

ROMANIAN JOURNALISTS - PERCEPTIONS ABOUT ROLES, CONSTRAINTS AND AUTONOMY

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Abstract

Objectivity is, according to the Romanian journalists, their most important professional role. 95% of them think that should tell the facts as they happen, without interfering in any way, and 85% say that they should be detached observers, according to the study *Worlds of Journalism*. On the other hand, half of the journalists said that what is ethical in journalism depends on a specific situation.

This paper will examine the perceptions of Romanian journalists regarding their professional roles, internal or external constraints, media independence and freedom of expression, all using the results of the international study *Worlds of Journalism*. The research was conducted in 66 countries worldwide, more than 27,000 journalists being interviewed during 2012 - 2015. In our country there were interviewed 341 journalists from 80 media organizations (radio, TV, print and online).

From a theoretical point of view this paper will analyze some key concepts such as professional autonomy, perception of the role of journalists or the social functions of journalism. External autonomy envisages independence

in relation to other spheres of power in society (McQuail, 2005), the degree of independence that journalists have when doing their job and whether this is consistent with the ideological values and ethical principles. Also, we must not forget the ways through which the press serves democracy: it should inform, supervise governments and the political class and give voice to public opinion (Curran, 2011).

Keywords: professional culture, objectivity, the autonomy of journalists, journalistic ethics

Introduction

Journalists, like people working in other different fields, have a professional culture based on well-defined values, but also on a clear ideology, reflected in the way they think and act.

One can generally speak of culture as a set of ideas (values, attitudes, and beliefs), practices (of cultural production), and artifacts (cultural products, texts). Journalism culture [...] can be defined as a particular set of ideas and practices by which journalists, consciously and unconsciously, legitimate their role in society and render their work meaningful for themselves and others” (Hanitzsch, 2007, p. 369).

The task of a journalist is not an easy one, because a well-trained and truly professional journalist must prove to have ”good judgment as to what issues or events that make good stories, how to gather the facts and details essential to the topic being covered and how to structure stories in a way that makes them interesting, factual and unbiased” (Niblock, 1996, p. 2). In the Ethics Code of the Romanian Press Club, the professional journalist is defined as a person with at least a year's experience in the field for whom media is the main occupation and who is paid for his or her journalistic activity. Thus the Romanian journalist "has the right to criticize, both the Power and the Opposition in the name of the

- *Objectivity* - the *World of Journalism* study shows that journalists believe they must be objective and equidistant. They also think that these values give them credibility in the eyes of the public.

- *Autonomy* – this is another very important value referring to the fact that journalists should be independent in their work and no external factors should intervene in what they report.

- *Rapidity* - technological developments and the fast way with which information is now spreading have made it harder for journalists to do an accurate and objective job. They are now working under great pressure of time, the competition pressure, the money pressure, the public's pressure and so on. Also, due to budget issues many journalists nowadays must be overspecialized and do different types of work in their newsrooms.

- *Ethics* - journalists should abide the codes of ethics of the profession.

As far as Romanian journalists are concerned, the study has revealed that they are assuming the rather classic roles of educating and informing. 80% of them declare their goal is to educate the audience, provide them with analyzes of current affairs, as well as promote tolerance and cultural diversity.

However, the profession is inclined to "idealize" its social utility: it's portraying itself as serving the public interest, hiding or circumventing the economic or social advantages of its pursuit; thus the professionals legitimacy is based on their "altruism", on the desire and the ability to be devoted to the public good. (Coman, 2007, p. 243)

Moreover, Romanian journalists declare themselves loyal to the public and not to the politicians, claiming it is important to help people express their own opinions, support national development and fight for social change. Only 3.9% of the Romanian journalists claim their duty is to present a positive image of the political leaders, and 5.4% think they should support government policy. However, given that Romanian journalists are very young, they have little experience in the field, and almost 80% of them have worked in a single editorial

office, the question arises whether in practice they are loyal to the public just as they claim or this is just an ideal.

Because the public-service ideal can be seen as a powerful component of journalism's ideology. It is an ideal that journalists aspire to, and use to legitimize aggressive (Clayman, 2002) or increasingly interpretive (Patterson, 1997) styles of reporting. Journalists share a sense of 'doing it for the public', of working as some kind of representative watchdog of the status quo in the name of people, who 'vote with their wallets' for their services (by buying a newspaper, watching or listening to a newscast, visiting and returning to a news site). (Deuze, 2015, p. 447)

Thus, the research of professional roles that journalists attribute to themselves is extremely important because the way in which they perceive their roles also influences how they do their jobs (Hellmueller & Mellado, 2015).

The results of the *World of Journalism* study prove, indeed, that loyalty to the public is often an ideal, and the rush for clicks is still very important and contrasts with this ideal of public service because 62% of Romanian journalists claim that their role is to present news that attracts the largest audience. And while they call themselves loyal to the public, journalists who assume the role of watch dog of democracy are fewer: only 51% think their role is to monitor the political leaders of the country. At the same time, 46% of journalists believe it is unimportant or less important for journalists to set the political agenda.

Authonomy in topic selection

The concept of autonomy is a key factor in the functioning of journalism and refers to the independence of the media from editorial, political, economic or institutional points of view. Journalists should have the opportunity to express themselves freely and to publish the materials they consider appropriate, respecting professional and ethical standards. The professional autonomy in the

as well as organizational influences (chief editors and higher management). Now, however, organizational influence has declined: only 41% of journalists claim to be influenced by their editors or editor-in-chief, 30% by managers and 25% by the organization's owners.

Surprisingly, the editorial policy of the newsroom or media organisation does not have much influence on Romanian journalists. Only 55% of them claim to be influenced by editorial policy. This may be a consequence of the fact that many newsrooms do not have a well-defined editorial policy and do not have a clear set of rules and values to guide journalists. As for the participation in the editorial decisions, the percentage is important: 57.4% of journalists have stated that they are always or very often involved in editorial activities, whether we are talking about decision-making or just daily editorial meetings.

A constant that has influenced journalists for many years now is the audience. Prior to 1989, the Romanian press was under the control of the Communist state and after 1989 on the media market started to appear private companies, mainly focused on profit. Ever since, the audience data has become a key element in shaping the editorial policy, but also in the way the journalists work. The *World of Journalism* report reveals that 69% of the Romanian journalists are influenced by audience feedback and 43.7% by audience data.

The results of the *World of Journalism* study bring a major surprise. The perception of the Romanian journalists is that political influences on their work are the lowest. Only 8.9% consider that government officials influence their work, 8.1% say that politicians are influential, and 8% speak of the influence of pressure groups. Indeed, 2016 was the year in which Romania had the best score in the last decade in the *Freedom of the Press Report*, namely 38. Romania had a better score only in 2002, 35, while in others year dropped significantly in the rankings, reaching even a score of 47 in 2005 (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-press/2016/romania>).

However, it is not to be neglected that lately the press in Romania has gone through issues that seriously affected the freedom of speech. The *FreeEx* report shows that in 2015-2016 some representatives of local authorities have tried to prevent journalists from publishing critical materials about them, more journalists have been removed from editorial offices because they have not complied with the political guidelines, and last, but not least, near the election date there has been a competition in the political environment to support televisions (which are going through difficult financial times).

In 2019, the situation is even worse. Romania has dropped 3 ranks in the World Press Freedom Index and it's placed on number 47. The report underlines the fact that "the media have gradually been turned into political propaganda tools. They are very politicised, their funding mechanisms are opaque or even corrupt, and their editorial policies are subordinated to owner interests". (World Press Freedom Index, 2019) The same problems have been reported also by the FreeEx Report which draws attention to the fact that journalists have been assaulted, threatened and insulted by politicians, government officials and law enforcement officials. Moreover, an independent journalist was threatened with the death by a policeman because of her investigative reports.

This difference between the ideal situation and the actual one is explained, first of all, by the existence of many influences on professional autonomy. In addition, journalists have not felt such a powerful influence of politics because pressures on them are no longer exercised directly at the level of the editorial content. The forms of pressure have diversified and became more subtle. They are now carried out through different means of labor law or intellectual property management (restrictive contracts for journalists, forms of employment with poor social protection, a.s.o.). All these make journalist vulnerable and lead him to self-censorship" (Center for Independent Journalism, 2016, p. 5).

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