

Public Abstract

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NORMATIVE ROLE CONCEPTIONS AND PRACTICES OF JOURNALISTS IN AN AUTOCRATIC REGIME

If one strips journalism of its watchdog role, is it still called journalism? If a government has an incredible direct power over news media, can we still say such media are providing journalistic service? How do journalists make sense of their work in a non-free environment? And, more generally, is there a place for journalism in an autocracy? These questions are important if we want to understand journalism in all its aspects and varieties. And this is what this study explored.

This dissertation looked at journalism beyond western nations to investigate how journalists in non-democratic regimes view their normative professional roles and how they describe and explain their daily reporting practices. This study used in-depth interviews with journalists and media experts from Belarus to understand how journalists negotiate boundaries imposed on their autonomy and how they manage to provide journalistic service within those limits.

The findings suggest that democracy is not a necessary condition for journalism and one cannot define mass media in a particular country judging only by its political regime. Journalists in a non-democratic country appeared to have very similar normative role conceptions as their colleagues in democratic nations, such as providing information, investigation, and commentary and offering a public forum. News practitioners work every day to overcome restraints on their autonomy and provide reporting that serves interests of their audiences, facilitates dialogue between social groups, and contributes to the well-being of society. Some journalists in non-democratic nations are often willing to take risks when they think public interests are at stake. In such cases, their civic courage allows them to expand boundaries of press freedom. The study also showed that certain types of restrictions on journalistic freedom led to a more disciplined professional culture among journalists as they got used to thorough fact-checking to avoid potential penalties from government offices. In the end, this dissertation calls for a more inclusive interpretation of journalism and for further exploration of journalism in non-democratic nations.