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Article:

Schimpfössl, E., Yablokov, I. orcid.org/0000-0001-7766-8867, Zeveleva, O. et al. (2 more authors) (2020) *Self-censorship narrated: journalism in Central and Eastern Europe*. *European Journal of Communication*, 35 (1). pp. 3-11. ISSN 0267-3231

<https://doi.org/10.1177/0267323119897801>

Schimpfössl E, Yablokov I, Zeveleva O, Fedirko T, Bajomi-Lazar P. *Self-censorship narrated: Journalism in Central and Eastern Europe*. *European Journal of Communication*. 2020;35(1):3-11. Copyright © 2020 The Author(s). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0267323119897801>. Article available under the terms of the CC-BY-NC-ND licence (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>).

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Self-censorship narrated: Journalism in Central and Eastern Europe

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Keywords: self-censorship, censorship, Ukraine, Crimea, Poland, Hungary, Latvia, Serbia, Croatia

Self-censorship is often understood in relation to censorship (Simons and Strovsky, 2006; Kenny and Gross, 2008; Tapsell, 2012). While the word ‘self’ emphasises individual agency, ‘censorship’ indicates the presence of an external force that imposes itself on an individual or a collective. The mainstream literature on media and journalism has thus far fallen short of theorising the relationship between self-censorship and censorship, and of grasping the mechanisms that inform and regulate the two phenomena. Studies on self-censorship are much less numerous than those on censorship. The main reason for this is that self-censorship is difficult to conceptualise, operationalise and capture empirically.

The purpose of this special issue is twofold. First, it aims to fill the gap in the literature highlighted above, theoretically exploring the relationship between censorship and self-censorship by drawing on empirical cases of former communist countries of Central and Eastern Europe. The works presented here address the problem of how and under what conditions censorship has transformed into self-censorship in Central and Eastern Europe, focusing on bottom-up perspectives offered by journalists.

The special issue’s second aim is to update our understanding of censorship and self-censorship in the region. The historical legacy of censorship in state socialism has shaped existing approaches to research on media in Central and Eastern European countries (McNair, 1994; Becker, 2004; Pasti, 2005; Lipman, 2005; Simon, 2006; Lipman, 2014). The dominant tendency in the literature is to favour media liberalisation on the one hand, and to highlight problems of illiberal oppression and repression on the other, that is, to understand censorship

¹ Taras Fedirko wishes to acknowledge funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (grant agreement n° 683033).

as ‘the repression of the inherently and essentially free word’ (Plamper, 2001: 526). By unpacking such legacies, the authors featured in this issue deliberately refrain from making normative judgments about censorship and self-censorship. Three of the articles explore the worlds journalists inhabit, focusing on their narratives and practices; the other one analyses survey data. The authors in this issue believe that taking a journalist-focused angle and looking at the day-to-day dynamics journalists face in their work will help us rethink Western-centric mainstream assumptions about the mechanisms of censorship.

Several social scientists who study media systems in Central and Eastern Europe have argued that the countries of this region, despite common historical legacies, have come to manifest ‘multiple post-communisms’ (Jakubowicz and Sükösd, 2008: 25) and ‘divergent paths’ (Mungiu-Pippidi, 2013: 40), which have merged with practices imported from the West (Mancini, 2015: 33). It is with this ‘miscellaneity and hybridity’ (Balčytiene, 2013: 32) in mind that the studies collected here seek to theoretically and empirically contemplate expressions of self-censorship *in their diversity*, and to capture how journalists narrate their perceptions of it. The present collection of articles also touches upon the diverse approaches researchers can employ to observe self-censorship, specifically in societies that have a history of state censorship.

The articles of this special issue, taken together, argue that journalism in the former Eastern bloc has developed features similar to those observed in many countries that do not have a state-socialist past. For this reason, we problematise and unpack the sources of self-censorship which are usually perceived as sets of binaries in existing literature: first, the binary of censorship emanating from the state versus censorship emanating from the market; and, second, the binary of dominant state ownership versus a pluralistic media environment. This special issue updates the existing literature by empirically demonstrating how the lines between these categories have become blurred.

From New Censorship Theory to the Analysis of Self-Censorship

Traditionally, Western-based scholars adhering to liberal approaches to media studies have analysed journalism from the perspective of normative ethics, comprehending censorship as top-down repression and as the natural opposite of free speech. Since the early 1990s, critical scholars have challenged this take on censorship, turning their attention towards ways in which censorship permeates society even when a top-down powerful censor cannot be easily identified. Matthew Bunn (2015: 39) has termed this latter body of literature New Censorship Theory. In what has become a programmatic statement of this critical turn, Richard Burt has argued, with respect to early modern English theatre, that censorship is ‘dispersed among a variety of regulatory agents and practices; it [is] productive as well as prohibitive; it involve[s] cultural legitimation as well as delegitimization’ (1998: 17).

Burt’s reading implies that censorship should be regarded as the norm rather than the exception, because censorship is a constitutive force of any expression (Post, 1998: 2). This suggests that formal censorship exercised by a powerful institution, typically the state, is not always necessary for upholding structures in society that are favourable to the powerful agent, and that the absence of direct coercion does not always signal the absence of censorship. Censorship resembles practices of micro-power in the Foucauldian paradigm, simultaneously constraining and constituting the freedom of the subject (Butler, 1987; 1998). The critical understanding of censorship in New Censorship Theory also echoes Marx’s notion of ideology (Bunn, 2015: 34-

6) as false consciousness that underpins social control by making certain thoughts and actions literally unthinkable.

In this vein, direct censorship represents a failure of ideology—a form of domination that, in the Weberian understanding, relies on raw power rather than authority. Formal state censorship, then, is ‘only one form of control of society, secondary to the more “productive” systems of ideological production and dissemination’ (Bunn, 2015: 36). The censorial effects of ideology (or, to borrow terms from Gramsci and Althusser, of hegemony and ideological interpellation) blur the distinction between censorship and self-censorship. Building on this idea, the articles in this special issue explore how journalistic expression is shaped by social structure, individual agency and subjectivity.

The broadening of the conceptual boundaries of censorship, as advocated by the proponents of New Censorship Theory, has produced conceptual problems of its own. While overcoming the normativity of the earlier literature, their contribution has made it hard to draw an a-priori analytical distinction between censorship and other forms of ‘cultural regulation’ (Mazzarella and Kaur, 2009), or, with regard to the scope of this special issue, between self-censorship and practices such as self-editing or formatting of discourse in accordance with ideas of ‘proper’ journalistic practice. Such vagueness risks eroding the specificity of censorship and self-censorship as analytical categories that have explanatory value and empirical reference points (Bunn, 2015: 40). In response to this critique, the historian Robert Darnton (2012) argued that it is productive to keep a narrower definition of censorship that entails particular kinds of (usually state-orchestrated) institutional arrangements, and local meanings that allow social actors to distinguish between censorship and editing (see also Plamper, 2001).

In this special issue we do not rely on a single, overarching definition of self-censorship, nor on one research method that allows us to empirically capture the phenomenon. Rather, we seek to attend to and bring forth the empirical specificity of self-censorship in the various contexts we study. The empirical data presented in the papers varies across time and between differing social contexts, but the contributing authors share an interest in the specific social arrangements that enable self-censorship. Collectively, we examine how journalists and editors maintain or resolve the ambivalence of self-censorship, how doing that may be practically, politically or morally consequential for them, and how they evaluate the judgments that emerge around self-censorship.

Post-Communist Country Cases: A Common Past of Censorship

The contributions in this special issue account for the mechanisms and narrations of self-censorship across varied socio-political contexts, histories, and types of news media. The country cases examined by contributors are united in their shared history of state-led censorship, and in the political and economic pressures that have rendered self-restraint among journalists and editors an integral part of all the media systems we analyse. In this section, we provide historical background for the country cases the contributing authors analyse, and discuss the findings of scholars who analyse media systems in comparative perspective. The historical and system-level works discussed here provide the backdrop for the meso- and micro-level studies presented in the special issue.

Censorship never existed in the Eastern bloc *de jure*: all the various constitutions formally ensured press freedom (albeit without explicitly banning censorship). Press freedom was stipulated in Article 124 of the 1936 Soviet Constitution, which was widely copied *verbatim*

by legislators across the satellite countries. *De facto* the various nomenklatura systems exercised strict control, organising the press and media in a hierarchically centralised and coordinated manner (for contemporary accounts, see Miquel, 1972, and Siebert et al., 1963). Journalists were to refrain ‘from criticising the party itself’ and to remain ‘committed to the socialist project as a whole’ (Roudakova, 2017: 51).

Total political control over the press was never fully achieved: *samizdat* (self-published) publications existed in a number of communist countries, including Hungary, Latvia, Yugoslavia, Poland and the Soviet Union. Although heavily jammed, Western-Europe-based American radio stations such as *Radio Liberty*, *The Voice of America* and *Radio Free Europe* were accessible to parts of the population (Sükösd, 2012). The regimes’ grip on the press varied across time and space. In Poland, for example, freedom of speech was less restricted than in the USSR, where the press-controlling system relaxed only with *glasnost* (transparency) in 1987 under Mikhail Gorbachev.

The political transformations that unfolded in 1989-1991 shook the media landscapes of Central and Eastern Europe. Media policy-makers made efforts to establish independent public service broadcasting modelled after the British Broadcasting Corporation (cf. Mungiu-Pippidi, 2003). The journalistic communities of these countries formally adopted professional and ethical codes, copying those that existed in the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Austria and the Nordic countries, attempting to introduce self-regulation based on neutral and objective reporting (cf. Chalaby, 1996; Kunczik, 2001).

However, as many media scholars have argued, instead of the anticipated *Americanisation/Anglicisation* of the media, the 1990s brought about a process of *Berlusconisation/Italianisation* (Wyka, 2007; Splichal, 1994), and the media systems in the region developed a number of similarities to those prevalent in Southern European countries (Jakubowicz, 2008). Politicians who survived from the old party state maintained the same attitudes toward the media, expecting journalists to carry out ideological and educational tasks (Trionfi, 2001: 95; Vajda, 2001: 155). The press market remained underdeveloped, as did journalistic professionalisation (Hallin and Mancini, 2004).

Market pressures were a major factor in shaping the new media landscape (see Balčytiene et al, 2015; Schimpfössl and Yablokov in this issue). Many outlets were unable to sustain themselves in the turbulent economic transformations of the 1990s, others fell victim to the 2008 financial crisis. As a result, many outlets fell back into the hands of powerful patrons. Media outlets were instrumentalised in political and economic struggles. Some argue that such phenomena were part of a struggle between competing elites for not only the control over economic assets, but for power over the institutions of the state itself (Koltsova, 2006; Grzymala-Busse, 2007; Ryabinska, 2014).

Following the 2008 financial crisis, multinational media investors withdrew, legal regulations became more restrictive, and domestic media oligarchs and government cronies gained ever more power, growing to dominate the landscape through their oligarch-state ownership combined with ‘media-political clientelism’ (Roudakova, 2008, 2009; Freedom House, 2016). Some countries, such as Hungary and Poland, even gave way to a *Russification/Putinisation* of media control (Vartanova, 2012: 135; Sükösd, 2018; Tokarczuk, 2019).

Taking note of these dynamics as a backdrop to their analysis, the articles in this issue shift their focus onto the mesa- and micro-level. The subjects of inquiry are media managers, editors,

and journalists, as well as their social interactions with each other, with state authorities and elites, and with their audiences.

The Contributions in this Issue

The authors of the articles in this special issue analyse self-censorship from the bottom-up, that is, as revealed in the practices and in the narratives of journalists and editors. The authors approach self-censorship both through the analysis of questionnaires and qualitative interviews. Some of the stories emerging from our data pointed to constraints journalists imposed upon themselves, while others shed light on intentional and active adjustment to new social, political, and economic circumstances the journalists found themselves in.

The accounts of journalists analysed across the articles in this issue reveal that journalists often evaluate their practices as altruistically motivated and as working for the benefit of someone else, either their editorial board, the owners of the outlets they work for, their advertisers, their audiences, or the staff they are responsible for. In this sense, it is not a-priori obvious whether self-censorship is an expression of self-repression stemming from internalised external constraints, or whether it results from other social forces. Based on the analysis of interviews with public broadcasting journalists in Kyiv who work for organisations funded by Western grants, Taras Fedirko argues that journalists engage in several different forms of self-censorship that do not necessarily have a relationship to direct external censorship. His work demonstrates that self-censorship may work simultaneously along to several differing logics for a single individual at a single point in time.

Olga Zeveleva also addresses differing forms of self-censorship that can coexist within one local media landscape, drawing on her analysis of how Crimean journalists adapted to the Russian state's imposition of new rules in the local media sphere after 2014. Zeveleva argues that the post-2014 transformation did not bring about passive acceptance of the new 'rules of the game' from the side of local media professionals; rather, many of Zeveleva's interviewees understand self-censorship as a form of active contribution to the wellbeing of their local communities. Zeveleva demonstrates how the Russian state intervened in the local media sphere actively through censorship in 2014, but as Russia's *de-facto* control over Crimea stabilised by 2016, journalists began to reproduce the new practices more easily through self-censorship.

In their work on Russia, Latvia and Hungary, Schimpfössl and Yablokov did not observe community-mindedness among self-censoring journalists; rather, in all three countries journalists and editors were most concerned about their own fate, albeit to varying degrees and differing logics of justification. The authors' initial findings echo previous research on Russian journalists and editors, who emphasise the 'professionalism' of the practice of intuitively toeing the Kremlin's line without restricting themselves in their creativity. The journalists interviewed by Schimpfössl and Yablokov in Russia euphemistically called this skill or strategy '*adekvatnost*', best translated as the 'right instinct' and a 'feel for the game', something apparently effortless, which does not require any identifiable censor (Schimpfössl and Yablokov, 2014).

Despite the differences in motivations and justifications for their practices offered by journalists across the studies presented here, the 'right sense for the game' (in a Bourdieusian sense) is described by all the authors of this issue as an element that defines the boundaries of the profession. Anda Rožukalne's survey-based research note explores how self-censorship is

chosen by the Latvian journalists as the main strategy to avoid political and economic pressures and, at the same time, helps them reconcile with their professional principles.

All four contributions draw on differing theoretical and conceptual propositions in order to contribute to our common task of challenging traditional normative notions that surround censorship and self-censorship in existing scholarship, contributing to the body of work on New Censorship Theory by drawing on empirical case studies of post-communist countries. We hope that this special issue opens up the floor to further discussion about how to understand self-censorship.

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