

## CHAPTER 11

# **‘Freelancing’ as Spectacular Free Labour: A Case Study on Independent Digital Journalists in Romania**

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### **1. Introduction**

Using a case study approach (based on non-structured interviews, observations, and thematic analysis of articles) and drawing on Debord’s notion of spectacle, this research aims at investigating the activity of a residence of independent digital journalists/writers in Romania. This residence’s aim is to foster the production of journalistic/non-fictional content, outside the institutions that materialize the dominant world view at the social and individual level (as in Debord’s understanding): mainstream media institutions or editorial houses. The case study ultimately illuminates the two-fold way in which freelancing journalists simultaneously disrupt and reproduce the spectacle as it crystallizes in the journalism field. The members of this group are positioning themselves against the institutionalized materialization of the spectacle. Similar to Situationist intellectuals, they try to create situations that, by the force of critique, undermine the spectacle. Nevertheless, by accepting, in various ways, the financial support of

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the institutions they criticize, these independent journalists contribute to the materialization of the spectacle itself. By their activity as apparently independent critics, they may offer an appearance of legitimacy to the institutionalized system of ideology.

At the end of 2011, Vlad Ursulean, a young journalist working for the mainstream print media, found an abandoned four-room apartment in a heritage building in the old centre of Bucharest, the capital of Romania. He was writing a journalistic report on old buildings filled with squatters and his approach entailed reflecting on the national concern about a potentially devastating earthquake. The four-room apartment, filled with dirt, and with no electricity, heat or hot water, caught his attention. It was part of an old building situated in the heart of the city. He imagined himself occupying it and transforming it into a place for young journalists to gather and to work. He and his friends had grown tired of meeting in coffee shops or cheap restaurants. He found the owner of the building through an Internet search and, after some negotiation, got a cheap rent deal. After several parties held there, including on New Year's Eve of 2012, reality broke into this quiet community of young journalists. The anti-government protests of January 2012, taking place near the building, forced him to get involved. During the night of January 15–16, 2012, while the Romanian police forces were having bloody encounters with the protesters, Ursulean wrote a journalistic report which immediately went viral, generating more comments, views and likes than any other type of news report in the Romanian mainstream media ("The Slumbering Youth Are Throwing Rocks: 'We Are Fucking Angry!"). It was a decisive moment. He committed himself to online writing and to independent journalism. Two years later, he and other journalists who joined his initiative moved their belongings into a bungalow rented on Viitorului (Future) Street in Bucharest. The 'Casa Jurnalistului' (House of the Journalist) concept was starting to take shape.

Journalism and its associated activities have undergone substantial changes over the last 30 years. The common belief, fuelled by the media industry itself and its managers, is that journalism was changed primarily by the off-line to online transition (the technological determinism explanation). However, research on journalists and their working conditions (Deuze 2007; Deuze and Lewis 2016; Deuze and Witchsge 2016; IFJ 2011; Holmes and Nice 2012) yields more refined explanations related to political, economic and social factors that ultimately affect journalism, leading to an end of journalism 'as it is' (for a detailed discussion, see Deuze 2007, 141–170), and to the start of the new condition of 'becoming' (Deuze and Witchsge 2016). Following Deuze (2007), Deuze and Lewis (2013) and Mosco and McKercher (2008), I have focused previously on the changing working conditions of journalists in the digital environment. I have demonstrated how economic factors affect the media in the same way as technological or social factors by creating a work environment that impacts upon journalism: diminishing editorial freedom and/or agency, giving priority to soft subjects that can be easily monetized, blurring the line between

PR, advertising and journalism, and establishing rigid control/surveillance over employees (Surugiu, 2016). One unexplored yet important component of contemporary journalism is independent journalism.

This chapter is based on a case study conducted in 2015–2016, investigating the activity of a residence for independent digital journalists/writers in Bucharest, Romania. My aim is to analyse the results of this case study investigation using a Debordian perspective that takes into account free labour as an emerging feature of present-day capitalism (Terranova 2000; Briziarelli 2014) and the institutionalized materialization of ideology within the *Society of the Spectacle* (Debord 1967/1994).

The following questions are of particular interest:

- 1) How do the inhabitants of this journalists' residence position themselves vis-à-vis the institutionalized materialization of the spectacle within society?
- 2) Does working for free disrupt or reproduce the 'spectacle' as it crystallizes in the field of journalism?

## 2. Several Notes on Contemporary Romanian Journalism

Recent research carried out on 100 Romanian journalists demonstrated that fear is the main concern of the professional body/guild: 'the journalists' fear that tomorrow they may no longer have a job, fear of the end of the month, when one does not know if one is going to get paid, fear of the owner, of politicians, of the authorities' (CJI 2015, 4). The report stresses the economic vulnerability of journalists, the media agenda being captured by political or economic interests, censorship of the media, the lack of media ethics, the de-professionalization of the field, and the diminishing credibility of journalists, are seen as the major characteristics of Romania's national and local media system (CJI 2015).

Moreover, previous research showed that journalists in Romania are sceptical of the possibility of joining trade unions, which remain marginal institutions, unable to counteract the layoffs and salary cuts (Ghinea and Mungiu-Pippidi 2010, 326). Reports on local media underlined the political pressures on journalists and media outlets (FreeEx 2014). Media organizations are also described as being 'profoundly gendered, with the balance favouring the men at the top and women bunched at the bottom of the hierarchal pyramid', as well as unstable, de-professionalized, and less respected by the public (Rovența-Frumușani *et al.* 2017, 181). These are the features of an unstable work environment for journalists, but also for other knowledge workers in the post-industrial society, the key word being precariousness (Mosco and McKercher, 2008). As Hesmondalgh (2013, 261) explains, they sometimes accept poor working conditions in exchange for creative autonomy. Nevertheless, the symbolic reward

of becoming a name in the industry is available only for a limited number of people, while the number of cultural workers is high.

In this complicated economic and social context, young journalists have the most vulnerable position. They are subjected to an ideological pressure to commit to journalism 'as it is' (in Deuze's understanding 2007, 141), without questioning or resisting it. Gollmitzer (2014) also produced evidence for the common acceptance among young journalists of low pay and even no pay (in the case of interns).

As I have previously observed, their discourse on journalism is impregnated by:

... the elements of the contemporary ideology of work: long internships are mandatory for a career, individualism is the key factor of personal success, it is worth being underpaid as long as you work in an interesting and creative environment (such as media), and unions are unnecessary (Surugiu 2016, 195).

One illustration proposed by a young journalist was that of a person who is juggling many dishes (read 'tasks'), and gets more and more dishes in spite of the exhaustion shown. The journalists' forms of resistance against this ideology and the contemporary state of affairs are mostly individual, the 'exit strategy' from mainstream media being one of them (Surugiu 2016, 194). Young journalists leave mainstream media after three or four years and join PR/advertising agencies or other types of institutions. A small segment opts for independent and alternative media outlets, such as Casa Jurnalistului, on which the present case study was conducted. The case study consists of six non-structured interviews (four men and two women), conducted by the author, in Romanian, in October 2015. The number of journalists associated with Casa Jurnalistului was 22 (data available on September 2016).

Following the research design proposed by Creswell (2013), I added to the interviews: (a) personal observations; (b) a thematic analysis of articles (mainly features) published by *casajurnalistului.ro* between September 14, 2015 and September 14, 2016.

The chapter also builds upon previous research by the author on the journalism and media industry in Romania (Surugiu 2016, Surugiu, Lazar, Ilco 2016, Surugiu 2015, Surugiu 2013).

I compared my findings with the results and conclusions of policy papers/reports (CJI 2015; FreeEx 2014; Ghinea and Mungiu-Pippidi 2010; Preoteasa et. al. 2010) and academic works on media and journalism in Romania (Balan et al. 2010; Bădău 2010; Petcu 2005; Surugiu and Radu 2009; Petre 2012; Lazăr 2014; Vasilendiuc and Gross 2012).

My positionality is also worth mentioning. Having a BA in Journalism, I worked as a part-time journalist in 1999–2002, in 2007, and in 2009–2015, experiencing low pay, editorial pressures and institutional constraints. As a member of the Board of Romanian Public Television (2012–2015), I understood

the consequences of political and economic pressure on media institutions. As Associate Professor in the Department of Journalism of the University of Bucharest, I became acquainted with the hopes, doubts and disappointments related to the world of future journalists (both Romanian and international).

### 3. A New Space, in a 'Post-Apocalyptic' Landscape

The key feature of Casa Jurnalistului is the materiality of the space. It is not a virtual community, built around a digital platform, but a 'flesh and blood' community developed around a house, inhabited by several independent journalists. It is a community of reporters and writers that chose to freelance, that is, to produce media content on their own, without being hired by a long or short-term employer. This content is published on *casajurnalistului.ro* or on other independent and even mainstream digital platforms. Besides the platform (*casajurnalistului.ro*) and the commitment to a physical space, the community shares a Facebook page, and uses the virtual environment for work.

The community has an informal leader, who does not want to be considered as such, but who first put into practice the idea of having a material space. According to him, the space was very important for building the community. The trigger to finding an appropriate space was:

... the very corporative, authoritarian medium in which journalists used to work was a stupid thing, because in my opinion journalism is a liberal and ultraliberal profession (...) a versatile one that should not depend on so many things. Although it is performed in an organization, it should not have that (organizational) character. I have not considered what it should look like, but I thought of ancient craftsmen who owned a workshop, where people used to come to ask for an object to be made, like a sword, or in the case of a journalist, something in the nature of Sherlock Holmes stories – people used to come to his house and tell a story... (Interview 6)

The community of reporters and writers has developed around the physical presence of a house. At first, it was a penthouse near the centre of Bucharest and then a bungalow, situated on Viitorului Street (Future Street, in Romanian), also close to the city centre. Several persons actually live in the house, and others participate on a regular basis in editorial meetings and after work parties. The interviewees described the house as being organized as an 'open house' that 'opens minds':

People have formed this habit of coming to visit. There used to be moments when the house was completely open, anyone could enter and hang out for several hours, without any questions from the others

(...). Now the gate (of the courtyard) is closed, but if somebody comes, there is no problem, he/she is let in. On the second floor there is the office, where only journalists can stay, on the firstfloor people live, but the kitchen is open... you can see in the course of an evening all sorts of people there: musicians, IT specialists and so on... (...) The parties organized by Casa Jurnalistului had such an interesting effect. People came because they wanted to meet them (the journalists) and came to meet them, and they got the chance to better understand what they wrote, what they see, how they see, and they (the journalists) got to open minds. (Interview 1).

Asked to explain why they joined the house, the journalists interviewed painted the bleak situation of Romanian media. They all started working in the mainstream media, where they worked for two to four years. They were hired as interns, poorly paid, and treated as interchangeable and ready-to-use items. One interviewee mentioned that during the outbreak of the 'economic crisis' in 2011 his colleagues from the investigation department of an important national newspaper were abruptly re-assigned to write news stories (Interview 2). Another interviewee explained that media outlets in Romania do not financially support journalistic documentation and investigation (Interview 5).

The contemporary media was described as 'a post-apocalyptic landscape' (Interview 1), in which journalists are irrelevant and isolated. Although young, the journalists complained of exhaustion, apathy (feeling blasé) and bitter disappointment. The house was seen as an extraordinary place that 'made sense' and provided the opportunity to hold on to journalism (Interviews 4 and 5). It developed as an 'organic community', filled with energy, an 'endearing and acknowledged mess', and 'cool madness' (Interview 5). 'The house gives you courage. It's a vibe, and an energy that inspires' (Interview 3). The journalists voluntarily accept the precariousness of free labour in Casa Jurnalistului in exchange for agency and editorial freedom. From their point of view, it is better to be precarious and happy to work, than to be in the condition of their colleagues from the base of mainstream media: precarious and alienated.

#### 4. Crowdfunding and Financing the Old 'New' Journalism

The journalists are not paid for their editorial pieces. They work for free. Reporters and writers are not obliged to publish a quantity of articles per day/week/month as it is the rule in the Romanian mainstream media. The topics or subjects are selected by reporters and writers without any editorial constraints or rules.

The only control is related to the actual writing of the editorial piece, that is, textual composition, title and subtitles, quotations and so on. This editorial control is collective. The text is uploaded in a Google document and made available

to all the residents. Afterwards, the text is analysed during editorial meetings. The pressure of this collective editing is described by the journalists as being 'pretty important', 'time-consuming' and stressful for some reporters.

The rules of copy-editing respect the basic American journalistic/non-fictional style: fact-checking, reliable sources, appropriate angle, good quotations and titles, and consistent grammar. Residents acknowledge the strong influence of American gonzo journalism. Besides this, the interviewees declared they were inspired by the reportages of Filip Brunea-Fox (1898–1977), a Romanian reporter who practiced literary journalism and wrote about marginal people.

The thematic analysis of articles showed that the articles belong to literary journalism, considered to be one of the future paths of journalism (Neveu 2014), or a place for mediating the subjectivity of the reporter (Harbers and Broersma 2014). The features published by *casajurnalistului.ro* favour marginal subjects, marginal in the sense of not being covered by the mainstream media, and not being targeted to the general public. The features present stories of drug-addiction, prostitution, extreme poverty. They focus on what one may call the 'periphery of the periphery'. In fact, several interviewees underlined their commitment to these subjects, while one journalist considered the focus on marginal subjects as a weakness of Casa Jurnalistului.

The editorial practice of Casa Jurnalistului shows a strong commitment to quality journalism, usually associated with traditional newsrooms. Journalists deploy complicated working procedures (long reporting hours in situ, in-depth interviewing) to ensure accuracy and credibility. They focus on writing long-form articles, which are expensive to produce and time-consuming. This incredible amount of work is done for free, although *casajurnalistului.ro* has a PayPal platform.

The sum collected by crowdfunding is mainly used for rent and bills. It offers a 'low-cost lifestyle' (*Interview 2*). Its informal leader said that he wanted to keep the funding at a limited level, so as not to permit any slippage that might negatively affect the production of content. Casa Jurnalistului as an institution is not financed by any other entity or structure from Romania or abroad. Nevertheless, its reporters and writers are sponsored by various types of institution that could be grouped as follows:

- a. Romanian mainstream media. They pay a relatively small amount of money per article. One journalist works as a part-time employee for a high-quality Romanian weekly.
- b. International mainstream media. They pay a relatively large sum of money to freelance journalists who are willing to be 'fixers', that is, to arrange a story in Romania (sources, travels, background information, translations).
- c. Nongovernmental structures, financed by important transnational corporations or financial institutions (banks). They offer fellowships in an open competition to freelance journalists on a yearly basis. Journalists from Casa Jurnalistului compete with other journalists for a limited number of

fellowships and prizes that cover the expenses of documenting and writing articles on given topics. The organizers of the fellowships also offer editorial support. The only requirement is to produce a long form story on a topic selected by them. Among the selected topics are: domestic violence, extreme poverty, minority exclusion, the public education system and so on. The residents admit they apply for these fellowships, which can ensure them a small income.

- d. Other individuals who pay them for filming or photo-shooting at private events.

Romanian and international media do not publicly acknowledge the use of content provided by Casa Jurnalistului. However, nongovernmental structures are extremely vocal about their financial support and about their constant collaboration with journalists from Casa Jurnalistului.

I argue that these structures have appropriated Casa Jurnalistului as an epitome of creative writing and use it in their corporate social responsibility (CSR) campaigns for the financing companies. The creativity of young independent journalists is packaged by these structures as a PR object, and used as such in their public communication.

One interviewee explicitly denounced the temptation of using this type of financing, which he described as part of 'an unhealthy relationship' for journalists:

Fellowships, journalism prizes... they are OK, but, in the long term, you risk slipping towards an agenda imposed by NGOs, towards topics that are not necessarily yours. (...) At first it is cool, because it is the main validation when you are at the beginning and you feel disoriented, and you have no idea how to relate to the exterior world and to the public, you are validated. They feed the ego of young writers. (Interview 2).

## 5. What Does Freelancing Stand For? A Debordian Interpretation of Free Labour in Journalism

Debord's writings, published before the massive spread of the Internet, support the thesis that contemporary societal evolutions are not the effect of digitization, but accelerated by it. The seeds of societal transformation were present long before the outbreak of the new technologies of communication. *The Society of the Spectacle*, described by Debord in 1967, resembles the virtual society of the Internet, to which the same definition may be applied: 'a social relationship between people that is mediated by images' (Debord 1967/1994, § 4), holding 'the very heart of society's real unreality' (*idem*, § 5). In the same way as the society of the spectacle exists, the virtual society (of avatars and Facebook



'inhabitants') is not a society of real persons, but of images of the persons, who interact and build social relations with the help of technology.

Moreover, Debord's dichotomy between reality and image has found its illustration in the virtual society. ('The spectacle cannot be set in abstract opposition to concrete social activity, for the dichotomy between reality and image will survive on either side of any such distinction. Thus, the spectacle, though it turns reality on its head, is itself a product of real activity' Debord, 1967/1994, § 8)

The typical yet not unique effort to accommodate the society of the spectacle to the new digital context takes in the media's case the form of digital journalism. The journalists of the digital era no longer consider themselves to be inert components of the media system, because they have the ability to interact with the system not merely as its elements, but as 'conscious' elements. Journalists from the pre-digital era might be included in the classical industrial enterprise model, as workers who do their labour for the benefit of the company, but without the possibility of influencing decisions regarding the company and its means of production. In the light of the digital revolution, the journalist was willing to integrate information technology in his/her work. Journalists hope to acquire the structural ability to create, influence and change the professional field that, in the past, was built from the outside (by the social and political system, and economic institutions).

The journalist of the digital era is presented by the ideological apparatus of technological determinism as a participant in the decision-making of the company to which he/she belongs. (This is the case of all knowledge workers, as Mosco and McKercher (2008) explain.) In this sense, the ideology of technological determinism produced social and professional expectations related to a new type of journalistic agency and power, through the possibility of building a platform and uploading content in an instant. The endless opportunities to get in touch with people, to handle Big Data, to document stories online, and to publish them as soon as they are ready, without the institutional constraints of legacy media, proved to be elements of a well-designed spectacle, meant in Debord's (1988, § VI) terms to 'organize' ignorance and to hide other important societal issues.

The spectacle of digital media takes the shape of an upside-down system, where human relations are distorted by the requirements of the mechanical production necessary for the wide dissemination of information on the Internet. Instead of following the public interest, journalists choose soft subjects, easily monetized with the help of search engine optimization (SEO) techniques.

The established media system has few opportunities to fully integrate young people. Young people agree to participate in the media system by reporting and writing for free during long internships. They invest their limited resources hoping to join the system after they learn the tools of the trade. But the system cannot offer a stable job and a promising career in exchange for all the investment young people make in it.

Previous research (Surugiu 2016; Surugiu, Lazăr & Ilco 2016), based on interviews conducted with mainstream Romanian journalists, showed that journalists have a precarious work life. I argue that this precariousness leads to the acceptance, even embracing of the society of spectacle, which materializes in a continuous and tiring quest for higher circulation figures and audience ratings. As one journalist explains:

I would have wanted an editorial mission: to know why and what is the purpose of my writing, to dedicate time to each story, while they were asking me only 'quantities' and promotion for company's projects... somehow my mission was to make money and this left no room for higher purposes (Surugiu 2016: 193).

In this context, Casa Jurnalistului's commitment to the image and tools of the 'old' profession of journalism and to a revival of literary journalism may be understood as a quest to create a disruptive alternative to the digital spectacle. This alternative comprises a physical space, unmediated meetings, mutual understanding, a cooperative-like organization, and the production of journalistic and non-fiction stories about subjects rejected by mainstream media and in forms avoided by the so-called mass-media. As Kellner (2009, 1) points out, the current corporate media is centred upon 'sensationalistic tabloidized stories which they construct in the forms of media spectacle that attempt to attract maximum audiences for as much time as possible, until the next spectacle emerges.' As an alternative to soft and sensationalistic journalism, Casa Jurnalistului produces long-form articles that belong to the literary journalism domain. These articles are social documents that disrupt the 'spectacle of media' (in Debord's terms). This disruptive trait of Casa Jurnalistului is also present at the organizational level, not only at the content production level. It is illustrated by the decision to keep the crowd funding at a limited level. Another symptom of this disruptiveness is the lack of institutional funding for Casa Jurnalistului as an organization. However, its members, with some exceptions, case by case, peripherally integrate themselves in the institutionalized system of ideology, by applying for fellowships and prizes offered by nongovernmental structures. Young digital freelance journalists search for ways of joining the society of the spectacle, as do their counterparts employed by mainstream media. Their incapacity to resist PR and advertising pressures is the same as in mainstream media. However, the capacity of PR and advertising, as major components of the society of the digital spectacle, to take the shape of genuine journalism is improving at an unanticipated level.

## 6. Conclusions

Casa Jurnalistului is not a brand-new initiative in contemporary society. On the contrary, the concept of 'creative places' within 'creative cities' has been taking

shape for the last 10 to 15 years (Cohendet, Grandadam and Simon 2010; Collis, Felton and Graham 2010). Also, freelance journalism has been a reality from the very beginning of the twentieth century, and literary journalism is also not a novelty. However, my interest in Casa Jurnalistului was motivated by the quest of individuals who voluntarily disrupt capitalism.

The case analysis of Casa Jurnalistului highlights the twofold way in which freelancing journalists simultaneously disrupt and reproduce the spectacle as it crystallizes in the field of journalism. The members of this group are positioning themselves against the institutionalized materialization of dominant world view (presented in the media spectacles of corporate journalism). Similar to Situationist intellectuals, they try to create situations that undermine the spectacle through the force of criticism. This takes the form of accurate reporting of reality, as opposed to construction of media spectacles.

However, they feel tempted by the necessity to peripherally integrate themselves in the institutionalized spectacle, because this peripheral integration is, for them, the only possibility they can conceive of to continue to produce quality journalism. Therefore, by accepting, indirectly, the financial support of the pillar institutions of society (corporations), these independent journalists contribute to the materialization of the spectacle itself. Through their activity, as apparently independent critics and free labourers, they may lend an appearance of legitimacy to the institutionalized system of ideology.

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