minister drove after having attended a meeting of the National Liberal Party where the statute had been modified (Pro TV and Antena 3), that the liberal leadership met in Sinaia to modify the party's statute (TVR 1) and that the liberals met in Sinaia to modify the statute and Varujan Vosganian confirmed the fact that they would legally contest the Democrat Liberal Party having been founded (Realitatea TV).

Murders, suicides and aggressions

News presenting violent deaths represented the attraction of such a day, pretty scarce in any kind of news. Antena 1 - "Observator": a murder followed by the suicide of the murderer, an inexplicable death and two other suicides. To a less extent, those subjects were presented by Prima TV and Pro TV: a murder and a suicide, respectively.

"Observator" news programme of January 4th started with the case of a man from Braila county who committed suicide after having murdered his wife in front of their three-year child. The murder scene was dramatically reproduced by the anchorpersons' grave-alert discourse: "A three years old child had watched his mother corpse for three days and nights. He covered her body after having seen his father murder her. After the murder, the man hanged himself". A graphic cover preceded the material providing information about the murder: the text: "Stoned to death in front of the child" overlapped some images of the murder scene, while the sound background was dramatic. The same subject was also approached by Prima TV news. Although there were no graphic inserts and the sound background, the journalists were generous with dramatic phrases ("shocking case", "ferociously killed") intended to present as specifically as possible the murder details.

Other news

Another subject encountered in all the news programmes of January 4th was the event "Open gates" at the Parliament. All monitored TV stations, with the exception of TVR 1, made vast materials about this issue. The analysed news approached it in a unitary manner, focusing upon the visitors' picturesque character and upon the originality of their reactions.

The release of European health cards was another issue dealt with in the news of several TV stations on January 4th: Antena 1, Antena 3, Pro TV and TVR 1. The news emphasized the abnormal functioning of Bucharest Financial Administration in this process and provided useful information about the necessary documents and about the opportunity of getting those cards.

Another issue dealt with by almost all TV stations on January 4th was the statement made by the Culture minister, Adrian Iorgulescu, concerning the retrocession of Peles estate to the Royal dynasty (Antena 1, TVR 1, Realitatea, Antena 3). The materials presented the minister's statement, the list of properties of Peles estate, as well as a possible calendar of the retrocession.

The issue of the wealth declarations handed in by politicians was present only in three news programmes out of the monitored six. Realitatea and Pro TV presented a selection of MPs who had got considerable income increases, whereas TVR 1 referred to the main methods used by dignitaries in order to "conceal" their incomes.

On January 4th many TV stations dealt also with the annihilation of one of the largest persons traffic network in Romania, with placing under quarantine the hospitals and maternities in Cluj, due to the increase of viruses cases, as well as with arresting the manager of "Gazeta de Maramures", Dan Parcalab, in "Gazeta" file. All TV stations presented those subjects in a similar manner.

Gabriel Dobre

Media Analysis Results – Brief Narrative

Monitored TV stations Background:

The main players ruling over the prime-time segment of the Romanian television stations are: Antena 1, Antena 3, Prima TV, Pro TV, Realitatea TV and TVR1.

Prima TV and Realitatea TV prime-time aim at the period between 6 - 7 p.m. They are private TV stations, differentiated one from the other in matters of their content and orientation. Prima TV is part of SBS International trust and it has been broadcasting for ten years on the Romanian media market. In Prima TV there have been identified the generalist character, as well as the tendency of presenting mainly social subjects. On the other hand, Realitatea TV is known to be the first all news channel in Romania, with more than six years history in the field of Romanian TV stations. Now, it is part of the "Realitatea - Catavencu" trust. The agenda of Realitatea TV is dominated by subjects about domestic politics, but it also contains subjects of the hour concerning the administrative or legal systems.

The most intense competition takes place between 7 - 8 p.m. among Antena 1, Pro TV and TVR1. The rivalry for winning over the 7 p.m. TV viewers is an original one, as two private TV stations together with the public service broadcaster, TVR1, are involved in this race.

Antena 1 is part of the "Intact Media" group and, together with Pro TV, belonging to "Media PRO" media group, constitute the spine of the Romanian commercial TV stations. These two TV stations are noticeable for their appetite for superficial, matter-of-fact subjects and by the sensationalistic manner in which they promote the news. In contrast with Antena 1 and Pro TV, the public broadcaster - TVR1 - focuses upon public interest subjects selected either from the domestic political life, or from the international agenda.

Set up in 2005, Antena 3 is the third oldest TV station, specialized in broadcasting news programs and it belongs to the "Intact Media" group. The 9 p.m. news program is dominated by political subjects and also by the international news of the day.

Media analysis results:

The analysis emphasized the fact that, in the case of generalist TV stations (Antena 1, Pro TV and Prima TV), the highest percentage goes to common matters subjects. Whereas the subjects about the domestic political life, the state institutions activities or the international news of the day occupy a secondary place in the agenda of those TV stations, both as percentage and as position in the informative programs.

The TV stations specialized in broadcasting news programs grant priority to the public interest subjects, emphasizing, first of all, the domestic political arena and the activity of the main state institutions. The common matters have a negligible percentage in the news programs, being most often broadcasted at the end.

In what concerns the themes covered in the monitored news programs, the public television gets closer to the news specialized channels. The domestic political actuality, as well as the international one dominated the TVR 1 news programs during the monitored period. The common matters had a low percentage and a secondary position in the programs.

Overall, the *proportion of public interest subjects* was the same in the case of all monitored TV stations. The distinction was the hierarchical system of the subjects and the manner in which the journalists chose to present them. In the cases of the public broadcaster and of the news-oriented private TV stations, the public interest subjects were, each time, placed at the very beginning of the informative programs and they benefited of a well-balanced presentation. On the other hand, the generalist TV stations relied, most of the time, upon broadcasting common matters, while the public interest subjects were marginally treated, accompanied by shallow commentaries.

Sensationalism in Romanian TV news programs

This research had in view *the manner in which the six televisions resort to sensationalistic approaches of certain subjects*. The tendency to dramatize the dimension and the effects of certain events was much more stressed in the case of the generalist TV stations. The area of subjects dealt with in a sensationalistic manner varied from presenting morbid events (accidents, deaths etc.) to public interest events treated in a ludicrous register.

In order to intensify the dramatic character of certain subjects, the journalists inserted audio-video effects accompanied by sensationalistic comments.

Most of the times, the exploitation of the emotional dimension undermined the newsworthiness value of the subjects brought to the TV viewers' attention. Antena 1 and Pro TV detached themselves from Prima TV from the quantitative point of view, with respect to the frequency of the news tackled in a sensationalistic manner.

The tendency to express dramatically certain topics was also encountered in the case of the TV stations specialized in news broadcasting, as well as in the case of the public service broadcaster. The incidence of sensationalistic news was much lower, because the percentage of subjects which might have been emotionally speculated was more reduced. Besides, the only element that got

some news closer to the sensationalistic area was the journalists' discourse, as the audio-video effects were almost absent from the informative materials presentation.

Ethic principles and the news

An important component of this research aimed at estimating *the extent to which the TV stations comply with the most important journalistic ethic principles* (observing the presumption of innocence, respecting the individual's privacy, observing the non-discriminating treatment and presenting all the parties involved in a conflict).

The presumption of innocence was most often violated by Antena 1 news, on the opposite side being Antena 3 and Realitatea TV. Usually, the news where this principle was violated presented felonies or anti-social deeds. However, the monitoring process showed that the journalists' discourse was more cautious in the case of mediating legal cases involving public figures.

The principle of respecting individual's privacy was, again, most often violated by Antena 1 news programs. The news violating this principle mainly presented persons in state of predicament or in state of shock (accident victims). Antena 3 and Realitatea TV presented no materials that should have requested the observance of this ethic principle.

Traces of the discriminating discourse were identified in the news programs of all monitored TV stations. The most numerous infringements were identified in Pro TV news programs where ethnicity or the medical condition of certain persons linked to some undesirable actions (murders, violent deeds etc.) were mentioned.

The principle of presenting all the parties involved in a conflict was most often violated by Antena 3. The news usually presented controversies on the domestic political arena. This violation was identified in the news programs of all monitored TV stations when they presented attacks among the Romanian political players.