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Author(s): Agnieszka Stępińska, Gabriella Szabó

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Agnieszka STĘPIŃSKA

Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, Poland

Gabriella SZABÓ

Centre for Social Sciences, Hungarian Academy of Sciences

Continuities and discontinuities: changing patterns in journalism and media in Central and Eastern Europe

Abstract: The aim of this Special Issue of *Central European Political Studies* is to bring media scholars together and to reflect on the current trends in political journalism in our region. The focus of the articles is trained on the discovery of the shifts and continuities in journalistic practises 25 years after the collapse of the communist regimes. Some of the findings and conclusions presented in the volume come from studies conducted within the framework of international comparative research projects such as *Worlds of Journalism*, *Journalistic Role Performance Around the Globe*, or *Media Accountability and Transparency in Europe (MediaACT)*. The others come from single, national empirical studies or analyses on the media systems conducted in the Central and Eastern countries.

Key words: Central and Eastern Europe, media, journalism, change

In the introductory chapter of *Making the News: Journalism and News Cultures in Europe*, Pascal Preston (2009) provides a comprehensive overview of the complexity and multidimensional nature of researching the news making and journalistic culture in Europe. To describe and explain the characteristics of contemporary political journalism multilayers of analysis have been proposed by the book: first, the individual level influences such as professional values and role perceptions narrated by journalists and media workers; second, the media industry routines (institutional practises and norms that shape daily news making); third, the influence of politics and the economy; and finally the perspective of the symbolic content and meanings in the news media that may be linked to the broader patterns of social and cultural power (p. 12). In addition, Preston argues that journalistic culture is now in a state of flux.

This is a highly accurate observation concerning Central and Eastern Europe, a region which has effected rapid and profound transformations in the political, social and business conditions of journalism. The period of the past 25 years can be described as a period of political and economic transformation and a consolidation that has been leading to “Western type democratic societies” (Balcytiene, Lauk, Głowacki, 2014, p. 13). The role of the media was crucial in the transition process, since they served as a forum of political and social debate over the future shape of the relations between the state and the society. The media themselves experienced a transformation from a state-owned system to a dual model, with private and public electronic media, accompanied by a free market of printed media, followed by a technological transformation.

Notwithstanding the fact that the Visegrad Group of countries have their own histories and challenges in journalistic culture, the international literature suggests that there are some common experiences shared by journalists from the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia. Epp Lauk (2008) argues that the road from dictatorship to democracy has been accompanied by global media phenomena, such as “market concentration, commercialization, fragmentation of channels and drastic cutbacks in news production” in all post-communist countries (p. 193). Lauk also depicts the attempts at exporting the Anglo-American liberal model of journalism, which has been partly accepted by the younger generation but rather rejected by the older generation of journalists (p. 194).

Evidence shows that there has been a huge discrepancy between the declarations and the everyday work of media practitioners. The Hungarian press has never been able to follow the ideal of objectivity, even though the codes of ethics elaborated from the mid- to late-1990s clearly expounded this norm. Numerous content analyses have demonstrated that in the 1990s the Hungarian news media was ideologically biased, journalist performance did not meet the requirement of objectivity, and heavy partisanship was detected (see Szabó-Kiss, 2012). A strong version of political parallelisation can be detected in the Polish and Slovakian media as well (Dobek-Ostrowska, 2011; 2012; Örnebring, 2012; Štětka, 2014).

The aforementioned behaviour is assessed as harmful and as media malpractice, which is usually explained by the lack of journalistic autonomy. The unethical relationship between journalists and political actors is studied as a process, in which parties seek control over the media in order to suppress critical voices and to gain favourable coverage so that

they can influence voting behaviour (Bajomi-Lázár, 2014). It is, however, also observed that journalists, like their colleagues in Western Europe, are under growing economic pressure to generate reporting that is favourable to the owners' commercial interests (Štětka, 2012).

Following the liberalization of media markets and privatization of previously state-owned outlets, most CEE media have been institutionally and legally separated from government; nevertheless, their former political dependence has often been replaced by dependence on market mechanisms, imposing new forms of control and constraints on their autonomy. With the market being interconnected with the state and political actors in many post-communist countries, political journalists may find themselves under combined pressure from both political elites and economic forces, often leading to the establishment of a system of "political capitalism" or "paternalist commercialism" in the media (Splichal, 2001, p. 51).

This brings us to a concept of journalistic culture, defined as the character and performance of journalism as an institution, profession and discourse in a concrete economic, political and cultural context (Carey, 1969; Croteau-Hoynes, 1997; Weaver, 1998; Lauk, 2008). This is important, because journalistic culture is believed to possess explanatory power over the performances of media products and media systems. Hallin and Mancini (2004) compare the quality of professionalism in different media systems. They compellingly demonstrate the connection between the characteristics of journalistic cultures and the features of the media systems. Brian McNair highlights that the social, political and economic context of journalism affects the way the media present us narratives about the world beyond our immediate experience. Journalists, therefore, sketch a cognitive map of reality, says McNair (1998, pp. 30–34). In another branch of the literature, the authors discussing the participatory democracy theory propose a to-do type checklist for journalists, with the following elements: provide a civic forum, sustain pluralistic political competition, stimulate civic involvement, etc. A less normative and more realistic account of the media pinpoints that journalism is always ideological (Bajomi-Lázár, 2010). The study by Denton and Woodward (1998) offers an approach that assesses media performance as a representation of separate realities, which may, or may not connect to each other, but basically diverge. They argue that journalists today intend more to create a friendly environment and the emotional conditions for building (political) identities, than to serve as an information source pleasing a single, imagined public (Denton, Woodward, 1998, pp. 66–67).

A relatively new phenomenon, and a rather under-reflected topic so far, is the impact of audiences on political journalists. As the economic crisis, and the subsequent recession have hit the media sector of Central and Eastern Europe, advertisement revenues have rapidly decreased. The cutbacks have been said to be so significant that they endangered primary functions (the delivery of news), especially in the case of those media outlets which aim to operate independently of governments, political parties and media tycoons. One of the inventive reactions of editorial boards was crowdfunding. This is a practice that raises monetary contributions from a large number of people, and seems to be increasingly relevant in the media field.

In Hungary, Klubrádió was the first to appeal to its audience for private donations to save the radio station in 2014. Later, in 2015, a new investigative journalism centre, called Direct36, was launched, designed to finance its work from the monetary contributions of its readers. The audience responded very well to the fundraising campaigns. Both channels still rely on anonymous donors' financial aid to cover basic operational costs. The consequences of the enhanced relationship between the audience and the journalists are unclear. It is speculated that the financial involvement may create situations in which members of the audience step out as investors and demand changes in editorial work. The demand to please the political tastes of the audience over professional standards is noticeable and needs to be addressed, if crowdfunding becomes an integral part of political journalism.

One, however, may argue that political parallelisation is occurring because of the fact that advocacy journalism and political engagement is deeply rooted in the journalistic culture in Central and Eastern Europe (Jakubowicz, 2003; Bajomi-Lázár, 2010). Convinced they are better informed, due to their access to various exclusive sources, journalists feel responsible for fostering what they think is politically 'right' and good for the development of democracy in their country. The connection between the perceived position in the society and the actual coverage of politics, again, directs our attention to the intersection of concepts of the journalistic role and role performance.

The aim of this Special Issue of *Central European Political Studies* is to bring media scholars together and to reflect on the current trends in political journalism in our region. The focus of the articles is trained on the discovery of the shifts and continuities in journalistic practises 25 years after the collapse of the communist regimes. It is worth mentioning that

some of the findings and conclusions presented in the volume come from studies conducted within the framework of international comparative research projects such as *Worlds of Journalism*, *Journalistic Role Performance Around the Globe*, or *Media Accountability and Transparency in Europe (MediaAct)*.

Inspired by Pascal Preston's (2009) ideas, we endeavour to discuss the complex environment and the internal or external forces which shape the perceptions and performances of the journalistic role in post-communist countries. Searching for paradigmatic and methodological renewal, we also offer trends and snapshots. It is safe to say that the overwhelmingly top-down and mass-oriented nature of media seems to have changed radically, and there is also wide consensus over the doubts as to whether journalists still have gatekeeping power in public life. This Special Issue contains contributions by researchers from the Czech Republic, Hungary, Latvia, Poland and Slovakia, who present empirical analyses of current journalistic approaches. They can all be considered as pieces of a puzzle allowing the reader to comprehend who the key players are, how they conceptualise their function in society, and how they perform.

The subsequent part of the volume includes nine papers. We start with articles providing an insight into the perception of the journalistic role and (or) performance in the Czech Republic, Poland and Hungary, respectively. Then, we present papers focused on accountability, transparency, and professional journalistic standards. These papers are followed by case studies on the media coverage of political scandals and social issues. The last paper deals with media policy from the point of view of public value theory, regarding the management of public service media.

Alice N. Tejkalová and Filip Láb studied Czech journalists' working conditions, the most and least important perceived influences on their work, their level of trust in various institutions, recent significant changes perceived in their profession and the professional roles they prefer. The findings clearly show that Czech journalists are required to cope with more work, yet have less time to prepare their stories. This reality, shared with journalists from other CEE countries, is due to several main factors, including changes in the media environment related to the development of online media and news channels (both TV and radio), staff reductions and general financial restrictions.

A team of Polish scholars from Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań (Agnieszka Stepińska, Ewa Jurga-Wosik, Kinga Adamczewska, Bartłomiej Secler and Dominika Narożna) shares the preliminary find-

ings of a study on the performance of Polish journalists. In contrast to most of the previous studies conducted in Poland in recent decades, it focused mostly on the declarations of journalists. This is a content analysis of news items devoted to the actual practice of professional roles. The findings primarily support the observation on the political orientations of Polish newspapers and the political parallelism of the Polish media system. Indeed, the roles played by journalists heavily depend on the political bias of the media organisation they are working for. Although the data indicates that the watchdog model is the most commonly used model in the Polish press, followed by the infotainment and civic models, the extent to which journalists play those particular roles differs according to the current political situation.

The aforementioned paper, as well as the following one, written by Gabriella Szabó, Nikolett Kormos, and Veronika Zagyi, is based on the findings collected in a study conducted within the theoretical framework of the *Journalistic Role Performance Around the Globe* project. The project traces the presence of six models in news production: watchdog, disseminator-interventionist, civic, loyal-facilitator, service journalism, and infotainment.

The Hungarian study reveals that interventionism is an important journalistic pattern in covering politics. However, no single model distinguished by Claudia Mellado (2014) can truly describe journalistic role performance in Hungary. Due to the lack of a clear pattern in Hungarian journalistic performance, the authors call for more systematic overviews of the complex interplay between journalists, political actors and the representatives of corporate interest. Also, they claim that more attention has to be paid to the practises of journalists who work in electronic media outlets (especially in television channels), online news portals and local media products.

A crucial issue related to the professionalisation of journalism is ethics. Filip Láb, Sandra Štefaniková and Martina Topinková describe the current situation in relation to image authenticity and the professional ethics of photojournalists in three countries of Central Europe – the Czech Republic, Poland and Slovakia. They suggest that digital alterations might lower the credibility of news photographs. The results of their study actually show that all photographs published in news media today have been edited using digital imaging software. However, there are different tolerance levels when concerning hard news photography and lifestyle, soft news, illustration or feature visual content.

The mechanisms and instruments which aim to support media ethics and journalistic professionalisation in Poland are the central concern of Michał Głowacki's study. Referencing the outcomes of the empirical international research project *Media Accountability and Transparency in Europe (MediaAct)* the study provides evidence of similarities and differences in the perception of tools and existing practices by Polish journalists from different types of media and job positions. One of the most visible findings here was related to the high level of support for dialogue transparency – both at the level of norms and practices – in daily newspapers. It supports the previous observations on the traditions of the Polish printed press.

The two following papers provide the findings of studies on journalistic practices in Slovakia. Both papers focus our attention on the relations between political actors and the media. In the former, Andrej Školkaĵ and Alena Ištoková conduct studies on investigative journalism. Through two cases (bribery in the Police Academy and Cronyism at the labour office) the study further analyses the criteria and circumstances that determine the worthiness of a case for wide media coverage. The main question raised here was: why did the Slovak media not perceive both cases as worth covering more intensively? In the latter, Andrej Školkaĵ examines the media's role in politics and the ethical issues, such as an objective and impartial reporting. Again, the conclusions concerning the media and journalists are rather pessimistic: there is relatively high degree of journalist and media self-interest in defending their right to protect their sources, and concerns about wiretapping, and, on much smaller scale, by how collusion between journalists and politicians influences the content of respective media outlets.

The next paper is devoted to the issue of media coverage. The findings of the study conducted by Zuzana Veselková reflect the general attributes of the representation of the Roma minority in the Czech news, pointing out methods and signs used for emphasising the stereotypes shared by the majority. The analysis shows that the media discourse of news stories could potentially confirm prejudices towards the Roma minority, forming an image of Roma people as essentially maladjusted, dangerous and suspicious individuals.

Finally, Ainars Dimants critically examines Latvian media policy from the point of view of public value theory, regarding the management of public service media. Although, since 2011, the Latvian government has been slowly deciding plans for the reform and creation of a unified

PSM corporation, there is still a need for more political decisions by government and parliament in that matter.

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