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## The Transformation of the Field of Mass Cultural Production in Romania; Structural and Conceptual Premises

*Abstract: In this paper I problematize the transformation of the field of mass cultural production as a producer of specific mass cultural goods/media products. The aim of this paper is to set the situational and theoretical background against which the specificity of the field of mass cultural production in Romania is to be understood. The main conceptual tools that I use are: field, press freedom and market, as they appear in the academic literature, and as they have been used in Romania after the fall of communism. The transformation of the locus of valuation of mass cultural goods and the consequences it entails has not enjoyed enough attention. The lack of clarification of these aspects has concrete consequences at the level of the lack of coherence between the legislative institutional structures that continue to define and treat the mass cultural products as symbolic goods, and the market reality that defines them as merchandise whose value is provided by the price obtained on them in the process of free market exchange. The understanding of these phenomena allows the realistic consideration of the limits of creative input of the Romanian media producers in the field of mass cultural production in the context of a free and very competitive global market.<sup>2</sup>*

**Key words:** *field of mass cultural production, press freedom, free market, mass cultural goods, cultural exception, cultural lohn*

### Introduction

To the observers of the globalization phenomenon, history does not seem to have ended, but to have accelerated to an unprecedented speed. Romania has undergone a series of severe transformations after the 1989. It passed from a totalitarian regime, to a democratic one, from a single ideological voice praising the nation, to multiple narratives, both domestic and produced in other spaces. The transformation phenomenon was accompanied by institutional and symbolic restructurings, and below I am pointing to the changes of the field of mass cultural production. It is in this context that the recent transformations in the Romanian society have occurred, with the field of mass cultural production being one of

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the objects of change as well as one of the agents. I do not have a clear answer as whether the present time media field is a monstrous, karkian result of “Metamorphosis” or a beautiful butterfly that had emerged from a stiff cocoon. Nevertheless, the transformation of the field of mass cultural production in Romania, in the context of the emergence of the market as organizing principle after the fall of communism, is still an underexplored phenomenon.

I aim to understand the main directions of the transformation of the mass cultural field of Romanian production as well as its limits, in the context of the communist legacy. I believe it is important to understand what has fundamentally changed and what are the elements pointing to continuity, considering the type of institutional change that is specific to the region: “building the ship at sea” (Ester, Offe, Preuss, et alii.,1998). The passage from state ruled media to market driven media has turned to be a turbulent process in Romania. The country has faced multiple challenges, first in the context of sudden deregulation, and lately in the alignment with EU policy requirements. Lately, the decreasing trust in the market in the light of the recent economic crisis represents a further element that complicates the field of mass cultural production. The first years after the fall of communism have been dominated by the USA drive to sign Free Trade Agreements with the countries in the region, thus the institutionalization of the market principle for the mass cultural goods. The 'cultural exception' precedent set by France in Europe has not been the organizing principle for the negotiations, but the idea of freedom embodied at the time by the USA; that further legitimated the imposition of the market principles. The convergence towards the EU has brought new and sometimes conflicting dimensions of media policy options.

The main conceptual tools that I use are those of field, press freedom and market, as they appear in the academic literature, and as they have been used in Romania after the fall of communism. In order to accentuate the transformation, I compare the Romanian institutional setting based on the market, with the French one, based on the *cultural exception*.

In terms of the current research in this area, there is quite a vast literature on the legislative basis in the field of culture and media at the European level, and at the Romanian level (Chalaby, 2005; Garcia, 2007; Harcourt, 2003; Jones, 2004; Marinescu, 2006). The clarification of the status of mass cultural goods within the realm of the popular culture is clarified by Adina Ciugureanu; that emphasizes as well the obsolescence of the distinction between high and popular culture in the age of media (2008).

At the same time, the transformation of the *locus* of valuation of mass cultural goods and the consequences it entails has not enjoyed enough attention. The lack of clarification of these aspects has concrete consequences at the level of the lack of coherence between the legislative institutional structures, that continue to define and treat the mass cultural products as symbolic/cultural goods, and the market reality, that defines them as merchandise whose value is provided by the price obtained on them in the process of free market exchange (Petre, 2009a).

In this paper I problematize the transformation of the media sphere as producer of specific mass cultural goods. The aim of this paper is to set the situational and theoretical background against which the specificity of the field of mass cultural production in Romania is to be understood.

### **The concept of field – the sector of mass cultural production and its actors**

In the present paper, the unit of analysis is the field, or in more common institutional words, the sector of activity. In the larger context of poststructuralism, one of the fundamental concepts is that of *field (champ)*, as elaborated by the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1984, 1993, 1994, 1998, and 2008). It refers to a sphere of specific activities, characterized by objective relations between the various positions, where individual and institutional actors are placed in significant positions that limit, or on the contrary generate specific trajectories for development for the ones that occupy them. The field in the understanding of Bourdieu appears as a disposition of positions within a sector of activities. It has been used and applied by numerous scholars ever since (Benson & Neveu, 2005; Hesmondhalgh, 2006; Zukin & Kosta, 2004).

The field of mass cultural production is defined as the sphere of activity where journalists and media producers work; that produce media goods, for various channels. In the case of the field mass cultural production in Romania, the objective positions are structural dispositions given by the communist and post-communist setting, respectively. In the communist case, all positions were having as referent the central power, at the top of the political pyramid. Thus, the symbolic capital had to do with the legitimation given by the communist power. In the post-communist setting, the fragmentation of power enhances, theoretically, the individual agency of the actors in the field.

The more professionalized a field, the more autonomous it can become. Autonomy generates the capacity of the professionals to rule themselves according to their own norms and priorities, moreover, to legitimate the ones that want to occupy positions in that sphere of action. A field generates specific knowledge and specific products, in this case journalistic praxis, and mass cultural products, respectively. This knowledge is metaphorically called *esoteric* by Bourdieu (2005), for it differentiates the ones initiated from the profane ones, the ones that are inside the field from the ones that aspire to be part of it. The more hermetic and less accessible the knowledge, the more the ones that have it controls the field and its specific production. However, in the case of the field of mass cultural production, the *esoteric* knowledge is quite limited, for many people can work in the media sector, without a specific, specialized knowledge. It is one of the reasons that structurally limit the premises of autonomy and self-determination of this sphere of action. In Romania, the situation is further complicated by the legacy of communism, and the traditional subordination of the field of mass cultural production to the field of political power. The main finding of my doctoral thesis was that, in Romania, after the fall of communism mass-media has been more successful as the voice of change, rather than as the agent of its own transformation (Petre, 2009a).

From the methodological point of view, both for my doctoral research on media institutional change of the journalistic praxis, as well for the post-doctoral one on the transformation of the field of mass cultural production, I have been using field analysis (Bourdieu, 1993, 1998; Powell & DiMaggio, 1991). The main principle of this approach is the identification of objective relations between positions in the media field, in the structuralist tradition of deriving significance from the relational dimension. More recently, the poststructuralist and neoinstitutionalist types of analyses have moved beyond the vision

of binary oppositions, specific to structuralism, managing to better account the complexity and dynamic of a field in its ecological dimension.

The neoinstitutional analyses propose a comparable approach to that of field analysis, in the American scholarly tradition, in the larger framework of the sociology of organizations, with applications encompassing the field of cultural production among other sectors. The new perspective that neoinstitutionalism brings is that an organization cannot be understood in isolation, in other words, that the analysis of an organization is not enough, but the ecological context in which the aggregate of a certain sphere of activity functions; the ecological dimension I refer to is the one introduced and developed by the Chicago School in the first decades of the last century. One of the leading ideas of field analysis is that transformation is made possible by the opportunities that the various structural positions entail, according to the symbolic capital that they accumulate. The symbolic capital represents the sum of cultural, economic and social capital, in other words, the sum of the available resources that are considered to be legitimate by the other actors in the field.

According to classic functionalist theories, the more the society develops, the more it tends to differentiate in distinct sectors that fulfill specific functions. In this paper I only use the differentiation aspect from the functionalist paradigm, the accent being instead on the concept of field. While parsonian and mertonian functionalism had as premise the idea that an existing system is good and that the parts fulfill various functions in the sense of its conservation, poststructuralism and neoinstitutionalism depart from this premise, thus opening new areas for exploration, especially when it comes to institutional change. Thus, authors such as Pierre Bourdieu or Powell&DiMaggio, propose a vision that does not rule out transformative factors as structural burden that have to be removed, but as integral part of any institutional dynamic.

In terms of the explanatory power, the main virtue of the field approach is its positioning in a structural dimension, by means of the analysis of the objective relations between positions and of the sector context; that nevertheless does not overlook the input of the institutional and individual actors in the process of production of the mass cultural goods. The dynamic between structure and agency becomes thus apparent (Giddens, 1984; Rychard, 1999). As a result, we are able to understand transformation of both the actors in the field, and of the object of their activity, the mass cultural products in the field of mass cultural production.

### **The naturalization of the relation between press freedom and free market**

In order to account for the transformation of the mass cultural field in Romania, I have to clarify some conceptual dimensions that entered the common language not via theory, but via the enthusiastic rhetoric of change after the fall of communism. Some of the most popular terms used to legitimize change have been media freedom, and free market. In the following paragraphs I am to clarify the two terms as they have been conceptualized in theory, and as they have been used in the popular language to legitimate change.

The topic of press freedom has its roots in classical liberal theory. Theorists of democratic-liberalism realized the importance of the separation of the field of media from

the direct rule of the government. It was already in the nineteenth century that philosophers like Jeremy Bentham, James Mill or John Stuart Mill<sup>3</sup> approached the issue, in the context of a press that was quite severely censored and at the discretion of the rulers. John B. Thompson remarks that these thinkers “considered the free expression of opinion through the organs of an independent press as a vital protection against the despotic usage of the power of the state.” (Thompson 70) The liberal authors realized that the emergence of a separate sphere of the press could enhance the realization of a forum of discussion, ultimately, the emergence of a public sphere where useful ideas can take shape. These ideas have been further elaborated by Jurgen Habermas,<sup>4</sup> the virtues of an autonomous press being thus emphasized. The early history of mass communication associates the free market with the establishment of press freedom and the emergence of democracy (McQuail, 1998). The link between an autonomous field of mass cultural production and democracy was considered almost natural in the conceptualization of the development of the press. This idea has become very powerful in Romania as well, after the fall of communism. Romania was ready to embrace the market economy in the name of freedom. The ideas driving the opening after the fall of communism were congruent to the classical liberal positive connotations of a free press.

New journalists and lay people were ready to get as far as possible from the stubborn political control, in search of an autonomous field, that would further enhance democracy. The financial aspects though have been overlooked in those moments when “the ship was rebuilt at sea”. Who was to feed the field of mass cultural production, when the financial support of the state would stop? The answer would be the market forces and demand, but the limits of commercialization have not been put under scrutiny. Moreover, lately, the necessity of the relation between market and democracy has been challenged by the Chinese exception. China is a market economy; that does not consider freedom of the press as a necessary correlative.

The Romanian media policy after the fall of communism entered in the larger picture of deregulation and praising of the market virtues in the name of the newly gained freedom. This approach was legitimated by the newly gained freedom; of expression, of circulation, and so on. The ideas driving the opening after the fall of communism were congruent to the classical liberal positive connotations of a free press. In the specific context of CEE countries “a legacy of censorship and tight media control during the Communist era led to a relatively broad political acceptance of deregulatory media policies after 1989”.<sup>5</sup>

At the moment, deregulation is a reality in the Romanian field of mass cultural production, but not necessarily freedom. Some new realities emerged in the process of transformation: the emergence of the powerful media owner as donor, the pauperization of the quality of journalists, the low agency of the actors in the field, the external control of

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<sup>3</sup> John B. Thompson, in note 44 of chapter 2 of the book *Media and Modernity*, suggests the following readings by these authors: James Mill, “Liberty of the Press” in *Essays on Government, Jurisprudence, Liberty of the Press and Law of Nations* (New York, Kelly, 1976); John Stuart Mill, “On Liberty” in *Utilitarianism, On Liberty and Considerations on Representative Government*, HB. Acton (ed.) (London, Dent, 1972)

<sup>4</sup> See especially the chapter “The Transformation of the Public Sphere’s Political Function” in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere, an inquiry into a category of bourgeois society*

<sup>5</sup> in Media Ownership Report for Poland, 2003, 372

the media field, clientelism in the context of weak advertising market, to name just a few (Petre, 2009a). The limits of the market paradigm in the field of mass cultural production, considering the communist legacies, have not been considered in due time, when the opening of the region to the market principle of economic organization has occurred. It is now clear that the institutionalization of the market is not automatically securing press freedom and democracy in a post-communist context.

### **The virtues and the limits of the market in the field of mass cultural production**

The market is the place where offer and demand meet; that has as prerequisite the freedom to choose and as result the 'just price' (Kołakowski 219–220). At the same, there are some limitations of the market principles for the field of cultural production, like the dominance of the audience driven production (McQuail, Siune, 1998), the homogenization of the offer (Bourdieu, 2005) and the limitation of the public interest driven processes. In the last two decades, the market forces have started to set the value of the mass cultural goods on the market, the correct price being set by means of the exchange value of the products.

One of the central features of a market based society is the idea of trade having as basis the free exchange. “The theoretical question is: since goods are exchanged for one another at a particular rate, they must have some property that makes them quantitatively comparable, despite all their differences of quality; what, then, is this common feature which reduces the multiplicity of things to a single measure? The practical question, which was much debated in the Middle Ages, is that of a ‘just price’.” (Kołakowski 219-20) In order for a market to be functional, it requires as prerequisite individual and societal freedom, so that the fair price of any object or service that is exchanged to become set. Thus, “a market is any one of a variety of different systems, institutions, procedures, social relations and infrastructures whereby persons trade, and goods and services are exchanged, forming part of the economy. It is an arrangement that allows buyers and sellers to exchange things.” (Sullivan & Sheffrin 28) This is a positive understanding of a market situation, and highlights both the virtues of freedom, as well as the virtues of prosperity in the complex net of free exchanges.

My main point is that while in communism media products were considered ideological and cultural products, with no exchange value, but one directional from the communist state to the recipient citizens, the market perspective fundamentally changes this vision. Consequently, it is not only the vision that alters, but as well the whole institutional framework that sustains, encompasses and regulates the field of mass cultural production.

A central process to take place after the fall of communism was the implementation of market conditions. The trust in the market was at its peak at the beginning of the nineties. It was considered a sort of panacea for the social and economic ills. The consensus was quite large, encompassing not only the neoliberal thinkers from the United States, but as well European policy makers. When it comes to the transitions of CEE, international

organizations like International Monetary Fund or The World Bank brought into the region the vision of the market and engaged into implementing the main directions that it entitles (Abraham, 2006). It is indeed the case that all the sectors have been affected and altered by the new market perspective on organizing and exchanging goods and services, but my aim is to understand these transformations and its effects on the media sector in Romania.

Under market conditions, one of the main premises is that the fair price of any object or service, media products included, will be eventually set in the very process of exchange. It is thus visible the idea of an institutional framework that is rather reduced, specific bodies being required just to watch that there are no abuses of the context and content of the free exchange. One of the instances can be the unfair concurrence situation, cartelization, monopolization, extreme concentration, all situations that can disturb the fair context of exchange. For the rest, in the market driven reasoning, there is no need for further regulation, with the exception of contents that can be dangerous for children or that can promote hate and discrimination.

One of the advantages of the market driven institutional design is that it is simple; a limited number of organizations are designed to keep the balance, but not to interfere. This design is as well easy to export and fairly uncomplicated to implement, as it does not involve the reshaping and costly interventions in the already existing structures and procedures, but the implementation of freshly new ones. Thus, the burden of legacy and bureaucracy is avoided, and the efficiency is potentially high with a minimum of resources involved.

One of the most serious limitations of the market functioning is that it does not establish qualitative differentiations between the things that are exchanged. For example, socks and movies are on equal footing, according to the demand for them. The value is given in the instance of exchange, in both cases. On the same token, the commercial channel PRO TV is better than the public culturally aimed channel TVR Cultural because there is more demand for it, the former has more audience. The market does not manage to account for the qualitative differences between things, but sets only a quantitative scale. At the beginning of the nineties the main problem was the lack of a genuine market and the continuing clientelistic networks of financial support for the field of mass cultural production, deriving from the communist time. After the institutionalization of the market principle the main problem is the fate of the less popular formats, even if they have aesthetic or educational virtues. Low audience means poor quality in the logic of the market, and this is not necessarily so.

### **The transformation of the object – the mass cultural goods**

The main issue to be tackled in the following paragraphs is the transformation of the paradigm of value of the cultural goods in Romania, in the context of passing from communism to capitalism. The main paradigm of transformation was the institutionalization of the market principles in the field of mass cultural production after the fall of communism as discussed above. The transformation was quite abrupt, from setting the value of a cultural good according to the contribution to the official ideology and/or the

national culture, as it was common in communism (Verdery, 1994; Wachel, 2003), to its market value. The former understanding is closer to the French one, while the latter marks the new American influences on this issue. This discussion aims to explore the dimensions and the consequences of the change of the *locus* of value in the field of the Romanian cultural production, from the producer, to the exchange value. Under the new circumstances, the cultural goods are defined as merchandise, not as symbolic goods, part of a national patrimony, for example.

At the beginning of the Romanian stality, the institutional framework of the country was built on a French model, Paris being the main source of institutional inspiration since the inception of the Romanian state, in the nineteenth century (Eliade, 2006). In this respect, both nations have built culturally aimed institutions to deal with their high cultural production at first, and then with the mass cultural production, in the context of increasing literacy and the development of technologically mass-mediated means of communication.

The communist period did not represent an abrupt departure from this model, but it added the compulsory ideological and political aims to culture in general, the mass culture included. Unlike Romania though, at the beginning of the nineties, France has managed to exempt its cultural products from being freely tradable on the market in its commercial agreements with the United States, thus not defining its national products in the field of mass cultural production as merchandise.

After the fall of communism in Romania, the relementation basis in the two countries had diverged, more specifically from 1993 to 2007, to reconverge after the integration of Romania in the European Union. While Romania was opening up to the world, and started heavy imports of cheap media products, especially from the United States France imposed the *cultural exception* (Benhamou, 2006) in its commercial relations with the United States, excluding cultural products from being traded as commodities on the market. The French perspective determines a different dynamic of the cultural goods, as comparative explanatory factor for understanding the transformations in Romania. France, by raising the cultural exception managed to impose the definition of cultural products as symbolic goods, with an intrinsic value, that is not provided by their exchange value on the market, in the mechanism of offer and request, but as well by the quality of the artistic act (Benjamin, 1969) and their contribution to the national identity.

For Romania, the immediate effect of the trade agreement with the United States was the institutionalization of the principle of mass cultural goods as merchandise; by the middle of the nineties, more than eighty percent of the offer on the Romanian commercial media channels was from the USA (Munteanu, 2006). The reason was the high demand for these products correlated with the accessible prices of these products. In the symbolic realm, the correlation of American mass cultural goods with freedom helped the wide spread of these products on the Romanian media market.

In the discussions regarding the institutional system in the area of cultural goods, several vocal positions are noticeable when it comes to the *cultural exception*. The promoters argue that the *cultural exception* can be a weapon against Americanization and the colonization of the European cultural space with cheap products from the United States (Garcia, 2007; Williams, 2005). The skeptics consider that it has the unexpected effect of protecting all goods that are defined as cultural, irrespective of their actual value (Patapievici, 2009). Finally, the ones that oppose the cultural exception consider that it is a form of protectionism, not allowing the free market to fully function and set the correct price, this

being the American position on this issue. The latter mentioned perspective was very vocal in the nineties, a moment when the neoliberal wave reached its peak of legitimacy. At the moment, and given the context of the economic crisis, the unlimited trust in the virtues of the market started to erode. The tendencies in the last two years have been in the direction of the legitimation of state interventions, the time of the minimal state being already a thing of the past. After 2007, by joining the European Union, Romania integrated the European directives in the field in its internal legislative system, like the Television without Frontiers directive that introduces quotas of European, independent, and national productions, as compulsory for the media distributors. It can be considered a new context for the redefinition of the cultural goods, as well as of the institutional setting in the field. In this context, I believe it is an appropriate moment to reconsider the discussion on the institutional structure of the Romanian field of cultural production and the reconsideration of the principle of cultural exception as potential basis for policy in the field of mass cultural production.

In Romania, the institutional structure of the organization and regulation of the field of cultural production has not fundamentally altered, the definition and administration of the mass cultural products being still under the coordination of culturally aimed organisations, such as the Ministry of Culture, the parliamentary committees on culture and broadcasting, and so on (Petre, 2009b). My argument is that the economic transformation, the growth of the importance of the market and of the definition of cultural goods as merchandise, has not been accompanied by a redefinition of the institutional structures that deal with them, that would fit the raw realities. On the same logic, there has not been enough problematisation of the redefinition of the cultural goods as merchandise and the profound mutations that this situation entails. I argue that the lack of institutional harmonization can bring about difficulties in the establishment of efficient structural mechanisms that would encourage quality and publicly aimed autochthonous cultural production.

In the conceptual context set above, I argue that a deregulated field, where cultural products are goods in a market, can generate hybrid forms that are easier and cheaper to manufacture and sell, in a kind of *cultural lohn* (Petre, 2011: 14-40) system. I define *cultural lohn* as the process of adjusting to local markets pre-existing creative concepts on media formats that function as extensions of larger, international advertising platforms (Romina Surugiu, personal communication, 2010). Pre-existing concepts had already been tested on various markets, thus the risk of failure is lower on new markets. Thus, I hypothesize that a part of the field of mass cultural production in Romania can be considered as an assembly line of the creative concepts that are generated elsewhere, where cultural industries are developed. One of the conclusions of my doctoral thesis referred to the danger of pauperization of the quality of the human resources in journalism, under the conditions of high percentage of creative imported input. At the local level, phenomena of mere assemblage of pre-existing creative goods occur, besides the fully-fledged creative processes (Petre 2011: 14-40). In this context, I believe it is useful to further clarify the authorship issue and the limits of creativity in the field of mass cultural production, the position and the effective contribution of the author, as different from the one that merely assembles mass cultural goods. I believe this problem has relevance for the future generations of Romanian artists, media producers and journalists.

## Opening the floor for research

Under the conditions of structural transformations from the last two decades, we still cannot provide with an articulated answer as to the specific shape of the Romanian field of mass cultural production. More accurately, I refer to the way the field of cultural production changed, the way domestic cultural production and structure are defined, as well as the place and importance of imports in the system. New directions of research can aim to understand the specific structure of production in the sphere of mass culture in the context of the emergence of the market as organizing principle and of the transformation of the *locus* of valuation of the mass cultural goods. Several questions can be further raised: Is the *cultural lohn* dominant in Romania or is it the local creative production in the market context? What is autochthonous creative production, what is import and what is *lohn* in the Romanian cultural field? What are the perspectives of the Romanian cultural production field under these circumstances? What are the main attributes of the field of mass cultural production in Romania under market conditions? What is the structure/agency, creative input, commercial output in the field of mass cultural production? What is the new dynamic of the field, as determined by the integration in the European Union along the new legislative requirements? I believe that the answer to these questions will allow the improvement of the framework of ideas in the process of institutional adjustment in the field of Romanian field of cultural production. Last but not least, further research can allow the realistic consideration of the creative input of the Romanian producers in the field of cultural production in the context of a free and very competitive global market.

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