CONTROVERSIAL STATUS ROLES OF JOURNALISTS IN THE POST-TRANSFORMATIONAL MEDIA ERA

Hana Pravdová[*]

University of Ss. Cyril and Methodius, Faculty of Mass Media Communication, Nám. J. Herdu 2, 91701 Trnava, Slovak Republic

Abstract

The author primarily analyses the controversial status roles of journalists with secondary focus on conditions in media practice in Slovakia. The author defines and analyses key factors that to a large extent determine radical changes in journalistic work. In the author's opinion, these are also associated with changes in the standing and roles of journalists; specifically such changes include the formation of oligarchies in the media industry, the rationalisation of journalistic work, and the financial and ownership pressures created within the communication situation in the post-transformational era as examples. The concept of the application of media filters, as defined in the 1980s by Chomsky and Herman, is also applied. However, emphasis in this case is placed on the ownership, funding and sourcing filters. The author considers these filters to be the driving forces in conceiving the basis of argumentation for her considerations and conclusions. The author defines her premise in the introduction to the study, wherein the consequences of radical changes in media logic are most active in the post-transformational era. The result is the formation and expansion of the controversial statue roles of modern media professionals, i.e. journalists.

Keywords: journalism, post-transformational era, ownership, funding, selection

1. Introduction

Journalistic practices over the past ten years have tabled new phenomena that are now beginning to thematically resonate within research of media studies to a greater extent. The transformation of media logic and the consequences thereof, which are particularly evident in the first decades of the new millennium, remain the subject of attention from researchers. Hence, this period is named the post-transformational era. Altheide and Snow highlighted this major change in the behaviour of media and media logic at the beginning of the 1990s. According to them, the ground breaking moment was the period of the Persian Gulf War in particular and during which a radical transformation in the essence of journalistic practices was observed [1]. The communication situation and practices from this period very clearly demonstrated the influence of the

[*]E-mail: hp.kaplna@gmail.com

new communication situation. The application of unconventional approaches in journalistic practices is significant. Examples include failing to be dispassionate while ensuring a critical distance is maintained along with materiality and objectivity, and intentionally focusing media products on the target audience, the commodification of media production and so on.

The study focuses on the controversial status roles of journalists with focus on the conditions in Slovak media practices and the identification of the various factors that determine these roles. We define a framework of communication situations and formulate conclusions confirming the basic premise using analysis of controversial status roles. According to the premise, the post-transformational era confirmed and definitively established a radical change in media logic. Its consequences, according to our findings, are more than the simple transformation of journalistic processes in the creation of media content; rather these consequences include the creation and deepening of controversial status roles attributed to modern media professionals – journalists.

2. Framework of communication situations in the post-transformational era

There is no doubt that the traditional role of journalism and the communication atmosphere in the present day changed as a result of the continued strengthening of the process of media rationalisation and economisation. This is associated with the formation and strengthening position enjoyed by oligopoly capitalism on a global scale (as noted by Schiller, Chomsky, Herman, Giddens, Prokop, McChesney, Curran, McNair, Volko and others). The globalized world creates the conditions for media to operate on a global scale, which to a significant extent determines media behaviour, the quality and quantity of media production, the diversification of sales and distribution practices and even the reception of media content. According to Thompson, the global media-oligopolistic market was created as a consequence of many factors, from the opening up of economies to the subsequent transformation of media institutions into media corporations, the globalisation of communication processes and the rapid development of new information technologies [2]. The redistribution of the spheres of competences between media concerns is currently under way. The concentration of business has also occurred on the basis of the re-grouping of ownership structures in the areas of information technology at all levels, i.e. in the development and production of new digital technologies and in media production and its distribution. In this context, Giddens warns of a simplification of the world as a result of international media reach. "This development is an expression of the formation of a global information order, an international system of producing, distributing and consuming information." [3]

As a result of the expansion of the media industry, we are witnessing the diversification of media enterprises and a growing range of media options, which ultimately is reflected in the manner of their production and, ultimately,

their quality. According to Jirák and Köpplová, this lead "to the fact that a significant number of these products are simply repetitions (recycling) of well-known, cheap and shabby pre-formulation or the restoration of products that have long since been created" [4]. Among the other determinants that significantly impact the creation and quality of media content are factors derived from the actual functioning of the free market and the competitive environment.

When Chomsky and Herman identified the essence of the hegemonic behaviour of media and exposed their communication practices by defining and analysing the operation of basic media filters in the 1980s in their study named *Manufacturing Consent* [5], they pulled back the curtain behind that, in our opinion, had covered up the actual operation of the modern media industry. The filters include ownership, funding, sourcing, flak (negative feedback) and the manner in which the dominant ideology is promoted. The filters of ownership, funding and sourcing are important for our examination of the root causes driving the creation of the controversial statuses of journalists. The ownership filter is clearly exhibited in practice where media are controlled by wealthy individuals or corporations. Understandably, media under the tutelage of ownership structures prefer an agenda that is to their benefit or in the interests of those in power or the social elite. This fact has been confirmed by many authors, who emphasise the apparent interdependence of interests and the pragmatic conditionality of interactions between those who own and their employees (Chomsky, Korten, Prokop, Mc Chesney, Doyle, Demers, Herzán, Dinka and others). In this context, Herzán provides an illustrative example in the form of the well-known statement made by James Lilly, the former executive editor of the largest and often considered to the most serious newspaper in the world, the New York Times, who gave testimony to a Senate Committee in the United States in the middle of the 20th century. He posited that an independent press does not exist, journalists do not have the courage to give their true and honest opinion as it could pose an existential threat to them. "The business of the journalists is to destroy the truth, to lie outright, to pervert, to vilify, to fawn at the feet of Mammon, and to sell his country and his race for his daily bread. You know it and I know it, and what folly is this toasting an independent press? We are the tools and vassals of rich men behind the scenes. Our talents, our possibilities and our lives are all the property of other men. We are intellectual prostitutes." [6]

There is also the fact that commercial media endeavour tremendously to sell advertising space or advertising time. Financial dependence on deep pocketed advertisers commits media to a great deal of conformity with respect to the sources of their incomes. The funding filter defines the right of the advertiser to select conforming media and to choose the winning media in competition with competing media based on expressions of friendliness towards the purchasers of advertising space. According to Chmelár, financial dependence on advertisers has become one of the principles of modern corporate censorship. He highlights the fact by which the media in Slovakia have become increasingly dependent on various financing entities, monopolies and cartels. He provides the well-known

case of the Sme daily as an example, which published criticism of the duopoly in telecommunications. "The reaction to this criticism was instantaneous and the paper lost all advertising from one of the companies involved, Orange, for half a year. The publisher learned its lesson shortly thereafter and Orange rewarded its new-found understanding by restoring its advertising contracts worth millions." [7]

The sourcing filter speaks to the information dependency of media on the entities providing information. It highlights the undisputed dependence on such sources that provide regular information but are also credible and provide convenient access to such information, for instance through news wires, government communiques and the like. The public relations departments of various institutions have a major role in defining the news, which is confirmed by Trampot's analysis, according to which sources of information have tremendous power to influence the final form of news communication. Trampot also emphasises the socio-cultural and political context of this process when stating that "the access of individual sources to news reflects the hierarchy of society to a specific extent" [8].

The effect of this filter on the final form of produced media content clearly demonstrates the deterministic behaviour of journalists and their standing in the editorial system of journalistic production units. It also highlights the basic purpose and essence of the existence of a liberal media market, profit. The production of journalistic output is largely a business decision in its own sector and is controlled by private individuals and media conglomerates. Their decisions determine what they will or will not be published. According to McNair, this is because journalists are simply employees and as such they are subject to the views and decisions of those who own the media companies and who manage them. They come face-to-face with the effects of economic pressures, just as employees do in private firms. Identical to the results of the editorial production process, journalistic texts become a common commercial good that is offered for sale in an ever expanding media market over saturated with information. Just as any other good, it "must have a utility and exchange value for potential customers. It must be functional and desirable, a fact which has had a fundamental impact on the content, style and form of journalistic outputs over the previous decades. Journalistic outputs must compete with one another for a share of the market." [9]

These economic and ownership pressures on journalists have indisputably led to change in the approaches taken to the creation and, ultimately, the quality of journalistic outputs. The issue of the extent of the freedom of journalistic expression has also come to the forefront given that censorship and self-censorship have become integral parts of these decision making mechanisms. In response, Remišová warns of the threat of a loss of freedom of the press as a result of economic pressures. "The consequences of economic interference into the media world are currently the single largest limiting factor on the freedom of the press, even though this fact is not widely recognised by the public at large or even among journalists themselves." [10]

The consequences of the competitive battle between media companies and journalists themselves are another aspect of journalistic creation. They compete for readers, listeners and viewers using a variety of means including the taylorization of journalism and its tabloidization, leading to the production of content for entertainment purposes. According to Postman, the public at the end of the previous millennium was born into the age of entertainment and the public is now destined, given the very nature of the information, to entertain themselves until they die [11]. Ramonet warns that the production of recycled information is nothing more than a version of a mass industrial production process, which he attributes to the information war between competing media. "We are witnessing the taylorization of the art of journalism, where once journalism was considered a craft; it has now become an industry." [12] This situation has an impact on the selection of topics and their processing and on compliance with the fundamental ethical criteria in journalistic practices. In their competition for an audience for their content and to maintain their ranking in terms of readership, and television and radio ratings, media prioritise disasters, conflicts, intrigue, and sex and are full of vulgarities and obscenity. According to Hudíková, this is best observed in the form of processing, which can be characterised by typical "tabloid headlines, brief footage and sharp cuts, slow motion and the ripping of shots, modified colours, intensive light effects, loud and unbalanced sound, 'circus'-inducing headlines and teasers..." [13]. Given these tendencies, McNair sides with the critics who think that "the informational, educational and promotional functions of print media today are only a dull shadow of the original ideals" [9, p. 116].

The post-transformational era was created on the basis of a radical shift in the essence of journalistic work over the past two decades of the previous century. It brought with it a crisis in traditional processes and in the role of journalism, which is ultimately related to the crisis in modern democracy. The conclusions reached by McChesney also support this assertion. McChesney sees the root causes of the crisis in a number of phenomena including the corruption of journalists, the weakening of investigative journalism, tendencies exhibiting the degeneration of political news and reporting, international journalism and in the growing importance of celebrities in different scandals, etc. [14]. The commercialisation of the media sector, thereby weakening the democratisation role of journalistic practices, is considered the primary culprit. Commercialisation and the hunt for maximised profit has pushed media companies to permanently focus on decreasing production costs, while competitive pressures are also forcing them to work at a faster pace, continuously producing new information, which has ultimately created a spiral of recycled information and the multiplication of scandals. News reports have become superficial and commercially-focused. News reports depoliticize society as they discuss or cover topics that are of particular interests to the advertisers or divert the attention of the audience [14, p. 26-27].

3. Controversial status roles of journalists

Various definitions for the terms 'journalist' and 'journalism' are offered up in encyclopaedic materials focused on the specific activities of creative professionals in media. They all agree on the basic principles that can be used to formulate a generalised definition framework for both terms:

- A journalist is a creative professional providing the public with information and reflection on all spheres and phenomena expressing the essentials of societal reality;
- Journalism is a creative activity that results in journalistic compositions that inform and orient readers, radio listeners, TV audiences and the public online regarding current and pressing events in a variety of ways.

In liberal democracies where a legal state is the basic prerequisite for a functioning society, emphasis is placed on the following two principles of journalistic creation within the education of future practitioners of journalism in all types of media and in educational materials:

- Disseminating relevant and true information so that the public is able to form its own opinions and reach its own conclusions regarding specific events;
- Performing a role that serves to provide an effective check against power structures.

These principles should ensure that democracy is enhanced in societies composed of well-informed citizens who are knowledgeable regarding the topics of the day and capable of making independent decisions. The political and democratising function of media as one of its legitimate fundamentals has come to the foreground within considerations over journalistic practices. Thompson provides a guide for enhancing and strengthening specific principles for revitalising the postulates of democratic society. Thompson hones recommendations for tabling what is called deliberative democracy, which is based on the foundation of mediated democracy, the primary mission of which is to provide its recipients with the means to express their opinions. "In real conditions the deliberative democracy can, to a large extent, be a mediated democracy in the sense that the processes of contemplation depend on media institutions as sources of information and a means for expressing their own opinions." [2, p. 205]

The optimistic and liberal guide provided by Thompson to revitalise media practices and its democratisation function wither when faced by the day-to-day media and political practices in Slovakia, which come in for strong criticism, in particular with respect to the activities of the mainstream media and the increasing interest among researchers in the causes for the loss of critical thinking among journalists and the general public. An example is highlighted by the former prime minister and professor of sociology Ms. Iveta Radičová, who notes a fact which she claims demonstrates the fundamental change in the standing of political entities and media. In her opinion, the news on specific events and competition between political entities is not transparent and confuses

residents. "The politician's statement is indistinguishable from the media's statement. How do the media shift statements from politicians? What do they ask politicians? What is and what is not emphasized in society? What is mocked and downplayed and what, on the other hand, is interpreted to be a serious, important decision? It is all in the power of the media." [I. Radičová, *Médiá sú hodnotovo a mnohé aj ideologicky zafarbené,* http://www.masmedialne.info/iveta-radicova-media-su-hodnotovo-a-mnohe-aj-ideologicky-zafarbene/, accessed 09.01.2014] A critical line of reflection on the role of media and journalists is strengthened by Dinka's observations which serve to highlight specific examples of manipulation involving journalists and the manipulation of journalists. Former cabinet minister Vladimir Palko also notes the critical lack of independence and democratic approaches applied by Slovak journalists and their inability to understand self-reflection. He sees the root cause in the way in which members of the journalist community think, calling their thinking deformed and exhibiting a mob mentality. Palko goes on to claim that "Slovak journalists go out of their way to give the impression that they are the guard dogs of democracy and shine a light on bad politicians while doing a service to society. In most cases they fail in this task. They often fulfil the interests of their owners, regardless of the truth." [15] Publicist Ľubomír Huďo is known to the public thanks to his departure from the public broadcaster RTVS in protest against censorship practices. Given his own 17-year journalism career in the media, he is much more critical than many modern media critics. He called a majority of Slovak journalists 'press-titutes' or 'mortgage and leasing journalists' [16]. He claims: "Press-titutes, as opposed to prostitutes, are not selling their own bodies, but much more than that; they are selling their character, conscience, pride, their own identity, basically anything that they can sell and they know no limits in their perverted efforts" [16, p. 13].

Other reasons for a more in-depth review of media creation and journalistic creation within its framework also exist in addition to the provided examples of the critical evaluations of Slovak journalism practices. The arrival of the new millennium and the transformation of the product level within journalism attracted increased interest among researchers given the dramatic change in the manner in which classic media (periodicals, print media, radio and television) operate as a result of the relatively offensive rise of new digital media disseminated over the Internet. Gálik in this context speaks of digital communication in cyberspace as a new existential dimension in people [17]. This dimension is formed by the emerging alternative Internet-based news and publicity websites. They are gradually becoming strong competition for classic mainstream media and are interfering with their information monopoly in a relatively dramatic fashion. They also offer new qualities, such as the speed at which information is disseminated, flexibility in the production of media content and respect for the right of the audience to select a portal, information or author and various means to receive feedback from the recipients of content. On the other hand, it remains clear that the essence of the journalist's work in new media and factors that determine this essence remain constant. Radošinská and

Višňovský in this context emphasise the fact that online journalism is primarily a creative intellectual activity, "similar to traditional journalism, which requires the application of specific processes for it to occur at all" [18]. On the other hand, one can agree with Gáliková Tolnaiová's statement that the 21st century will be marked by a tremendous invasion of media into the human world, in particular "thanks to the expansion of information technologies and multimedia technologies" [19].

As a result and at first glance it might appear that professional journalism building on the creation of new information equality has a bright future. Taking a closer look at journalism practices shows that the opposite is true. It exposes the weakening position of journalists within their work in editorial systems and in their relationship with the audience. The strengthening influence of the external environment, in particular economic and political environments, on journalistic work as highlighted by their symbolic status of serfs in such system is also exposed. Such status roles are formed in an environment in which they formally declare their compliance with codes of conduct and ethics designed to ensure the freedom and objectivity of individual journalists. "It is clear that journalists found themselves in a very unstable position at the beginning of the new millennium. They became a major part of political and economic (marketing) communication and are therefore subject to manipulation on the part of the political elite and strong economic entities. However, they are weakened by digitalised means of communication available online accessible from practically anywhere in developed societies." [4, p. 183]

It is also clear that current reflection on the identified issues fluctuates among a range of different opinions. Some points of view are based on the conviction of an ability to revitalise journalism to such an extent so that its democratising role is increased in the interests of the entire society and the need to preserve the status of journalists as the "guard dogs of democracy" [20]. Other aspects represent opinions based on the era of journalism from the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century and the age of press-titutes [16, p. 16]. Different opinions also exist that see the revitalisation of the original journalistic ideals in the form of a return to critical and independent thinking among journalists and their audience. According to Volk, just such a method is critical for ensuring that strictly pragmatic persons "who lack empathy, tolerance, respect for classical values and the thirst for knowledge" are not socialised or raised [21]. The critical slant taken by media theorists raises a red flag and accents the need for greater education and media literacy across all age categories. In this context, Petranová emphasises the need to think critically: "thinking critically means thinking in-depth about the information a person receives through various means" [22].

4. Conclusions

The media environment, in addition to the socio-cultural environment, can be considered a unique human creation, which according to Slušna is influenced

by the "spiritual habits and mentality of mankind while determining its actions" [23]. Within critical analysis of status roles, we cannot neglect the elementary truth and mission of the journalist, arising from the very essence of the position and the traditional mission of journalistic genres. In addition to an informational function, journalists take a stance and express opinions or make judgements concerning depicted or analysed current events and situations. Vojtek even notes that every journalistic text is fundamentally subjective, even when the journalist attempts to take an objective approach when processing the facts [24].

It turns out that the ideals and aspirations of traditional journalists have been succeeded by rigid pragmatism. Solík posits that the modern age as brought about the destruction of values and the "collapse of the societal hierarchy" [25]. Given these factors, it is clear that the economic environment, the use of technology and the strong liberalisation trends in the editorial environment, thereby strengthening the fierce competition between journalists, have all had a major impact on the work and status roles of contemporary Slovak journalists. This competition is associated with the permanent risk of a loss of existential certainty, which results in a pathological drive to succeed and survive in any conditions, even at the cost of their subordination to a dominant ideology or the power and interests of their owners or the management of media companies.

It is clear that the transformation of the status roles of journalists has come about in situations where they are manipulated by the political elite and strong economic entities, even when the audience is unaware what statement is from a politician and or the given media, or where and to what extent does the media shift statements made by politicians [http://www.masmedialne.info/iveta-radicova-media-su-hodnotovo-a-mnohe-aj-ideologicky-zafarbene/], given the existence of published evidence, examples of manipulation by journalists and the manipulation of journalists [15], or when journalists voluntarily and internally identify with propaganda and elevate themselves to the pedestal of the media elite [16, p. 13]. Given these factors, it remains questionable as to the specific extent to which journalists in the post-transformational era can experiment with their status roles and revolt against the radically modified and strongly entrenched methods of journalistic practices. It has been demonstrated that a portion of the journalism community goes about its work under the influence of an organised social system and dominant ideologies, with which they themselves internally identify. Another portion works under the influence of existential pressures and are subjected to political conformity with their own ownership and management structures.

References

[1]   D. Altheide and P.R. Snow, *Media Worlds in the Postjournalism Era,* Aldine de Gruyter, Hawthorne (NY), 1991.
[2]   J.B. Thompson, *Media a modernita, Sociální teorie medií (Media and Modernity, Social Theories of Media),* Karolinum, Prague, 2004, 168.
[3]   A. Giddens, *Sociologie,* Argo, Prague, 1999, 377.
[4]   J. Jirák and B. Köpplová, *Masová média,* Portál, Prague, 2009, 194.

[5]   N. Chomsky and E. Herman, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media,* Pantheon, New York, 2002.

[6]   M. Herzán, *Totalitní světovláda, Fakta a důkazy o zákulisí světové politiky, lidských právech a globalizaci, (Totalitarian world rule, Facts and evidence about the beckground of world politics, human rights and globalisation)*, Eko-konzult, Bratislava, 2002, 186.

[7]   E. Chmelár, *Formy obmedzovania slobody prejavu v demokratických krajinách,* in *Médiá, spoločnosť, fikcia,* Faculty of Mass Media Communications at UCM, Trnava, 2008, 259.

[8]   T. Trampota, *Zpravodajství,* Portál, Prague, 2006, 90.

[9]   B. McNair, *Sociologie žurnalistiky (The Sociology of Journalism),* Portál, Prague, 2004, 103.

[10] A. Remišová, *Etika médií,* Kalligram, Bratislava, 2010, 203.

[11] N. Postman, *Ubavit se k smrti, Veřejná komunikace ve věku zábavy (Entertained to Death. Public Communication in the Age of Entertainment),* Mladá fronta, Prague, 1999, 164-165.

[12] I. Ramonet, *Tyranie médií (Tyranny of Media),* Mladá Fronta, Prague, 2003, 33.

[13] Z. Hudíková, *Extrémnosť - stigmatický prvok v televíznej produkcii,* in *Nové trendy v marketingu: spoločenská zodpovednosť,* J. Matúš & D. Petranová (eds.), Faculty of Mass Media Communications at UCM, Trnava, 2012, 109-112.

[14] W.R. McChesney, *Problém médií, Jak uvažovat o dnešních médiích (The Problem of the Media. How to Treat Today's Media),* Grimmus, Český Těšín, 2009, 67.

[15] P. Dinka, *Slovenské masmédiá, Metódy manipulácie,* PPA, Bratislava, 2008, 193.

[16] Ľ. Huďo, *Presstitúti verzus konšpirátori,* EZEN, Bratislava, 2014, 16.

[17] S. Gálik, *Kyberpriestor ako nová existenciálna dimenzia človeka*, in *Kyberpriestor ako nová existenciálna dimenzia človeka,* S. Gálik (ed.), Książy Młyn Dom Wydawniczy, Łódź, 2014, 13.

[18] J. Radošinská and J. Višňovský, *Aktuálne trendy v mediálnej kultúre,* Faculty of Mass Media Communications at UCM, Trnava, 2013, 99.

[19] S. Gáliková Tolnaiová, Eur. J. Sci. Theol., **10(Suppl. 1)** (2014) 195-206.

[20] J. Curran, *Nový pohled na masová média a demokracii,* in *Politická komunikace a média,* Charles University, Prague, 2000, 119.

[21] L. Volko, *Internetová komunikácia ako súčasť mediálnej kultúry,* in *Megatrendy a médiá, Limity mediálnej komunikácie,* S. Magál, T. Mikuš & D. Petranová (eds.), Faculty of Mass Media Communications at UCM, Trnava, 2011, 92–93.

[22] D. Petranová, *Podstata a význam kritického myslenia v mediálnej výchove*, in *Mediálne kompetencie v informačnej spoločnosti*, S. Magál, M. Mistrík & D. Petranová (eds.), Faculty of Mass Media Communications at UCM, Trnava, 2007, 141.

[23] Z. Slušná, Acta Culturologica, **11** (2004) 13.

[24] J. Vojtek, *Teoreticko-historické východiská žánrov anglicky písaného novinárstva*, in *Štruktúra a kompozícia anglicky písaného novinárstva*, , J. Vojtek (ed.), Faculty of Mass Media Communications at UCM, Trnava, 2014, 12.

[25] M. Solík, Communication Today, **1(2)** (2010) 43.