

Rationalizing the Gap: How Journalists in a Nondemocratic Regime Make Sense of Their Professional Work

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This article investigates how news professionals in a nondemocratic regime rationalize their institutional roles and daily reporting practices, negotiate boundaries of their work, and make sense of their professional activities. This study used qualitative interviewing to explore personal experiences, perceived practices, and opinions of Belarusian journalists and media experts. When addressing the gap between their understanding of normative roles and describing their actual practices, journalists provided such rationalizations as personal beliefs and motivations, risks, internal conflict, and professional deformation, as well as attempts to find middle ground. News practitioners in autocratic regimes often expand boundaries of press freedom with civic courage by reporting critically of government policies and taking risks when public interests are at stake. In addition, the study highlights that certain restrictions lead to a more disciplined professional culture of journalists as thorough fact-checking is necessary to avoid penalties enforced by government offices.

Keywords: democracy, journalistic practices, journalistic roles, nondemocratic regimes, normative roles

We went to several workshops for journalists, and during one trip to Paris we met with some European officials. There was one official, I do not remember his name. . . . When he entered the room, he said something like, "Hello everyone! I cannot greet you as journalists because there is no journalism in a dictatorship." So, he said we are not journalists. And this happens everywhere in foreign countries where we go. They have no idea how Belarusian journalists work. I hope with time they will understand that this is not just black and white. (Belarusian journalist, personal interview, July 2017)

Until a few recent decades, institutional roles of journalists have been studied mostly in democratic nations, with roles of journalism and journalists in the society described by scholars from either a normative perspective or by presenting surveys on how journalists perceive their roles (Curran, 2005; Schudson, 2008; Weaver & Wilhoit, 1996, among others).

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Date submitted: 2019-05-01

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Recent analyses have allowed scholars to introduce conceptual models of ways journalism works in different sociopolitical systems and comparative empirical surveys have provided an understanding of the range of roles journalists perceive to be important in different countries (Hallin & Mancini, 2012; Hanitzsch, 2011; Hanitzsch & Mellado, 2011; van Dalen, de Vreese, & Albak, 2012; Weaver & Willnat, 2012; and more recently, Hanitzsch, Hanusch, Ramaprasad, & de Beer, 2019b, as well as Mellado, Hellmueller, & Donsbach, 2016). However, the impact of sociopolitical structures on journalism and journalistic roles in nondemocratic countries is still not fully understood. Arguments continue around such questions as the usefulness of the concept of democracy in defining journalism in non-Western contexts or the applicability of existing normative classifications of journalistic roles in autocratic regimes (Josephi, 2013; Nerone, 2013; Zelizer, 2013). Despite academic globalization of communication studies, the field continues to provide “only a keyhole view globally” (Waisbord, 2019, p. 119).

Most recently, this idea was underlined by Hanitzsch, Hanusch, Ramaprasad, and de Beer (2019a), who argue in the introduction to the book *Worlds of Journalism: Journalistic Cultures Around the Globe* that “the Western dominance and researchers’ uneven coverage of world regions have had notable consequences for our understanding of journalism” (p. 6). In an attempt to continue improving our understanding of conceptual and methodological frameworks in studying journalistic cultures, the book represents findings of the survey of thousands of journalists from 67 countries within the *Worlds of Journalism Study*, the largest comparative research project in the field of journalism studies that unites scholars from around the world and regularly reports on the state of journalism globally.

This study is a part of a larger project that investigates how journalists in nondemocratic regimes, first, conceptualize normative journalistic roles and, second, describe their institutional roles and daily reporting practices in a nonfree media environment that is characterized by a high level of state involvement. The purpose of this particular study is to provide a better understanding of how journalists rationalize their roles and practices, or how they explain the gap between normative expectations and perceived and described journalistic practices (or, in other words, between what they think they should do as journalists and what they describe as being able to do in their daily work). Hanitzsch and Vos (2017) describe these analytically distinct levels as normative/cognitive role orientations and practiced/narrated role performance.

I used in-depth interviews with Belarusian journalists and media experts to offer a fine-grained account of the ways news professionals negotiate boundaries of their work and provide journalistic service within the limits imposed on their autonomy. The ultimate goal of this study and the entire project described above is to further explore and expose the complexity of processes within mass media systems in nondemocratic regimes.

The Belarusian mass media system represents a uniquely valuable case for exploration. The authoritarian regime consolidated after a brief period of democratization in the 1990s. The central government reestablished control over local governments and the economy, increasing coercive capacity with a powerful internal security apparatus and concentrating energy and property in state hands (Levitsky & Way, 2010). The sociopolitical context in Belarus is characterized by lack of plurality and a weak civil society and private sector (Miazhevich, 2007). Today, the state has a monopoly on printing, subscription, distribution, and broadcasting services, and owns sociopolitical print outlets with the largest circulations as

well as TV and radio stations with the largest share of audience (Klaskouski, 2011). However, it is important to note that independent news organizations dominate in the online realm and in the last few years have been experiencing a relative increase in readership and popularity.

Relatively big commercial media markets developed in Belarus only in the early to mid-1990s, when on the wave of pluralism and "instant democracy" there appeared many new news outlets. Journalists and other news professionals traveled abroad to participate in workshops and trainings and implemented newly obtained knowledge and skills by establishing news media that did not exist before, such as quality business newspapers. At the same time, as in other postcommunist countries, a relatively high degree of institutional continuity was observed in public spheres in Belarus, including the system of journalism education and the media, which means that some of the Soviet-era practices continued to be applied with certain modifications (Miazhevich, 2007). Because of the consolidation of the authoritarian regime and, as in many other countries, the inability of many news organizations to survive in the competition for advertising, the media market continued to experience transformations in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Today, the largest news media in Belarus are either represented by big Russian companies that produce mostly entertainment or infotainment or by state-owned Belarusian news media (Klaskouski, 2011).

Since the 1990s, mass media in the country have been characterized by the coexistence of two major forms of mass media: (1) state-run media, which constitute the majority of sociopolitical print outlets, TV, and radio stations; and (2) independent, or private, news media. The news content in state-run media is almost exclusively favorable to government offices and the status quo in general, whereas private media allow varying levels of government criticism and face both market pressures and certain levels of restrictions and control enforced by the state (Jarolimek, 2009; Miazhevich, 2007).

The government has adopted policies, such as legal and economic pressure, politicized registration, and licensing of mass media outlets, to limit activities of the nonstate press. There are also such controlling measures as a system of warnings and suspensions, administrative prosecution of journalists, and restrictive use of the system of accreditation for foreign reporters (Belarusian Association of Journalists, 2017). New laws have been enforced in the recent years to regulate Internet news media as well.

The role of the state and the degree of intervention in mass media regulation are dominant in both economic and political aspects. State-run news organizations receive subsidies in many forms, including allocation of advertising, and have moderate to minimal profit motivations, and government offices have direct editorial impact on news content (Belarusian Association of Journalists, 2017).

Theoretically, this study is informed by the literature on the concept of democracy in its relation to journalism as well as by studies of the roles news media play in autocratic regimes.

Literature Review

News Media and Democracy

When discussing the utility of the concept of democracy in studies of mass communication and journalism, scholars disagree on the extent to which the concept might be helpful in understanding journalistic practices in different parts of the world. Zelizer (2013) calls for a "retirement" of the concept, arguing that the lens of democracy imposes a pro-Western view and limits the range of what could be understood about journalism in other environments (p. 459). She argues that there are certain theoretical and practical shortcomings of using democracy as a central concept for understanding journalism because "in nearly every region of the world, journalism regularly operated, and continues to do so, in conditions in which modernity is tied to repression and a respect for order, consensus and authority rather than freedom of expression" (pp. 466–467).

The inappropriate application of Western standards and a hegemonic normative model of journalism is also criticized by Nerone (2013) and supported by the argument for broadening a comparative perspective of media studies in *De-Westernizing Media Studies* by James Curran and Myung-Jin Park (2000). In most cases, imposing the pro-Western framework to the understanding of journalistic practices in non-Western contexts implies an inevitable transformation of all political regimes from nondemocratic to democratic, which, as time and studies have illustrated, is not the case for many countries where a "transition" phase became a permanent state. Political scientists have argued, therefore, that this transition paradigm should be discarded (Carothers, 2002).

Continuing the discussion of the concept of democracy, Josephi (2013) argues that democracy is not a precondition for journalism and that journalists in nondemocratic and semidemocratic regimes have to balance and negotiate their relative autonomy from power and provide service that reflects their orientations and role conceptions while using good news judgment and reporting accurate information. To grasp differences between journalism cultures, Josephi argues, one must look at specific journalistic practices. This current study offers this particular in-depth exploration.

Gap Between Normative Orientations and Perceived Journalistic Practices

Approaches to journalistic orientations include analysis of mass media systems depending on political and economic environments, studies of particular standards of news coverage, limitations and boundaries to political communication, and studies of different types of journalistic services (Blumler & Cushion, 2014).

This project studies the gap between journalists' normative orientations and their perceived or recollected journalistic practices in an attempt to understand the link between the two, which is one of the important questions scholars of journalism need to pursue (Hanitzsch & Vos, 2017; Loffelholz & Weaver, 2008). The importance of exploring this gap is among others highlighted by Hanitzsch and Mellado (2011), who looked at journalists' perceptions of influences on their work and argue that it is important to explain how those perceptions become "real" in journalistic practices.

Van Dalen and colleagues (2012) found that the differences in role conceptions of political journalists in Germany, Denmark, the United Kingdom, and Spain are reflected in the reporting style of political news and that journalistic orientations vary more between than within countries. Similarly, Tandoc, Hellmueller, and Vos (2013) looked at the relationship between role conception and role enactment by comparing the role conceptions of surveyed journalists with a content analysis of news stories written by those journalists. They found that the path from role conception to role enactment is not linear and that routine influences, such as the effects of news deadlines, supervisors, and colleagues, are stronger predictors of role enactment.

This study explored how journalists in nondemocratic regimes, who often face difficulties in fulfilling their roles, explain this gap between normative orientations and practices they describe and how they make sense of their job on a daily basis.

Mass Media and Authoritarian Regimes

In studies of mass media in autocratic regimes, the use of news media has been often described as a tactic of rule that authoritarian rulers employ for their benefit and for extending the regimes' durability, mostly by preventing the appearance of alternative power centers and marginalizing potential mobilization (Walker & Orttung, 2014). The menu of media manipulation in authoritarian regimes described in the literature includes restrictions on means of communication, such as restrictions on private ownership in the form of state monopolies on print or electronic mass media; postproduction restrictions on media content, such as censorship, withdrawal of licenses, beatings and assassinations of journalists, harassment by tax agencies, or other forms of pressure that lead to journalists self-censoring their work; and restrictions on media consumption, when the products created outside the bound of authoritarian control are prohibited for dissemination (Schedler, 2013).

China under the communist regime has received probably the most attention of scholars who have looked at different aspects of mass media in nondemocratic regimes. According to content analysis of 110 mainstream newspapers in China by Qin, Stromberg, and Wu (2014), the Chinese Communist Party differentiated media products for their political-economic goals by using more strictly controlled newspapers to implement political and ideological political goals, while using less controlled newspapers for economic goals.

Elimination of collective action potential is another important goal of autocratic regimes regarding news media. In a large-scale, multiple-source analysis of censoring online posts in Chinese social media, King, Pan, and Roberts (2013) found that the main purpose of the censorship program was not to block criticism of the government or its policies, but "to reduce the probability of collective action by clipping social ties whenever any collective movements are in evidence or expected" (p. 326).

One important role of state-run mass media in autocracies is to discredit and marginalize alternative political movements and actors (Walker & Orttung, 2014). In this regard, censorship and self-censorship serve as a filter that allows only "approved" facts and actors to appear in the news media. State-run media in autocracies also are often used to eliminate criticism of the regimes and legitimize incumbents by exclusively favorable coverage of regimes and policies and depictions of success and harmony in a given

country (Prekevicius, 2005). In such countries as Azerbaijan, Belarus, Cambodia, Vietnam, Ethiopia, Iran, and Mozambique, regimes use mass media for the ideological purpose of shaping political discourse by using a mix of consumerism, anti-Western and antirevolutionary rhetoric, and nationalism (Miazhevich, 2007; Prekevicius, 2005; Walker & Orttung, 2014).

In terms of news coverage, the coexistence of state-run mass media with independent (or private, i.e., not subsidized by the government) news media can lead to a major ideological "gap" between the two and the ways they select and represent facts about the same events or actors. The discourse analysis of the coverage of mass protests organized with the help of social media in Belarus in 2011, the Revolution Through Social Networks, showed that state-run and independent Belarusian media constructed two distinct realities of the event (Karaliova, 2013). State-run media favored a progovernment perspective, never quoted protesters, and represented them as a detached and dangerous group, whereas independent media presented more diverse voices and criticized violent suppression by the police.

The literature on mass media in nondemocratic regimes confirms that there is no single explanation of how media operate in such environments, nor is there a single framework that would explain the variety of ways autocratic regimes intervene in the operation of news organizations. Therefore, the actual professional roles and perceived practices in this study were explored by posing questions and gathering detailed accounts that provide an understanding of specific practices in a particular sociopolitical system and, specifically, of how journalists from a nondemocratic regime rationalize their daily perceived practices within the boundaries of constraints on their professional activity.

Method

Data for this study were collected using semistructured interviews with Belarusian journalists. In addition to interviews with journalists, or "a sample of representatives," the sample also included "knowledgeable informants" (Weiss, 1994, p. 17), or experts, to acquire various perspectives and explore alternative explanations (Alvesson, 2011). Interviews with experts served both as a source of data and as a resource to improve validity of the data obtained during interviews with reporters. Experts provided comprehensive explanations and views on journalistic practices as well as current background information on the mass media system in Belarus and allowed for the exploration of a broader spectrum of concepts.

Interviews were done both face-to-face and via Skype depending on participants' preferences regarding the communication method or their availability during fieldwork in Belarus. Snowball sampling was used to recruit participants for the project. This was an effective way of sampling for two reasons. First, my past professional background of working as a journalist in independent and state-run news media in Belarus granted me access to former colleagues and acquaintances who agreed to be interviewed and recommended some of their colleagues and friends. Second, because there was a certain level of risk both for myself as researcher and participants involved in this project, discretion and caution were used when contacting journalists and setting up interviews.

The participants for this study were news reporters and editors who work for daily mainstream newspapers and online news media in Minsk. These people are referred to as "journalists," or people who

are employed at news organizations full time and participate in editorial work, mainly by reporting, writing, and editing. The panel of knowledgeable informants, or experts, included media critics, journalism professors, and media law experts from Belarus. In total, 26 participants (19 journalists and seven experts) were interviewed. Two of the media experts were also journalists and editors. To have a balanced sample of journalists from state-run and independent news media, I interviewed 10 respondents from state-run news outlets and nine journalists from independent ones. The sample included 13 female respondents and 13 male respondents 24 to 66 years of age. Participants represented a variety of beats they cover within their news media, as well different levels of experience and a variety of positions in their corresponding news media in terms of seniority. In this article, the names of news organizations are not reported to minimize any potential risks for respondents. The overall number of news organizations represented in this study was 12. The interviews took from about one hour to one hour and a half each.

Interviews were transcribed in detail to analyze how speakers construct data both in terms of themes and structure. The interviews were then analyzed using the constant comparative method of analysis (Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Findings

This section discusses how journalists explain their choices and orientations and how they justify and make sense of their professional work, as well as how they assess dynamics of media environment in the country.

Seven categories emerged from the interviews and are used here to sort the types of rationalizations: personal reasoning (e.g., personal beliefs, motivations, benefits, risks, and internal conflict and professional deformation); assigning responsibility to outside forces (e.g., audience's interests and expectations, sources, editors/managers, and specifics of Belarusian media environment); normalization (e.g., denial, distancing, and comparison with other countries); compromise, or how journalists negotiate boundaries of their autonomy by seeking middle ground between their normative, or ideal, roles and their described practices; routinization, or the ways daily routines help to regularly come up with safe ideas and sources for news stories in a nonfree environment; professionalism and journalistic norms, or how journalists rationalize their practices using the argument of professional norms; and critical assessment, or how journalists make sense of their work by evaluating dynamics of press freedom, the journalistic community, the credibility and image of journalism in the society, and suggested changes. Types of rationalization are illustrated in Figure 1.

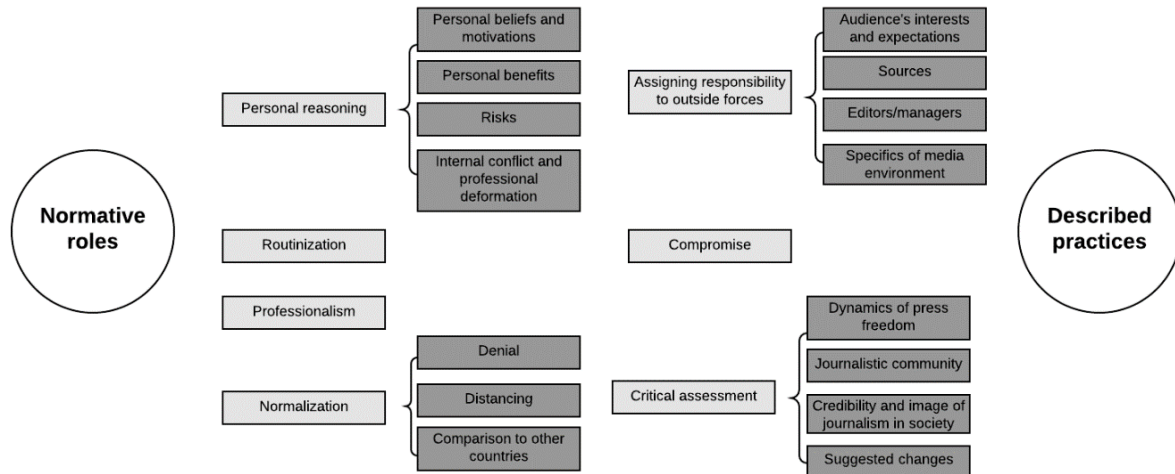


Figure 1. Types of rationalizations journalists use to explain the gap between their understanding of normative roles and perceived daily practices.

Personal Reasoning

Personal reasons, such as personal beliefs and motivations, benefits, risks, and internal conflict and professional deformation, are often used to explain why journalists make choices regarding specific practices or commitments to specific types of news organizations.

Personal Beliefs, Motivations, and Benefits

Some journalists described how their views align with the editorial policies of their news organizations and are eager to support such views and practices. Here is an example of an exchange with a journalist from a state-run newspaper who said that editorial restrictions do not apply to her simply because she personally is not interested in covering “undesirable” topics:

Q: How autonomous are you in choosing a topic to cover?

A: I am absolutely autonomous in covering any topic that I like. Personally, I am not interested in the topics that are undesirable for publication. Usually these are topics related to the opposition or some destructive public organizations that are usually unregistered. Frankly, I am not interested in those.

Another type of personal motivation, namely economic incentives, was mentioned in the conversations about journalists’ choices of news media. A media expert said that often young journalists who start working for

certain news media later have to switch to jobs that offer better pay and “are not choosing what to cover or not; they are just looking for their niche.”

Personal benefits in the form of connections are valued assets in a society with higher levels of corruption, and here is how one respondent working for a state-run news organization described connections a journalist from a state-run news organization might have as another incentive:

For example, we cannot secure a place for our child at a good school. But with the help of some authorities, I can do that. If you are a regular citizen and you have a problem, you are helpless, but if you are a journalist from a newspaper that belongs to a city administration or a regional administration, then you can solve your problems. We all understand that this is very bad; this is probably called conformism.

In this explanation, while rationalizing the choice to work for a state-run newspaper, a journalist acknowledged the experienced ethical dilemma.

Risks

On many occasions, risks were named as the rationale for professional choices of journalists. One journalist highlighted her uncertainty in social and economic security and protection of her family by an employer if she worked for an independent news organization, including risks associated with the coverage of “dangerous” topics. The idea of state-run media being more safe and stable places of work was supported by a media expert who said, “As a human being, I understand why many people choose state-run media. This is a safe haven where everything is stable and predictable.”

To the contrary, a respondent from an independent news organization said that she and her colleagues are willing to take risks, and even for investigative news stories or news stories about the president’s family, they put their real names in bylines because “if something happens to us, then we’ll know why.” She also added, “This might sound scary, but at least it will not be in vain. If this is some important information, we will publish it anyway.”

Other respondents, however, are not too pessimistic about the risks journalists face at their work and described them as somewhat limited. One journalist from an independent newsroom said,

Control of power holders is the main difference between careful private media from not careful ones. But I think we should not be afraid. There are examples when journalists are criticizing officials for years and nothing happens to those journalists.

This idea was also highlighted by a media expert who said that there is an abundance of critical news stories in some news media, but in others, journalists may stay away from risky coverage.

Internal Conflict and Professional Deformation

More than half of respondents who work or used to work at state-run news media shared that they experience an internal moral conflict or dissonance when their views and beliefs conflict with editorial policies of their news organizations and how such practices often lead to professional deformations, including self-censorship. One journalist described that she felt offended when her newspaper did not cover some important issues and events that were undesirable for the government. She added that this "moral violence" and discomfort led to a feeling of anger:

If you have certain principles and if the main position of the news organization is different from yours, . . . it is better not to work [for that news media] at all. . . . I always felt discomfort, constant outrage, and unwillingness to go to work because of that.

That journalist said that some of her colleagues who worked for state-run media in the past told her they experienced the feeling of dissonance and "internal protest" as well.

Other journalists described disagreement and confusion with some specific practices, including numerous "mouthpiece-role" assignments that lack newsworthiness, which lead to a persistent feeling of dissatisfaction with their job. One journalist said that she often gets so nervous over such problems that she has to carry stress medication with her all of the time.

Two journalists from state-run newspapers also described how they sometimes decline to work on openly propagandistic assignments that contradict their views and that sometimes editors have to reassign those to other reporters. However, one journalist acknowledged that such practices do not eliminate the feeling of dissonance:

A: If something contradicts my views, I will just say, "I'll not go there." They sent me to cover a couple of such things, and I wrote about it in a way that I thought was appropriate. They stopped assigning such topics to me because [it was too much work] to rewrite my stories and then publish them.

Q: Did they start to send another reporter?

A: Of course. This might be idealistic, but I believe that every journalist can have his impact. . .

Q: But you still work for a news organization that publishes these news stories, right? . . . So, if these stories don't have your name in a byline, you are fine with that?

A: No, not really. . . .

The examples above demonstrate that respondents use personal beliefs, benefits, and motivations to explain their commitments to certain types of news organizations.

Assigning Responsibility to Outside Forces

Journalists often explained how outside actors and forces, namely audiences, sources, editors/managers, and specifics of the Belarusian media environment, impact their daily practices.

Audience's Interests and Expectations

Respondents shared their understanding of the interests and expectations their audience has and discussed what they would change in content produced by news organizations from the readers' point of view.

Some journalists from state-run news outlets said that their audience would expect and value more news stories that cover people's daily problems and help them understand complex issues that impact their daily lives and that people are not necessarily interested in news on politics or any watchdog-type news coverage. As one journalist put it, "One should not think that the entire Belarusian public only waits for some critical [of the government] news stories. People live their regular lives and they want to know what is going on around them."

However, this is not the only way audience interests impact perceived news practices. One journalist from an independent news outlet shared an example about how it had to change its editorial policy and abandon its principles under the pressure of readers' interests. He said that several years ago, the news outlet decided to limit coverage of the incumbent president because "he had too many platforms for being public." But later it changed its position because of the market's pressure and, although it carefully chooses to publish only the most important news stories about the president, usually those news stories are the most popular ones on their website.

Sources

Sources, or problems with access to information, were mentioned as another factor that impacts daily choices and practices to different degrees. This was discussed exclusively by journalists working for independent news organizations who shared their frustration about such issues as officials declining to comment or issue accreditations to cover government proceedings and events. Participants also discussed possible solutions, such as attempts to diversify sources and find people beyond officials to interview. For example, one journalist from an independent news organization explained what she does if some official declines to provide information: "Our website has a good readership, and there will be someone else other than this official who will agree to provide a comment for our story."

News reporters said that even when they know their requests will most probably be declined, they still make attempts to contact the source. In the end, almost all journalists working for independent news media described that they often have to work hard toward establishing good relationships with official sources or seek alternative ways of finding or verifying information.

Editors/Managers

In many cases, responsibility for certain choices in daily practices is assigned to editors/managers. A few respondents said that often they must ask for their editor's approval before covering an issue or interviewing a person.

Two journalists from state-run news outlets recognized that editors and managers sometimes have limited power in choosing the newspaper's direction because it is often established "from above" by a government office:

Q: Imagine that you are an editor of your newspaper for one day. What would you change?

A: This is a complex question because our direction is imposed from above. It does not depend on our manager or editor-in-chief.

A professor of journalism said that this question of editors/managers' influence on journalistic practices is especially significant for local news media where the impact of local city administration could be very prominent. There, he said, "the relationship between them [editor and the controlling city administration] and understanding of the role of journalism is especially important" because very often, editors of state-run local newspapers are not journalists but appointed former government officials, which means the watchdog function of a news outlet is often very limited or nonexistent.

Specifics of the Belarusian Media Environment

Finally, to justify the status quo in the mass media system in Belarus and to explain why state-run media are needed, respondents from state-run news media explained how specifics of the mass media environment validate the existing situation. For example, one journalist said that independent news media are very biased and unable to communicate the government stance adequately and that this is one of the specifics of the Belarusian media environment.

A professor of journalism said that one should also think about the Belarusian media market as not as developed as markets in Western European countries. In turn, journalists from independent news organizations explained that specifics of the political regime, rather than market, impact the media environment and their work, including influences such as censorship, retaliation from authorities, restricted access to information, and economic discrimination of independent news outlets.

Normalization

In the discussions of how journalists overcome restraints on their professional activities, normalization is used as another discursive strategy. By making the situation appear normal or acceptable (while acknowledging the problem or denying it), journalists normalize the status quo by denying any restrictions on their autonomy, distancing themselves from news media or beats that are more susceptible to restrictions, or comparing the experiences of Belarusian journalists with those of their colleagues in other countries.

Here is a response of a journalist from a state-run newspaper who stated that it is acceptable to take a news story to another outlet and use a pseudonym if the story is politically risky or undesirable and will not make it through the editors' revisions: "There are other news outlets where you can publish your piece under a pseudonym. There is nothing wrong with that. And as [a journalist from] a state-run news media you have more resources and you can use them."

A respondent with a higher editorial position at a prominent state-run newspaper was especially outspoken in explaining why the existing matter of facts is normal. He argued that there are no restrictions on journalists' autonomy he is aware of and that these are claims made by journalists who lack professional qualities or are unwilling to seek information and work hard. He further discussed that journalists and news outlets can stay out of politics and criticism of the government and still be successful by covering other types of news and that there are plenty of other outlets, including online and foreign ones where journalists can work if they feel their freedoms are limited.

Two journalists from independent news media, while acknowledging the problem of restrictions on journalistic autonomy, tried to distance themselves from such limits by saying that the situation is better in their news organization than in others or that they personally have never experienced such problems, but they think their colleagues who cover other issues and beats had.

Finally, by comparing experiences of journalists in Belarus with practices of their colleagues in other countries, two respondents from state-run news outlets normalized the situation by presenting it as similar. For example, one reporter said that she knows that problems with access to information are the same in Western European countries. Another news reporter instead compared the situation with access to information in Kazakhstan, where, he said, the regime is also "complicated from the point of view of access to officials."

Looking for Compromise and Alternative Ways

Journalists from both state-run news organizations and independent news organizations talked about compromise and ways to find middle ground and negotiate boundaries in their practices when they faced limitations of their editorial autonomy. For example, one journalist from a state-run newspaper said,

I suggest my topics to the editor and he understands that we can write about something or we cannot write about something. It is clear that we cannot bite the hand that gives us food. But again, we need to find some middle ground. We are not some bootlickers and we cannot always praise, praise, and praise.

Similarly, an editor from another state-run newspaper said that they try to keep at least some minimal balance and that their news organization is known for never openly using name-calling toward oppositional candidates and remaining "decent" toward different points of view.

A compromise, as explained by another journalist from a state-run newspaper, could be made not only in what topics a news organization chooses to cover, but also in how journalists work with government

officials as sources. He said that instead of writing an openly critical story, he chooses to work with the government office that is responsible for a particular problem and demonstrates what that office is doing to improve the situation.

One news reporter described writing between the lines as a way to approach personal disagreements with the editorial policy of a state-run news organization that avoids any criticism of a government office. He also said this is something that is gained with experience:

Sometimes I try to say something between the lines. So, I try to write in such a way that it does not look like an open criticism. Because I do not want to compromise our news organization. But [I write] in such a way that one can understand that the author does not agree with the issue they are writing about.

Finally, respondents from independent news organizations explained how they find alternative ways to overcome economic discrimination. For example, after being removed from the state-run system of distribution and subscription, some news outlets organized their own subscription and distribution services at editorial offices and mailed newspapers to their readers in envelopes.

Routinization

Similar to their colleagues around the world, Belarusian journalists have their established work routines. Planning and editorial meetings play an important role in helping journalists make sure their work complies with editorial policies of their news organizations. At some point, one journalist said, choosing an appropriate topic for coverage becomes a subconscious decision.

For state-run media, daily press releases and calls from government offices are an essential part of their work. Because news reporters are often assigned to cover specific geographic regions, they establish good relationships with the government officials from their regions/districts who are also often required to have news stories about their departments' activities appear in news outlets. Apart from government officials, journalists work with other sources who are "safe" for their news organizations.

Although journalists in other countries also have their established work routines and ways to find, report, and write news that they consider important, for Belarusian journalists, routinization of daily practices also helps them come up with safe ideas and sources for news stories on a regular basis and to overcome problems with access to information.

Professionalism and Journalistic Norms

Journalists turned to discussions of professionalism to explain how the media environment in Belarus impacts application of journalistic norms in news coverage.

Three journalists from independent news media and a media expert said that restrictions on journalistic autonomy in fact help improve the professionalism of news reporters. For example, because of

the system of warnings and suspensions, when any mistake can lead to a fine or suspension of a newspaper, journalists become more disciplined, get used to thoroughly checking every fact, and learn how to write about important issues without giving the Ministry of Information a formal cause to issue a penalty.

In addition to that, three journalists from independent news media said that restrictions on access to official information lead to news reporters being creative in seeking and verifying information. For example, one journalist said, "You know, we went through such a good school of reporting during these many years of work in these circumstances."

Critical Assessment

Journalists' ability to critically evaluate the dynamics of the media environment and press freedom in Belarus helps them make sense of their activities and be cognizant of changes that impact their work. By recognizing positive dynamics, journalists said that they are sometimes able to move closer to a normative understanding of their function.

Dynamics of Press Freedom

Some respondents spoke about a certain level of improvement in the press freedom environment in the country compared with several years ago. A media expert said that although the process appears to be under strict control, the situation for journalists has somewhat improved, even if only in certain areas. At the time the interview was conducted, he said that there were almost no recent cases of beatings or fines and warnings issued for journalists, with the exception of a few detentions of journalists who covered protests in early 2017.¹

Journalists from state-run news organizations are somewhat more optimistic about the liberalization climate compared with their colleagues in independent news outlets, who said that this wave of liberalization may be replaced with yet another wave of suppression. For example, one respondent said,

Nothing will change without the changes in the entire current [political] system. There are improvements of course. Indeed, they do not break into our homes, do not confiscate computers like it was seven years ago in entire Belarus. . . . Yes, we are not being blocked like in China or North Korea. The situation is better today, but tomorrow this could change. . . . We went through all these stages before.

¹ At the time when this article was being prepared for publication, the situation with press freedom in Belarus regressed again, and the Belarusian Association of Journalists reported that at least 43 reporters of dozens of media organizations had been arrested while covering the presidential election campaign (Belarusian Association of Journalists, 2020a). Dozens of journalists were beaten and detained by security forces in Belarus after the protests against rigged elections swept the country in August 2020 (Belarusian Association of Journalists, 2020b).

Reporters from state-run media highlighted some changes in how the recent presidential elections were covered in their news outlets. One respondent said that their news outlet, following a directive "from above," covered all presidential candidates and that was very unusual compared with previous elections when only the incumbent was covered.

A media expert confirmed that the election campaign at that time was unusual and that several state-run media covered all candidates. However, he stressed that the coverage was not proportionally balanced, and that it was "some kind of imitational democracy" because the candidates' positions on many issues were not clear and pluralism was "allowed" but "limited."

Journalistic Community

Dynamics and polarization in the journalistic community, between journalists of state-run and independent news outlets, were prominent themes for conversations with journalists and experts.

According to respondents, on a personal level, there are no significant conflicts or confrontations, and news workers from both types of organizations usually cooperate to help each other, for example, to find a relevant source or verify a quote from a press conference. As one journalist described, people understand that everyone makes their choice and stops blaming each other for that. However, on a general level, several respondents shared their grievances about a lack of understanding between the two communities of journalists. One reporter said, "Frankly, we do have this division. It is clear that we are different because we have different values, we work in different conditions, with different available resources." The existence of two unions of journalists, the Belarusian Union of Journalists and the Belarusian Association of Journalists, reinforces the existing division, especially during "politically intensive times," a media critic said.

Some respondents, however, did not agree that the distinction between the two communities is that important because there are good journalists in both. Also, quite often, journalists change their places of work and switch from one type of news media to another.

Credibility and the Image of Journalism in the Society

The two prominent themes were, first, lack of trust toward journalism and journalists and, second, officials viewing journalists as enemies and part of the opposition.

Because people see discrepancies between news coverage on state-run TV and what they see in real life, they distrust the news media overall, one journalist said. According to a media expert, during politically intensive times or economic crisis, levels of trust toward independent news media increase, but then, when things calm down, decrease again. Another important aspect of why journalism is not valued by the society, the expert added, is that the public sphere is depoliticized and most people do not see themselves as citizens and taxpayers and, therefore, are not interested in learning how the nation's budget is being spent.

Two journalists also said they want government officials to stop viewing them as enemies or "vultures" and that reporters also work to improve the well-being of the society.

Changes

Finally, when talking about changes in the mass media system, respondents showed their understanding of other models of journalism and suggested steps that they think might bring journalism in Belarus closer to their ideals.

Most journalists from independent news organizations believe there is no need for the Ministry of Information to oversee news organizations or retaliate against journalists and that the journalistic community can self-regulate. Liberalization of the Media Law, improvements in access to information, and more transparency of government institutions and offices are other changes that many respondents named as essential. A media expert said that demonopolization of mass media and changes in the system of state-run news organizations, especially television and radio, are crucial.

Fair competition for state resources and advertisers is another aspect mentioned by journalists from independent news organizations. Often, they spoke about elimination or replacement of state-run media with other types of news organizations (e.g., public ones). All of these suggestions, the respondents acknowledged, are impossible without changes in the political system and in the way people in Belarus view and value journalism and freedom of the press.

Discussion

This study looked at how journalists from a nondemocratic regime rationalize their perceived daily practices within the boundaries of constraints on their professional activity and how they explain their choices and orientations. The findings underscore a point that political regimes of the countries should not be equated with mass media systems and that democracy is not an essential preexisting condition for journalism.

As this study has shown, journalists develop ways to rationalize the gap between normative role conceptions and their perceived practices by such strategies as personal reasoning, assigning responsibility to outside forces, normalization, compromise, routinization, professionalism and journalistic norms, and critical assessment. This values–practice gap in nondemocratic regimes was especially significant in discourses of journalists from state-run news media. Notably, the large gap between normative ideals and the reality for many journalists from state-run news media could entail internal moral conflict and dissonance, which was noted in interviews by more than half of the respondents who work or used to work for state-run news media.

One of the most important points this study revealed about journalism in nonfree environments is that certain types of restrictions, such as the system of warnings and suspensions, while abhorrent, nevertheless lead to a more disciplined professional culture of journalists working for independent news media. Several respondents said they got used to thoroughly checking every fact given that any mistake could endanger their news organization and result in a warning. In addition, restrictions in access to official information lead to journalists relying more on alternative sources, other than government officials, and being inventive in seeking information, which helps diversify sources and voices presented in their stories.

In addition to the factors that impact the mass media systems and levels of press freedom described in the literature, such as the legal and economic environments, political regime, and specifics of national identity and national security cultures, this study suggests other important aspects, including, first, the impact of historical traditions in news outlets management, and second, depoliticized audiences. One of the traditions in news outlets management borrowed from Soviet times is appointment of local government officials as chief editors; in most cases, this means minimization of journalistic autonomy from government offices in local news outlets. It also significantly limits journalists' ability to fulfill their adversarial/monitorial functions. The factor of depoliticized audiences can also have a considerable impact on journalistic practices. In nondemocratic regimes, the governments often work toward depoliticization of the public and reducing the civic identities of the society members to a matter of owning a passport (O'Donnell & Schmitter, 1986). In such environments, it is often hard for journalists to appeal to a "monitorial citizen" stance and gain trust of their audiences.

As other studies have shown, some current autocratic regimes may tolerate the existence of commercial media that serve as a source of more diverse information (Egorov, Guriev, & Sonin, 2009; Qin et al., 2014). In the case of Belarus, the limited regime's resources force the power holders to imitate democracy to avoid sanctions imposed by the European states and tolerate independent news media at least to some extent. Very often, however, the relative improvements of press freedom conditions in an autocratic country are indicative of just another wave in the opportunistic cycle of the regime, as suggested by some respondents. Nevertheless, it is important to note that journalists show their ability to recognize and respond to even small positive changes in the media environment, which helps them "regain" their freedoms and establish higher levels of credibility, especially in times of political or economic crises.

State-run news media are still often used in Belarus, like in other nondemocracies (Walker & Orttung, 2014), to discredit and marginalize alternative political actors and legitimize incumbents by favorable news coverage. However, as this study shows, the existing view of state-run media as submissive and completely deprived of their agency to act independently is not quite correct. Journalists from state-run news media are often looking for alternative ways to provide the kind of reporting that they believe is helpful for their communities. To find "middle ground" between serving the interests of their news organization and helping their audiences, news reporters often have to cooperate with government officials to help find solutions for specific local issues. Importantly, journalists from state-run news outlets are willing to make a positive impact with their news stories, even if only on smaller issues, and bring their practices a little closer to the normative roles described as their ideal.

The conclusions presented above support the argument for a more inclusive interpretation of journalism. Getting back to the anecdote described by the journalist at the outset of this article, when a European official declined to recognize reporters from Belarusian news organizations as journalists because "there is no journalism in a dictatorship," this study shows how that official's criticism clearly misses the mark. As the results of this study demonstrate, a closer look at specific cases and circumstances is needed to understand how journalists in nondemocratic countries do their work in complex conditions.

This study, an attempt to understand the impact of sociopolitical structures on journalism in nondemocratic countries, contributes to broadening the focus of journalism studies beyond Western dominance to challenge the "keyhole view globally" perspective (Waisbord, 2019, p. 119). Uneven coverage

of world regions has led to some countries, such as Belarus, for different reasons being almost entirely absent from ongoing conversations about journalistic cultures. This study provides an opportunity to better understand journalism in this understudied nation to explore and expose the complexity of processes within mass media systems in nondemocratic regimes overall.

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doi:10.1177/1464884912464179