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ROMANIAN JOURNALISTS - PERCEPTIONS ABOUT ROLES, CONSTRAINTS AND AUTONOMY

Antonia MATEI
Assistant Professor, PhD., FJSC, University of Bucharest, Romania
antonia.matei@fjsc.ro

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

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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

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freedom of expression, and the sole criterion for judging the facts is their duty to abide the laws of the country and the moral principles" (http://www.ajs.ro/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/cod.pdf). The public has the constitutional right to be properly informed and therefore, the first article of the Ethics code stresses the fact that the most important duty of the Romanian journalists is to tell the truth, regardless of the consequences this might have upon them.

Romanian journalists prove that they understood this at least theoretically. In their view, objectivity is the most important role of the profession. According to the results of the *Worlds of Journalism* study (http://www.worldsofjournalism.org/), 95% of the Romanian journalists think they should report the facts as they happen without any interference, and 85% say their duty is to be detached observers of the reality. On the other hand, half of the journalists consider that what is or isn't ethic in journalism depends on a specific situation. Thus this paper will analyze 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 *Worlds of Journalism* study.

Methodological framework

The *World of Journalism* study has broken down all barriers in terms of comparative studies in communications science, with more than 27,000 journalists from 66 countries around the world interviewed. The study was conducted at an academic level and aimed at making a real picture of the professional culture of journalists, the main objective being

to help journalism researchers, practitioners, media managers and policy makers better understand the worldviews and changes that are taking place in the professional orientations of journalists, the conditions and limitations under which journalists operate, and the social functions of journalism in a changing world. (https://www.worldsofjournalism.org)

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The study was based on a common methodological framework (in order to be able to make a multinational comparison) and all national teams used the same questionnaire translated into their own language. In Romania, there were 341 respondents from 80 media organizations (radio, TV, print and online), interviews being conducted between February 2014 and October 2015. The standard questionnaire was translated from English into Romanian, and had 150 questions. Interviewing methods were mixed: by phone, face to face, by email, and by online questionnaire. There was also a field manual with instructions on the most important aspects of the study. SPSS programme was used for analysis. The World of Journalism Center in Munich coordinated the data processing and verified them for errors, inconsistencies or frauds.

Who are the Romanian journalists?

The economic crisis has greatly affected the newsrooms in Romania. The number of journalists has decreased in recent years. Indeed, there are journalists who have migrated to other newsrooms, but also many who have left the field completely. However, it is important to know who the Romanian journalists are at this very moment in order to be able to create or adapt the policies in the field. According to the results of the *World of Journalism* study, more women than men work in Romanian newsrooms (62.5% of the journalists are women and 37.5% are men). Romanian journalists are very young, most of them are between 25 and 34 years old (36.7%), and 33.4% are only between 18 and 24 years old. 14.7% are between the ages of 35 and 40 and 10.9% are between 41 and 50. In terms of their eduction, almost half of the journalists have a university degree, and a quarter have also a masters degree. The current generation of Romanian journalists is (or should be) more educated and much better prepared in the field of journalism because 80% of those with higher education have a journalism diploma or one in the fields of communication sciences.

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However, the Romanian journalists have little professional experience. Their average experience is 5 years, and the number is one of the lowest in the study and well below the average of the European Union countries. In Germany and Croatia, for example, journalists have an average of 20 years of professional experience, in the Netherlands and the UK they have an average of 18 years, in Austria 17 years, and in Italy 15 years.

Professional roles

Objectivity is one of the key concepts of the identity of journalists around the world, a real "milestone of the professional ideology of journalists in liberal democracies" (Lichtenberg, 1996, p. 225 in Bailey, et al, 2008). Even if media objectivity has been put to a heavy test lately (Donald Trump`s campaign and also the Brexit campaign are strong evidence to that effect), Romanian journalists believe that their most important role is precisely objectivity. 95% of them think they have to report things as they are, and 85.6% state they have to be detached observers of reality.

It is obvious that things have changed over the past few years because a few years ago, in 2009, in a research on self-regulation of the Romanian press run by the Independent Journalism Center, Active Watch and IMAS (http://www.cji.ro/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/Autoreglementarea-presei-in-Romania.pdf), 83% of the journalists declared that their most important value as professionals is fairness, followed by equidistance (69%) and public interest (68%).

The five main values and concepts that characterize the professional culture of journalists (Deuze, 2005, p. 447) can be also found in the results of the *World of Journalism* study:

• *Public service* - it refers especially to the watch dog function that journalists often assume. They are guardians of democracy and their role is to watch out for any governmental wrong doings.

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• *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 shoud 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

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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

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press guarantees the pluralism of opinions and the objectivity that Romanian journalists consider so important.

As journalism continues to face the challenges of the digital age, the rules and resources of the news media structure remain open and negotiable. It is within the permeability of this profession that the agency inherent in journalistic autonomy can assume its influence in the duality of structure. The level of autonomy enjoyed by journalists is therefore a fluid and moving concept – continuously adjusted according to what is needed to perform the task of reporting the news. (Sjøvaag, 2013, p. 164)

Autonomy can be restricted at two levels, one external and one internal (Reich and Hanitzsch, 2013). The internal level refers to the freedom of a journalist to do his job without being put under pressure by his managers or commercial factors, while the external level takes into account elements such as government censorship, legislation or professional regulations. But, in the end,

as journalism is practiced within the boundaries of the institution, professional autonomy is negotiated within an institutional context [...] and journalistic autonomy is conceptualized as both a positive and a negative right - it is based on the freedom to speak and publish, and freedom from interference in that activity (cf Carpentier, 2005). (Sjøvaag, 2013, p. 156)

As far as Romanian journalists are concerned, there is a certain degree of autonomy, but the problem is that it often we are talking about the individual autonomy of journalists and not the autonomy of the entire professional class (Petre, 2013).

Regarding autonomy in the selection of topics, the *World of Journalism* study shows that Romanian journalists feel that they have a great freedom to choose the topics they publish. Almost 79% of journalists say they have complete freedom and a large freedom to choose the topics. Actually, 35% of them say they have complete freedom, 15.7% state they have some freedom, 3.6% say they have little freedom to choose the topics, and finally, 1.8% claim they have no

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freedom to choose the topics. Percentages are comparable to those in Western countries (with solid press and long standing democracies). For example, in Switzerland, 77.9% of journalists said they had complete freedom and a large freedom to choose subjects, 78.7% of the Austrian journalists feel the same and 72.8% in the UK.

The study also reveals that Romanian journalists turn out to be somehow paradoxical about the ethical standards of the profession. Although most of them have said that journalists should adhere to ethical codes, in any situation or context, 22.6% of journalists believe it is acceptable to set aside moral standards if extraordinary circumstances require this. However, should there be an extremely important article, only 3.8% of journalists would publish it without verifying the information, 4.7% would accept money from sources and 4.5% would consider it justified to modify or invent a quote.

Influences on journalists and on freedom of expression

Following the pilot study of the *World of Journalism* research conducted on 1,700 journalists from 17 countries during 2007 and 2011, Hanitzsch et. al (2010) structure the sources of influence, as perceived by journalists, in six main conceptually and empirically distinct areas. These are political, economic, professional, procedural, organizational influences as well as reference groups.

- *Political influences* refer to all sources that come from or relate to the political environment. But, surprisingly, in this category (and not in the one of economic influences), there are businessmen along with politicians or government officials.

Representing, advocating, and imposing the interests of business and trade are political acts with political implications. The implications may only indirectly, if at all, affect the news organization for which the journalist works. In the view of the journalists, the influence of business people therefore refers to

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the general interests of business and trade that are commonly negociated in the realm of the political. (Hanitzsch et. al 2010, 15)

- *Economic influences* refer to the factors that have consequences on media organizations in which journalists work. These are external influences, which are not always directly related to editorial work, but which ultimately reflects on them, too. The fact that an editorial office has to survive, the fact that the production of quality news is costly or the fact that media owners expect profit from the organizations will all become economic influences on the journalists.
- *Organizational influences* take into account the internal mechanisms that supervises the management procedures and the routines of news-rooms and media organizations. "The organizational domain includes sources of influence that stem from multiple levels: from within the newsroom (supervivors and higher editors) and from within the media organization (managemtn and ownership)" (Hanitzsch et al, 2010, p. 15).
- *Procedural influences* represent the various operational constraints that journalists face in their work. These constraints vary from standards and procedures imposed in editorial offices to the time and space milits or problems in accessing sources.
- *Professional influences* refer especially to laws, policies and conventions of the profession or the editorial offices.

These constraints largely materialize in the form of limited resources in terms of time and space, represented by the items "pressing news deadlines" and "shortage of resources". Another important aspect of procedural influences is the fact that news production is a highly standardized and routinized process, and journalists have to cope with these procedures and standards as they impose important limits on routine news work" (Hanitzsch et al, 2010, pp. 15 – 16).

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- *Reference groups* represent the influences from the audience, influences from some professional categories (such as colleagues from other newsrooms or competing media organizations), and finally, the influences that journalists have on their friends, family or acquaintances.

The professional activity of the Romanian journalists, as well as the editorial production in the newsrooms, are influenced by a wide range of elements, as shown by the country's report from the *Worlds of Journalism* study entitled *Journalists in Romania*. The most important influences are the procedural ones. 82.2% of journalists answered that they were influenced by the limitations in accessing the information. 81.4% stated that they were influenced by journalistic ethics, but this may also be due to the fact that journalists deviating from the professional norms started to be sanctioned by the courts (based on the new Code Civil), and the number of processes in this case continues to grow (www.activewatch.ro/Assets/Upload/files/FreeEx/rapoarte/Raport%20FreeEx%202015-2016.pdf).

Interestingly enough, personal values and beliefs have a huge influence. 71.2% of journalists chose this response, a much higher percentage than Western European journalists (51.3% in Italy, 42.6% in the Netherlands, 40.1% in Belgium, 50.2% in Switzerland or 49.8% in Denmark). However, the percentage is similar to that in the former communist countries who are also strongly influenced by personal values and beliefs in their editorial activity: 72.6% in Estonia, 73.8% in the Czech Republic, 77.4% in Hungary, or 71.8% in Latvia.

The *World of Journalism* study proves not only that the field is extremely dynamic (which is already known), but also the fact that the professional culture of journalists is continuously changing at a rapid pace. Just a few years ago when the pilot study was conducted (between 2007 and 2011), the work of Romanian journalists was not mostly influenced by access to information, ethics or personal values, but especially by the deadlines and news sources. During that period of time procedural influences were more important (but others than at this moment),

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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).

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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 droped 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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Indeed, the economic crisis in the recent years has left the press extremely vulnerable to attacks from the political environment, and so many journalists have been fired or forced to resign.

Moreover, one of the sad truths of Romanian journalism is that the survival of the commercial media channels is not necessarily positively correlated with the journalistic quality of the professional body, but with the direct input of the owner-donor or the demands of the audience. The former instrumentalize the media channels for power purposes, the former are fervent consumers of entertainment (Petre, 2013, p. 11).

The *Report on Freedom of Expression in Romanian Legislation* also draws attention to the fact that media properties often concured with the political map and the press was used to gain or consolidate certain influences.

The influence of politics was reflected in the editorial content to the point where, in electoral situations or punctual political competitions, media ceased to be the neutral observers of the phenomenon. Initially, they turned into instruments of political competition, ultimately becoming active actors and setting aside the necessary fairness and equidistance (Center for Independent Journalism, 2016, p. 4).

Journalists in Romania have still been the target of verbal attacks, intimidation and even physical aggression, which explains the high percentage of those who have claimed in the *World of Journalism* research that censorship represents an important influence. 22.6% of the Romanian journalists declared that censorship is influencing the way they work in their newsroom, the percentage being even ten times higher compared to countries like Denmark (1.2%), Switzerland (2%), Finland (2.5%) or Germany (2.8%). The percentage is considerably higher even compared to some of the other former communist countries: 2.4% in Latvia, 6% in Estonia or 14% in the Czech Republic.

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Future research

It is important that more research regarding journalists' professional culture to be done, both nationally and internationally, because the results of such studies as *World of Journalism* help us better understand the media phenomenon around the world. Greater attention should be given to the factors that influence the work of journalists and the establishment of differences between their sometimes subjective perceptions and the realities of the professional environment.

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